Community Education and Neoliberalism

Philosophies, Practices and Policies

Camilla Fitzsimons

Second Edition

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Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

CHAPTER 1

Community Education in Neoliberal Times

A lot has changed since the first edition of *Community Education and Neoliberalism* was published in 2017, much of which has not been for the better. In case you aren't familiar with the first edition, a big part of its focus was the experiences and opinions of over 220 community educators who were either teaching, or organizing, locally based education in mostly working-class and rural neighborhoods across the Republic of Ireland.[1] The groups of people they worked with were, and likely still are, mostly drawn from communities that bear the brunt of the many negative symptoms of neoliberal capitalism (an expression I will explain later). These symptoms include higher-than-average rates of unemployment, disproportionate numbers of people surviving on low incomes, more people who are homeless or living in precarious housing and a higher-than-average density of vulnerable migrants in need of social supports.

Eight years ago, one of the biggest challenges facing these community educators was whether they would have jobs in the future. For some, this was because the locally based organizations they worked for were under threat of losing the government grants that they had become dependent on. For others, it was because the contracts they individually held

[1] This was through a broad-based, anonymous online survey that was circulated using community education networks in 2015. All practitioners were based in the Republic of Ireland.

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as either tutors, teachers, or facilitators (whichever expression you prefer) were short-term, casual and paid by the hour. This wasn't just a few. Over half of the people I engaged with told me they were working part-time, often not by choice, with unstable contracts. This didn't impact on their commitment to the work that they did. A whopping 91 percent of all paid workers told me that they regularly worked more hours than what they were paid for.

Across the board, these Irish-based practitioners were anxious about the future of community education. There was a growing mistrust about the repeated policy documents that were being produced by successive governments, sometimes without warning. This was mostly because these educators didn't necessarily recognize the way these documents talked about their work. Certainly, government policies talked the language of equality and inclusion that was fundamental to how many of them understand community education. But this policy language wasn't matched with the long-term and secure funding that independent community education providers so desperately needed to continue their work with thousands of people every day, many of whom were returning to education after a long time away from formal learning. Instead, the opposite happened. Many often-long-standing community education projects were experiencing budget cuts and increased restrictions on the work that they could do. Some were shut down completely when their government grants were not renewed.

The first edition of *Community Education and Neoliberalism* reported on these findings in more detail. It also focused on the practice of community education by encouraging practitioners to create conditions that prevent many of the people who take part in community education from being ashamed about finishing school earlier than is typically expected and therefore not having the qualifications to get a well-paid job. This meant they often struggled to make ends meet. Overall, I made a case for an approach to community education that would expose and blame the structural causes of economic inequality and the political decisions that result in certain communities being underserved in terms of the public investment and adequate access to the essential services that other communities often take for granted like healthcare, public transport, affordable housing, and job opportunities.

Suggesting community education should be about politicizing people isn't a new idea but one that underpins many of the foundational

texts I was introduced to when I first studied adult and community education back in the 1990s. These texts included the work of Tom Lovett, who wrote about community education with working-class communities in England (Lovett, 1975) and Gerri and Colin Kirkwood's account of consciousness-raising community education in Scotland (Kirkwood & Kirkwood, 1989). I was particularly influenced by accounts of consciousness-raising feminist education in Ireland, my own country, which set out to problematize women's oppressive social status, especially throughout the twentieth century (Connolly, 2001, 2005). And there was work by Liam Kane (2001) which highlighted examples of 'popular education' (discussed later in this chapter) that set out to empower and politicize marginalized communities in Brazil. These texts, and the practitioners like me who took influence from them, were mostly drawn to ideas attributed to the Brazilian philosopher and activist Paulo Freire, especially his belief that education can never be neutral. Instead, Freire maintains that education always does one of two things: it either maintains the status quo or it critically questions the way things are. When seeking to achieve the latter, education isn't just about creating talking shops, but about combining our collective learning with activism as together we fight systemic oppression and seek to transform the circumstances of people's lives. As Professor of Community Development and Social Justice, Margaret Ledwith puts it,

> Being critical is not an intellectual state of mind; it is located in praxis. In order to avoid 'armchair revolution' on one hand, or 'pure activism' on the other, it requires action and reflection in symbiotic relation in order to move nearer to what Freire calls authentic praxis (Ledwith, 2007: 598).

The first edition of this book also argued that this approach to community education is being increasingly marginalized, in part because of a process of co-option where once radically orientated local organizations have been gradually steered towards a more instrumentalist approach to community education amidst forced mergers or closures of many community education providers. These processes sought, and still seek, the same end goals, to silence oppositional voices and to orientate the central ambition of community education towards creating a flexible, mobile workforce.

To be clear, I am not against education that prepares people for employment, helps people get a better job or helps them do their current

job well. Courses that help people develop certain skills and competencies have always been part of community education provision. I speak from personal experience of my own occupational background, which includes organizing and delivering healthcare courses designed to help people find work. The difficulty with vocational education is when the courses that are specifically designed to meet gaps in the labor market become the dominant model of publicly funded community education to the detriment of personal development programs, courses for leisure, and overtly political programs such as social analysis, voter education, or community leadership all of which were foundational within much early grassroots community education.

This second edition again pushes for a radical approach to community education and again presents *critical pedagogy* as the most appropriate theoretical base. I repeat the case for adult learning that, as bell hooks advises, embodies 'teaching with love' and 'a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust' (hooks, 2003: 131). But I also call for this to be a praxis-oriented, politicizing model of adult learning that challenges many of the core assumptions that shape traditional approaches to education. At its best, this radical approach to community education validates people's experiences, opens our eyes to the structural nature of inequality, takes an international approach, and collectively labors for a better, more equal world.

As was the case ten years ago, I have again used some primary research to underpin the arguments that I present, and again, my contributors are Irish based. A smaller cohort of just 51 people completed a lengthy, online mixed-methods questionnaire. Eligibility criteria were 'to be working directly with groups as a tutor/teacher/adult educator or be in an organizing role'. And I defined community education as 'education that is delivered outside of a school, college or university excluding outreach programmes and that is local to participants'. The participation of these 51 practitioners is drawn from one non-representative intervention, which I offer without a comparator. This is clearly a weakness as I have likely generalized from this one small example, which may not accurately reflect broader trends. But there are benefits too including that the voices of people who are directly engaged with the topic under discussion gives me the opportunity to elevate practitioner and activist voices in a way that ensures that my writing at least somewhat reflects what is happening outside the university 'ivory tower' perspective. In other words, the voices

of others help keep me grounded, relevant, and connected to those who best understand the practice of community education.

A limitation of this book is that the voices of those who take part in community education are absent, meaning I am making assumptions about practice without consulting the very communities it purports to support and, at times, represent.

Explaining Community Education

Before going any further, I want to spend some time detailing exactly what I mean by the expression *community education*. At its broadest, community education refers to any localized, structured adult learning that happens outside of traditional institutions, by which I mean schools, colleges, and universities. Certain features are common across community education, like smaller group sizes than you would find elsewhere with usually no more than 20–25 people and sometimes as few as five or six. The age range is also different. It isn't uncommon for groups to include people in their twenties right up to people in their sixties or seventies. Community education also happens in a variety of settings, including in training centers or health centers, in churches, in unoccupied social housing, within people's homes, or in whatever other spaces are available. Sometimes, it happens online, a process that was accelerated during the 2020–2023 coronavirus pandemic when community educators proved more adept at pivoting towards the internet than many schools and universities, often because of the better connections they already had with their constituents (Cobain et al., 2020). Online community education can also be effective in other contexts including when politicizing education involves social activists who live miles apart but are united in their campaign work on national or international issues.

Another feature of community education is that its organizers are varied and can include specialist adult education providers, independent community sector organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), charities, trade unions, voluntary groups, campaigns, social movements, political parties, and anyone else organizing structured education programs that are easily accessible and relevant to the people involved. Even professional football clubs can be heavily involved in community education, as is the case with the English club Liverpool FC,

who offer a range of programs designed to meet the needs of surrounding communities.[2]

Typically, community education prides itself on process as much as content. A commonly evoked mantra that you may have heard before is the idea of *starting where the person is at*. This approach includes accommodating the many practical challenges adults can face in accessing education, such as the need for flexibility, being able to enter education at a low cost, and the need for childcare or eldercare. A lot of community education is also different from other forms of education because the people who attend live in the same area. As a result, their conversations tend to be informed by the issues affecting that neighborhood, especially when it is organized as part of community development. The role of the educators is to guide these discussions. As the prominent British contributor Lyn Tett explains 'community education sees a community as a group of people who perceive common needs and problems, have a sense of identity and a common set of objectives' (Tett, 2006: 2). One community educator I engaged with made a similar point when they described community education as 'most beneficial to people when they can "name" the situation they find themselves in, be that a personal or collective issue; when they can understand the nuances that underlie communities and see the politics associated with the structure of community'. This, they argue,

> is very important for two reasons: firstly, it helps the individual to use a 'sociological imagination' perspective to contextualize and understand their circumstances and broader societal issues and secondly, it assists with understanding the need for cohesive approaches to policy and decision making at political levels.

These descriptions somewhat echo the work of an Irish-based collective of academics, community education practitioners, and learner advocacy groups called the Three Pillars group (est. 2018). Its mission is 'to raise the profile of community education and build on its history of inclusive and social justice focused adult education practice' (in Cobain et al., 2024: 139). Their charter for community education, developed in 2021 and in consultation with a wide range of community educators working across the public and voluntary sector, describes community education as a practice that,

[2] See https://www.liverpoolfc.com/foundation/programmes. Sourced 20 March 2025.

… is rooted in equality, justice and empowerment
… creates voices for those who are furthest from the education system
… is about social inclusion in its broadest sense
… is needs based, driven by the community and reflective of lived experiences
… recognizes the value of accredited and non-accredited learning
… promotes critical thinking
… is learner centered, flexible, supportive and developmental
… is facilitative, group focused and open to new things
… centers on relationship building.

(in Cobain et al., 2024: 139)

Community Development

A further feature of bottom-up, grassroots community education that I alluded to earlier is its close and often overlapping relationship with community development (or community work as it is sometimes called). Not all community development is radical. In fact, quite a lot of it is distinctly domesticating and often represents uncritical service-provision that acts within the constraints of existing power structures (Emejulu, 2011: 380). When outlining a radical approach, Margaret Ledwith details one of its critical components as 'educational activity … that encourages people to ask thought provoking questions about their everyday lives and to question answers rather than just merely to answer questions' (Ledwith, 2020: 82).

If a Freirean approach is applied to community development, this too involves organized collective critical learning (be this in a workshop, an information session, leadership program or certain vocationally focused programs) that moves beyond the classroom by supporting collective action to the benefit of community and society at large. Where community development's focus is broader, is that it directly focuses on lobbying for local involvement in decision-making forums, initiating and managing campaigns, or providing local services that are otherwise absent. One way to think about the relationship between the two is to see community education as a foundational feature of community development that equips individuals and groups with the skills and knowledge they require to take action to improve the circumstances of their lives and the lives of others (Fig. 1.1).

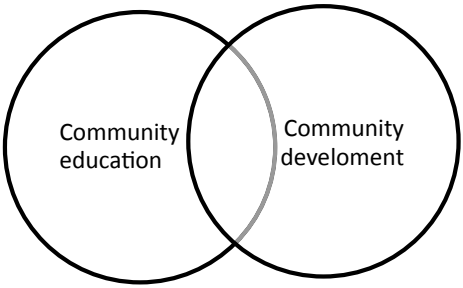

Fig. 1.1 Relationship between community education and community development

Popular Education

Sometimes, people use the expression 'popular education'. Indeed, the terms 'community education' and 'popular education' can be used to mean the same thing. This only applies when people are talking about a critical or radical approach to community education (something I explain in more detail in Chapter 2). Both radical community education and popular education prioritize collective learning and social change, both challenge hierarchies of knowledge, and both operate at the grassroots. The expression is more common in some parts of the world than others, especially in the Global South (Brazil, Chile, Nicaragua, Peru, South Africa) but also in some parts of the Eurocentric world (e.g., in Canada and parts of the UK, especially Scotland). It is also more likely to be associated with social justice movements, something that is nearly impossible to define, but that is typically a mechanism through which social actors engage in collective action that involves a conflictual relationship with a clearly identifiable opponent or opponents (della Porta & Danni, 2006: 20). Popular education is sometimes used to describe education within left-wing, socialist revolutionary political parties in the form of study groups and discussion circles. To illustrate, Bob Boughton (2013) details how much of this popular education work preceded the theories associated with Paulo Freire that began to emerge from the 1950s onwards. The expression is also sometimes used in the context of workers' education and within trade unions, although there are some differences in how popular education tends to be community-based, grassroots, and part of the struggle for social justice, whilst labor education occurs within the context of the highly organized institutions of the workplace (Cavanagh, 2024). The challenge of describing popular education as confined to

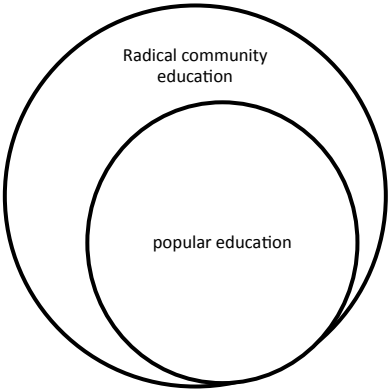

Fig. 1.2 Relationship between popular education and radical community education

non-funded social movements arises where, in some countries, radical community education begins as something that is non-funded, then its organizers successfully apply for government grants meaning they are now funded. This was the case for much feminist-oriented and anti-poverty popular education work of the 1980s and 1990s. Popular education is still the expression of choice in some corners of feminist struggle, such as by Just Associates (JASS, est. 2003), a global feminist collective that seeks to strengthen women's rights, leadership, and collective power for justice, particularly in the Global South.[3]

By way of an over-arching understanding, Ian Martin sees popular education as 'rooted in the interests, aspirations and struggles of ordinary people' and implicit in the history of the radical adult education when it has emerged from the tangible experiences of people's collective struggles (Martin, 1999: 4–9). One way to tell popular education and community education apart is to remember that although all popular education is a form of community education, not all community education is a form of popular education (Fig. 1.2).

The Contested Nature of Community

No discussion that defines community education is complete within considering what is meant by the word *community*. For most people,

[3] See https://justassociates.org/who-we-are/history/. Sourced 18 March 2025.

the first thing that comes to mind is to see community as a location or neighborhood, like a town, a village or a city-center or suburb. This is mostly how I have interpreted community so far. In Western literature, many theorists draw from the ideas of the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1887/2002), who is noted for contrasting gemeinschaft (community) and gesellschaft (society) whilst also examining how these two concepts are interconnected. Gemeinschaft, Tönnies argues, relates to personal contacts that are private and intimate yet linked by shared characteristics such as language, religion, cultures, and beliefs. Gesellschaft 'is public life - it is the world itself' (Tönnies 1887/2002: 33), thus characterized by urbanism, heterogeneity (or difference) and impersonality.

In other parts of the world, there are very different perspectives on what community means. One illustration of this is the concept of *Ubuntu*, an African philosophy that is premised on the belief that our very personhood is shaped by our mutual dependency with others (Ogunde, 2019: 1). Another example comes from China, namely the concept of *Confucianism*. This differs from Western concepts by viewing community as something that is characterized by hierarchical extended family structures where people hold different roles that, when working in harmony, maintain stability. Joseph Chan describes Confucian ways of being as 'a radical departure from European and American liberal democratic theory' because of how it rejects an individualist rights-based approach in favor of a mutual commitment to the collective good (Chan, 2014: 21).

In day-to-day Western contexts, people also use community in ways that move beyond both the geographical and the philosophical. Sometimes, it infers a collection of people with a shared interest or goal, like members of a book club or a community that centers around support for a particular sports team. A community can also be a network of people who share the same skills or occupations. One example of this is the World Architecture Community (est. 2006), which boasts thousands of architects, interior designers, students, and academics as members and therefore demonstrates just how expansive a community can be. There are also communities that are united by a desire to influence political or social change. Take the conservative based Never Trump Movement (est. 2016) as a case in point. Despite being mostly members of the Republican Party, this community came together to oppose the 2024 election of Donald Trump as president of the United States of America (hereafter the US). Another very different, but also politically minded example is the

environmental activist group Extinction Rebellion (est. 2018). Through a network of local groups and an over-arching umbrella structure, Extinction Rebellion sets out 'to connect people from community to movement for change' by supporting non-violent action to raise awareness of, and act on, climate catastrophe (Ledwith, 2020: 212–213).

There can also be communities that form because of a shared identity like the 'LGBTQIA+ community' or the so-called 'Traveller community' which refers to a particular minoritized ethnic group. Whatever the shared characteristics or circumstances, most people would agree that the word 'community' usually signifies something good and something that connects people by fostering belonging and providing often much-needed support.

However, understanding community is complex, and there are decades worth of academic literature arguing about its meaning (for example, see Bell & Newby, 1972; Putnam, 2000; Thompson, 2000; Block, 2009; Ogunde, 2019). These are important debates. By way of example, the theory and politics of community include the need to focus on exactly who we are talking about when we use the expression. When referring to the geographical, the adult education scholar Jane Thompson (2000: 68) points out how the word is mostly used to describe areas where there is a concentration of poverty. These areas are then talked about negatively and sometimes as a drain on society. Some of us, me included, have even been raised to consider certain communities as dangerous, no-go areas. Some academics and policymakers view these so-called 'disadvantaged' communities as not only the cause of the often-significant social problems they face, including elevated crime rates, problems with addiction, so-called 'anti-social behaviour' and poor political representation but as holding the answers to these problems as well. The US-based political scientist Robert Putnam (2000) is one such contributor who argues that communities are powerful sources of their own solutions. This, Putnam contends, is because they are uniquely equipped to address their own challenges through collaborative, locally driven networks that will generate high levels of civic engagement. Communities will thus be empowered to identify and address their own issues.

I agree on the importance of strong networks; these are a foundational feature of much community development work. Where I differ from Putnam is that his ideas are, in many ways, blaming the poor for the circumstances that they find themselves in and then expecting those who are most impacted by structural inequality to address issues that they

did not create. To illustrate, suggesting networking in a way that will build social capital as the solution to locally based social problems downplays the extent to which government policy creates the difficulties many communities face. Putnam and others who forward similar ideas rarely focus on what is sometimes called *residualisation* meaning a change in the nature and demographics of an area which is caused by a convergence of government policy decisions. These include policies and practices that undermine the state's responsibility to house people, that weaken people's tenure rights, that poorly maintain public dwellings, and that concentrate high densities of people with low incomes and complex needs into the one area (Dukelow & Consedine, 2017: 270). Because of residualisation, certain communities lose out on business investment and property prices remain stubbornly low. Together these factors create stigma and negative stereotyping against the the people who live there.

There are other problems with using the word 'community', including presumptions of homogeneity (or sameness) and how community is sometimes used in a way that maintains privilege by excluding those considered unsuitable (as does the World Architecture Community) or undesirable. For example, LGBTQIA+ communities across the world were largely formed because queer people were excluded and marginalized from mainstream society and were forced into creating spaces where they could live freely and find the support and solidarity they were (and sometimes still are) denied in the communities they were born into. Another concern is how conversations about 'community' also often focus on a nostalgic view of history or 'praising the past to blame the present' (Bell & Newby, 1972: 22). These sentimental memories of neighborhoods past mostly center on the sanctity of the traditional, hetero normative family, where women were expected to take on even more of the unpaid domestic and care work than they do today.

One contributor to discussions on community that helps us address some of these challenges is the UK-based Methodist Deacon, David Clark. Similar to the ideas expressed by Tönnies, Clark sees community as a social system that is continually negotiating its relationship with wider society. In his book *Schools as Learning Communities* (1996), Clark draws out the importance of people, place, relationships, beliefs, and values. For something to be classified as a community, he suggests the people involved must experience three core feelings, (1) of *significance*—that I matter, (2) of *solidarity*—that I belong and (3) of *safety*—that I won't be harmed either physically or psychologically. Importantly, Clark

outlines how not every space that is rich in these three S's is a force for good. A perfect example of this is to consider the way members of far-right political parties and groups feel significance, solidarity, and safety because they are interacting with like-minded people. But their vision of community is exclusionary rather than inclusionary, and their activism deliberately creates the opposite of safety, solidarity, and significance for certain people. Their message is that community is about excluding so-called 'outsiders', especially when these are migrants, LGBTQIA+ folk, especially trans people, and other minoritized groups. The truth of the matter is that, across Europe, in particular, far-right groups have been the perpetrators of violent attacks, including physical assaults and vandalism, and arson attacks on places of worship, especially mosques. These are alongside high-profile marches by far-right activists that mostly set out to intimidate people.

Sometimes, these marches lead to clashes with police and the public at large. In 2024, following demonstrations across the UK which targeted Muslim communities, the response of the police included high numbers of arrests. In the aftermath, the Conservative Party government in power took a strong stance against far-right protesters by prosecuting them in a way that reflected a zero-tolerance approach. Many of those found guilty were handed down heavy sentences. Without seeking to minimize the impacts of actions that deliberately and dangerously scapegoat migrants and other minoritized groups, the full force of the judiciary will not solve the problem of the rise of the right and may embolden those involved by doing nothing at all to address structural concerns.

In Ireland, police have been accused of the opposite response and Gardai have been criticized for 'soft policing' and not cracking down hard enough on the violent right-wing perpetrators of hate (Dalton, 2023), although this began to change from 2025 onwards following violent clashes between Gardaí and protesters. I support the argument that one of the main reasons some governments go soft on addressing right-wing ideas more forcefully is that when people are enticed towards this ideology, it diverts their attention away from the root causes of the economic hardship and the wider inequalities they experience every day. In other words, it's easier to do nothing about scapegoating and blaming migrants for the circumstances of their life than enabling people to confront the true source of their struggles, which would lead them to reconsider how they vote and to question the effectiveness of the political system more broadly. Neither approach addresses why more people than

before are turning to the right as they seek an explanation for their struggles, especially the inadequate and unaffordable housing, but also low wages, both of which contribute to increasingly precarious lives which can lead to ill health and a sense of despair for many people.

The explanation I subscribe to is that more and more, people feel that they have been abandoned by the political system, including by center-left governments who repeatedly talk about improving living standards and ensuring equality for all but then act in the opposite way by prioritizing the interests of multinational corporations and people who are already wealthy. I often use Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister of New Zealand from 2017 to 2023, as an example of what I mean. As leader of the Labor Party, she consistently spoke about social justice and promised to reduce poverty across the country. However, she implemented many economic policies that maintained the neoliberal frameworks she had inherited and she continued to support free-market principles throughout her time in office. According to Naomi Klein, the current rise of the right cannot be uncoupled from these sorts of left-wing centrist politics which have contributed to what she calls a 'war on meaning' where these politicians have ensured there is fertile ground for populist ideas to gain traction as people seek answers to genuine anger and upset about neoliberal-led decisions (Klein, 2023: 156).

Because 'building community' can, therefore, be exploitative in the wrong hands, David Clark sets a task for those of us who are interested in creating communities that genuinely embody safety, security, and solidarity for everyone. This task is to engage with what he describes as a *communal dilemma* or 'the problem of how social systems can become more open to one another without weakening their own sense of community or destroying that of others' (Clark, 1996: 48). Addressing this communal dilemma cultivates communitarianism, meaning the relationship between individuals and their community, in a way that ensures our interactions are respectful, inclusive, and nurturing. Only then can we further diversity and prevent cliques and elites from forming that inevitably isolate certain people and privilege others. Community, Clark argues, must unite differences and allow people to co-exist in a way that everyone feels safety, significance, and solidarity.

Explaining Neoliberalism

What I hope has become clear to this point is that often, the most influential factor in what a person means by *community* is their own political inclination. Terms such as 'strengthening community', 'nurturing community' or 'building community spirit' are all frequently used across the political spectrum, including by those who enact *neoliberalism*, a concept that has a more solid footing. But what is it? First and foremost, there is no harm in clarifying that neoliberalism, at its simplest, refers to the model of capitalism we are living with today and have been living with since the 1980s (something I will explain in more detail a little later). This begs the question as to what exactly *capitalism* is. Simply put, capitalism is an economic model of organizing society that centers around the private ownership of goods and services, which are produced for profit and then distributed to others at a cost.

Modern-day capitalism is relatively new. In the Global North, it began with the social and economic upheavals of the mid-1800s, particularly the British Industrial Revolution, something that was only possible because of the earlier colonizing actions of the British Empire and other Western nations when they ruthlessly invaded and occupied vast regions of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, stealing their natural resources and enslaving their people. This laid the foundations for the industrial revolutions that created the class-based societies that remain resilient to this day. One feature of these industrial revolutions was the introduction of property laws that consolidated land into large estates that became the property of an emerging elite (Allen, 2017: 21). Everyone else, including those who had to that point, owned smaller plots, became economically dependent on this ruling class who drew wealth from people's surplus labor by paying them an amount that was less than the value of the goods and services they produced (Marx & Engels, 1848/2018). This economic model then spread across the globe at varying degrees (Sangari, 2020: 269) and remains dominant to this day.

At its inception, one of contemporary capitalism's central features was to strengthen the traditional family unit and privatize domestic and care work as women's work. Capitalism came to rely on vast amounts of unpaid domestic and care work, or *social reproductive labor* by which I mean the essential labor needed to sustain us as social beings like preparing and cooking food, birthing and raising children, and keeping the house clean (Ferguson, 2019, 86–87). As the Marxist feminist Marnie

Holborow explains, women became responsible 'for the reconstitution of the working-class family which would deliver, on an individualized basis, a steady stream of workers–fed and refreshed daily for today and new workers for tomorrow' (Holborow, 2024: 43). Outside of feminist theory, this aspect of capitalism formation is sometimes overlooked, despite being a central reason why the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy remains strong.

It was these features; an elite class of property owners who Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels refers to as the 'bourgeoisie', and a working class, or 'proletariat', a domestic role for women, and an uneven spread of capitalism across the globe, remained uninterrupted until the early 1900s. From this point onwards, two things happened. Firstly, Western markets began to contract as the promise of perpetual growth became questionable. Secondly, socialist ideas, specifically the idea that the proletariat could unite and dismantle capitalism, became popular, and trade union density spread across the Global North. The capitalist class became genuinely concerned about the possibility of a socialist revolution. Their response was to introduce Keynesianism, a new model of capitalism that implemented policies that sought investment in social support and welfare programs. The logic behind this move was that by putting money in people's pockets, their spending power would stimulate the market and capitalism would grow again whilst their desire for an alternative social arrangement would diminish (Mitchell & Fazi, 2017: 12–13).

This worked for a while, but Keynesianism was ultimately short-lived, and Western markets became sluggish again by the 1950s. Rather than accept the fact that any model of perpetual growth was bound to run into problems, neoliberalism was born, mostly from ideas harvested in the US, Chicago School of Economics and through Thatcherism and Reaganomics of the 1980s. The academic David Harvey (2005) explains how capitalism was revolutionized through very specific fiscal and social policies and practices, all of which were introduced under the premise that interfering with the free market was always wrong.

From the 1980s onwards, money markets have been deregulated and national budget deficits are managed through austerity instead of wealth taxes. Perhaps most impactful for community education is neoliberalism's ongoing quest for the privatization of public services, or the hollowing out of the state as it is sometimes called. Every effort is made to sell off transport systems, healthcare, prisons, and our education systems to private interests, who, we are told, will be less hamstrung by cumbersome

trade union agreements and can be more agile than the supposed bureaucracy of the public sector. This doesn't always manifest as a wholescale transfer of entire systems, but as the outsourcing specific components whilst leaving the core system in public hands. For example, where I live, the city's bus service is still in public ownership, but a growing number of individual routes are outsourced to a private company. Where privatization isn't possible, public and civil society sectors are expected to be managed in the same way as private corporations and sometimes even to become a source of profit in their own right. The business logic that underpins these ways of working is imbued through public and civil society spaces (and indeed society at large) through *new public managerialism.* This is a process where organizations re-configure themselves in the service of concepts like value for money, measurability, accountability, and competition so they can supposedly create services that are more user-friendly, less burdened by duplication, and less likely to squander taxpayer's money. I'm not saying it isn't important to make sure that public services don't waste money and that they shouldn't be accountable to the public for their actions. What I am saying is that the legacy of new public managerialism has been to fundamentally alter these spaces ensuring business logic now overshadows pretty much all other values such as accessibility, equality and collective responsibility.

There are other features of neoliberalism too, including the creation of a somewhat illusive knowledge-economy with multinational companies locating where there are workforces that possess the knowledge and education structures to sustain and grow their business. For example, the high literacy rates and highly qualified workforces in countries like Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia in North Africa entice many multinationals to locate there. At the same time, high-skilled workers from across the globe are enticed to move across wealthy countries, creating this 'knowledge economy' that, according to Sharam Merriam and Laura Bierema, has important implications for education systems in terms of what is taught, and what is not taught (Meriam & Bierema, 2013: 3). As information and communication technology, sometimes abbreviated to ICT, becomes a critical asset, along with research and development, neoliberal economies have shifted their focus towards the continuous pursuit of innovative ideas in the endless quest for even more products and services, the creation of which will be staffed by a more flexible, agile workforce.

This has contributed to the commodification of education through the tech-oriented micro-credential trend that is sweeping across Europe.

Beverly Oliver (2019) details how there is no consensus on which micro-credentials are which has created a messy and poorly defined landscape of digital badges and other micro-awards that align with the needs of the job market, build into small, stackable units for quick consumption. In practice, micro-credentials not only align with capitalism's for-profit agenda, they help reinforce class inequality by privileging those with the resources to buy these credentials whilst catering to employers' demands for flexible specialized skills with the worker, and not the employer, bearing the cost of their own professional development.

Neoliberalism's Failed Agenda

The broader logic of neoliberalism might make sense if it did manage to deliver on its promise that flourishing entrepreneurialism at the top of society would ensure a trickle-down of wealth to the rest of us. However, this isn't what has happened. Instead, David Harvey notes 'enough contradictions in the neoliberal position to render evolving neoliberal practices (vis-à-vis issues such as monopoly power and market failures) unrecognizable in relation to the seeming purity of neoliberal doctrine' (Harvey, 2005: 21). The free market isn't free. Repeatedly, policy decisions by governments centralize money and power in the hands of a small number of people who control the jobs, health and housing markets, our access to food, and our freedom to move across borders. Mostly, these people haven't acquired this wealth through merit but because of a myriad of advantages bestowed on them, including inheritance and class privilege, which in turn brings better education and social and cultural capital.

The depth of inequality in today's world is staggering. In 2024, Elon Musk (who for a short time in 2025, was Head of Donald Trump's Department of Government Efficiency), was listed by Forbes as the richest person in the world with a personal wealth of $245 billion. He is one of a handful of people who control unimaginable amounts of wealth. Musk and other oligarchs' close relationship with Trump during his second term as president highlights their influence in policy decisions that disproportionately benefit the ultra-wealthy and potentially undermine seemingly democratic processes by prioritizing corporate interests over the needs of the general public. These people hoard enormous wealth. The charity Oxfam (2024) estimates that the world's richest five people, all of whom are men, have collectively doubled their wealth to $869bn since 2020.

Meanwhile, the wealth of the world's poorest 60 percent (totaling 5 billion people), has dropped by 0.2 percent in real terms (Oxfam, 2024). Other sources paint the same picture. According to *The World Inequality Report* (2022), the richest 10 percent of the global population currently take home 52 percent of global income, whereas the poorest half of the population earns 8.5 percent of it' (Chancel et al., 2022: 9). Around 9 million people die of hunger and hunger-related diseases every year, a figure that is more than from AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis combined.[4] For the many millions of people in the middle, their lives have become a constant struggle to make ends meet in a world where jobs are more precarious than before (Horgan, 2021; Jaffe, 2021) and where climate change has become a real threat to millions of people's lives, including in Europe (European Environment Agency, 2022).

And whilst many people often assume that countries in the Global South are poorer, this isn't necessarily the case. There are measurable differences across social classes in life expectancy and infant mortality, physical and mental health, educational performance, and imprisonment rates within so-called Western societies (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). If we continue to frame poverty through a Global North versus Global South paradigm with the latter presented as displaying a lack of economic progress or lacking certain resources, we divert our attention from the deeper issue, that large parts of the Global South are exploited by Western economies, including through unjust trade policies that co-opt local elites via International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank structural adjustment programs (Manfred & Roy, 2010: 119).

The Global South is particularly impacted by the negative features of neoliberal capitalism and the continuation of colonialism through imperialism, by which I mean the economic, political, and cultural dominance by certain powerful and mostly Western nations. The US and the UK in particular create a discourse that allows dominant nations to exercise significant control over other countries and deny them the right to self-determination and independence, including economic independence. Imperialism somewhat differs from colonialism because it hides in plain sight as it describes Western incursions as democratic and progressive. The truth of the matter is that repeatedly, imperialist powers expand their interests through military force as they exploit the resources and labor

[4] This figure is taken from the website The World Counts, which can be accessed at this link: https://www.theworldcounts.com/

of other countries. Imperialism also creates a dependency culture that, with the support of dominant media outlets, spreads the erroneous logic that white, Western ways of being are somehow superior. The owners of these same media outlets that peddle this racist narrative are often direct beneficiaries of the natural resources extracted from the Global South (Patnaik & Patnaik, 2021).

Another feature of imperialist, patriarchal, neoliberal capitalism is that most social reproductive labor continues to be performed by women and girls. I agree with the sociologist Kathleen Lynch when she writes, 'the overlap between the constituencies of capitalist and patriarchal interests, not just in maintaining the hegemony of men in heterosexual families, but in the developing of hegemonic constructs of competitive, controlling masculinity in employment and within the machinery of the state, means that capitalism and patriarchy are inextricably linked' (Lynch, 2022: 51). In case there is any doubt about the extent of which this is the case, the charity Oxfam maintains that if costed at minimum wage, unpaid labor by women, would amount to US$10.8 trillion per year (Oxfam International, 2021).

Many women do succeed within neoliberal society, but their success should not be isolated from middle-class, white, cis privilege. According to Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser (2019: 11), the gains of privileged women are because they lean on the labor of other women, most of whom are migrant and working class. Sometimes, this is easy to spot like how migrant women are more likely to work in the low-paid domestic and care wage economy Query (MRCI, 2020: 14). Indeed, migrants are often trained for these jobs in adult education settings. Other times, women (and everyone) living in the Global North ignore the extent to which their lives are built on structural racism and the exploitation of women and girls in the Global South. One example that is often talked about is through the fast-fashion textile industry where millions of workers endure terrible terms and conditions of employment under trade deals with multinationals that are anti-union. This same industry also wreaks environmental havoc and is second only to the oil and gas sector as the most polluting industry (Maiti, 2025).

Hegemony

So how have we gotten ourselves into a situation where we live in a world where there are plenty of resources but so much poverty and war? A key reason the neoliberal project persists is that most of us have internalized its thinking. The Marxist Antonio Gramsci is largely credited with coming up with the expression *hegemony*, by which he means consent by the majority to the general direction of society imposed by a minority (Gramsci, 1971: 12). Hegemony ensures there is enough public compliance to allow policies and practices to be advanced even when they are against most people's best interests (Gramsci, 1971: 55–57). In *Manufacturing Consent* (1994), written over 30 years ago but still relevant today, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky observe how consent is maintained through an increasingly homogenized popular culture and centralized control of public pedagogic spaces. Chomsky has always maintained that mainstream media isn't a neutral or independent institution but a tool for powerful elites to shape public opinion and reinforce dominant political and economic interests. As our global narrative is increasingly determined by algorithms controlled by those who own most of the world's wealth, powerful mechanisms determine whose voices are heard, what counts as representation, what behaviors are considered normal, and, conversely, what is thought of as subversive.

Militarization is also imbued as normal and reasonable through popular culture. To illustrate, Brett Pardy (2019) highlights how superhero films rely on models of heroism that mirror how the military presents itself to the public as a protective force. This model of heroism, Pardy argues, conceals the exploitative recruitment practices of armies around the world that heavily rely on positive imagery to entice often marginalized, mostly young men, to join their ranks by sidestepping or minimizing the fact that a central aspect of the job is to take the lives of other people. The hegemony pushed on the Western public is to trust in the military to keep us safe. The militarization of society is combined with an equally ubiquitous terrorist discourse that is selectively appropriated to focus our attention on certain acts of violence but downplay others. To borrow words from the political writer Arun Kundnani,

> To designate an act of violence as terrorism is to arbitrarily isolate it from other acts of violence considered normal, rational or necessary. The term terrorism is never used to refer to the military violence of Western states,

> or to the daily reality of gender-based violence, for example, both of which ought to be also labelled terrorism according to the term's usual definition: violence against innocent civilians designed to advance a political cause (the maintenance of patriarchy is eminently political). (Kundnani, 2014: 21)

Some of you are no doubt wondering how militarization and global discourses on terrorism have found their way into a book about community education. But as Henry Giroux argues, 'at the heart of the adoption of a militarized cultural symbol' there is 'a growing political struggle to reverse and amend decades of assaults waged by neoliberal capitalism against the welfare state, essential social provisions, public goods, public health services, and the social contract' (Giroux, 2021: 42–43), all of which are central to concepts of community.

Resistance to Neoliberalism

For as long as neoliberalism has existed, it has been met by grassroots opposition, including by many people working in community education who view their work as part of movements that oppose the neoliberalization of our world. For decades, people have protested militarization and war, income inequality and ecological disaster. The 1999 'Battle in Seattle' remains a noteworthy international example of arguably, the first modern convergence of anti-globalization movements, the participants of which included grassroots activists from around the world who had a strong community-based praxis-oriented focus. Regular anti-capitalist protests continued throughout the 2000s, including outside meetings involving the G8[5] which is a political forum that brings together the leaders of the world's most advanced economies. These protesters raged against unfair international trade and tariff arrangements and ongoing imperialist incursions.

Global anti-capitalist movements have continued to ebb and flow and include the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011–2012, which popularized the concept of a 'one percent' owning and controlling vast wealth, and repeated mobilizations against austerity in Greece, Spain and many

[5] Group of Eight namely Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. It was reduced to G7 in 2014 following the exclusion of Russia.

Latin American countries. There have been farmers' strikes in India, international women's strike movements, and a constant presence of labor movements. This is also a global environmental movement, some of which centers on the actions of Extinction Rebellion, which promotes nonviolent civil disobedience to address the climate crisis, but which also challenges the capitalist system that model of perpetual growth is the root cause of climate change.

The neoliberal political establishment has reacted swiftly and decisively against anti-capitalist movements, and political leaders have not hesitated in using the coercive wing of the state, i.e., policing, to tame opponents. As well as coming down hard on right-wing agitators, which I talked about earlier, the UK criminal justice system has come down hard on climate justice activists who organize high-profile civic disobedience stunts to raise public awareness on practices such as oil fracking, a massive global industry that the ultra-rich often invest in so they can get even richer whilst ignoring the environmental consequences along the way. In September 2024, two Just Stop Oil (est. 2022–2025) protesters, namely Phoebe Plummer and Anna Holland, were jailed for over two years for pouring soup over Vincent van Gogh's famous painting *Sunflowers*, which hung in London's National Gallery. This was even though there was no permanent damage done to the painting because it was protected by a glass screen. Earlier that same year, five other British-based Just Stop Oil environmentalists received record prison sentences for attempting to block a busy motorway two years earlier. Compare their treatment to the continued celebrity status enjoyed by RuPaul, the host of the hugely popular TV show Drag Race, and whose public persona promotes messages of love and tolerance. Behind the scenes, RuPaul profits hugely from oil companies fracking on their 60,000-acre ranch in eastern Wyoming.[6]

Just Stop Oil is one of many anti-neoliberal social justice movements that has an educational component to their work.[7] And it can certainly be considered a community because it brings together people who share a common goal–to stop the use of fossil fuels. The collectivism they create undoubtedly imbues solidarity and significance and the risk to their safety

[6] See https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/aug/28/fracking-wyoming-ranchers-rupaul for more on this. Accessed 3 November 2024.

[7] See their website for more information, https://juststopoil.org/get-trained/. Accessed 08 August 2024.

isn't from within, but from the institutions of the state who, through their actions, object to their demands for social justice and environmental protection.

About This Book

This introductory chapter has served several purposes. It has provided a broad explanation of community education and highlighted contested meanings of the word community. It has offered an overview of what I mean by neoliberalism and has begun a process where I infuse contributions from 51 people currently working in community education who completed an anonymous mixed-methods questionnaire in 2024. I do not cite everyone who completed the questionnaire, but the time people took to answer my questions about the nature of community education, its location and their thoughts and opinions on policy and practice, have been immensely informative, nonetheless.[8]

Chapter 2; *Approaches to Community Education*, explores the purpose of education in today's world and outlines inequalities of outcome for certain population groups. This then leads into a discussion on the different approaches to community education namely universal, second chance, and radical with examples of how each manifest in practice.

Chapter 3; *Philosophies of adult education; a pathway to critical pedagogy*, is a chapter about philosophies of education. It makes the case for a radical philosophy of education that differs from more dominant models of humanistic and sometimes behaviorist approaches that are becoming more common in community education. It shares aspects of critical pedagogy's rich grassroots history and details the ideas it typically draws from, as articulated by the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire. It draws out shortcomings in Freirean philosophy and argues for a more rounded, critical feminist pedagogy as a guiding theory of practice.

This is followed by three chapters that more deliberately focus on how new public managerialism has transformed much of day-to-day practice in the provision of community education.

Chapter 4, *Community Education, Lifelong Learning and Employability*, considers the role of a European lifelong learning agenda in pushing community education towards labor-market activation agenda

[8] These practitioners were working across Ireland.

that benefits the economy above all else. It uses the Irish experience as a case study to showcase the impact of these policies in practice but also gives some examples of how pressure from below, combined with community-based research, can illicit positive policy related change.

In Chapter 5, *Community Education and Professionalism*, I describe the contested concepts of professionalism and professionalization and consider their meaning in a community education context. I question the relationship between a discourse of professionalism and a situation where many community educators endure forced part-time and precarious contracts of employment and are often paid less than their counterparts in other parts of the education system.

Chapter 6, *Community Education and Accreditation*, emphasizes the growing trend in accrediting (or certifying) community education. It explores the origins and meaning of accreditation, which includes demands from below for the formal recognition of learning. This chapter problematizes taken-for-granted expressions like qualifications frameworks, learning outcomes and quality assurance and considers their impact on practice.

Finally, Chapter 7; *Rekindling Community Educatio*n *in Neoliberal Times* reasserts an anti-neoliberal position and offers some concrete suggestions on how to best create a critical, counter-hegemonic environment at a time when it is surely our moral imperative to do so.

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CHAPTER 2

Approaches to Community Education

The best way to describe my own journey into paid work as a community educator is as accidental. I didn't do particularly well at school. In fact, I finished with a very average leaving certificate. Partly, this was because I missed classes to help my mother care for the youngest of my eight siblings in a home environment that very much conformed to traditional gender roles. This biography, of doing badly in school but still ending up in a good job, goes some way in explaining how white, cis, middle-class privilege works. It was my social class, and my gender that got me a place on a nursing program in the 1980s, which was mostly decided on through an interview. But I didn't stay in nursing for long, as I quickly grew skeptical of the individualized medical model of care that focuses heavily on diagnosing and treating illness in isolation from the many external factors that impact our health. Or, as the influential philosopher Gabor Maté maintains 'by its very nature, our social and economic culture generates chronic stressors that undermine our well-being in the most serious of ways' (Maté, 2022: 3). Mostly, the medical model downplays or ignores these factors and reduces people to the passive recipients of care instead of active participants in understanding and managing their own health.

My lack of faith in the medical model wasn't the only reason I left nursing. I also struggled with its strict, patriarchal hierarchies where, instead of being viewed as allied healthcare professionals, nurses were considered subordinate caregivers who followed the instructions of mostly male doctors. Meanwhile the very few men I trained with ascended

C. Fitzsimons, *Community Education and Neoliberalism*,
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the leadership ladder much quicker than their female counterparts. This landscape has somewhat changed in recent years as more women enter medicine, as nurses take on expanding roles of advanced practice, meaning there is more recognition of their expertise and as people of all genders enter the nursing profession.

Around the same time as I got out of nursing, I joined a left-wing revolutionary political party for a while which had a strong educational dimension to its internal work. I continue to work closely with people on the political left, including in teach-ins and other educational gatherings. Indeed, my politics were a big part of my motivation for applying for a job with a community development project in the 1990s as I attempted to align my interest in fighting for political change with the need to make a living. Sarah Jaffe, a journalist and expert in labor and social movements, notes this as a common driving force when people with existing qualifications seek work in the non-profit sector (Jaffe, 2021: 117), but it is often something that only privileged people can manage to do.

My first job as a community educator was to set up a women's education group in an empty flat in a high-rise social housing block which I helped convert into a classroom, social space, offices, and a counseling room.[1] I didn't work alone but was paired with a local woman who had also underperformed in school when measured against social expectations, but who didn't have the social capital I held that secured my pathway to a professional qualification. Our different histories meant that, although we did much the same job, I was more senior and was paid more. It didn't matter that my qualification was in nursing or that she had more experience than I had when it came to working with adult learning groups. She learnt her skills on the job, in no small part thanks to non-accredited Training for Transformation workshops that were widely delivered across Dublin by a social justice movement of the same name that was rooted in the work of the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire.

My co-facilitator had also grown up in the community where we were based. As a result, she brought an authenticity to the work that I didn't hold. She could relate better to the lived experiences of the women we worked with, and this brought an immediate sense of trust and respect that I had to earn. There were many times when I could sense an understandable caution and mistrust towards me, which, because the

[1] The women who attended the group were all former heroin users but who now controlled their drug use through methadone maintenance.

attendees were former drug users, was compounded by my background in nursing. Drug users often face discrimination in medical settings, something I witnessed first-hand on many occasions.[2] I did manage to build a rapport, but this took time and involved working in a way that ensured the participants of this community education initiative were to the fore of determining the mission and ethos of the project, namely to support women in navigating their lives post active addiction. Getting off drugs involved dealing with high levels of stigma, ongoing exclusion, and guilt. Our mission was to support this process but to also engage in a process of critical reflection that focused on the structural and systemic forces that contributed to the choices people made.

The philosophy of education that we, the staff, sought to model was what bell hooks describes as *engaged pedagogy*. If you read on to the next chapter, you will find a more detailed account of the principles and practices of engaged pedagogy, for now, it is enough to describe it as a space of mutuality between teacher and student that nurtures growth for both parties and creates an atmosphere of trust, commitment and genuine learning where we embrace and explore 'the practice of knowing together' to strengthen the common good (hooks, 2010: 22). In other words, our work was about creating a space for healing, building resilience, challenging inequality and envisioning pathways toward change.

One of my strongest memories about this work is the first time we sat down to plan the curriculum. Our initial attempt involved simply asking attendees what they would like to learn about. Their responses mostly revolved around parenting and homemaking, and we quickly realized this reflected just how deeply Irish women in the 1990s limited their expectations. Had we uncritically responded to these requests, we would have created a dishonest learning environment that takes a mechanical approach to learning without unveiling the patriarchal context within which we lived. The second time we sat down to plan the curriculum, my co-worker and I didn't ignore the participants' stated preferences, instead, we used them as a gateway into more critical discussions on local history, the social determinants of health, politics, social analysis, and creative writing. I remember one class which we called 'women's work' which invited those in the room to list, on a flipchart, all the skills that

[2] To this day I still remember one occasion of a male, senior consultant intimidating a young female drug user with a judgmental, dismissive and cruel tone whilst I and several other healthcare professionals watched on without intervening.

were needed to manage a home. These usually included budgeting, time management, flexibility, creativity, patience, listening, empathy, conflict resolution, health and safety awareness and being able to cook and clean. When our list was complete, we costed this work against an average industrial wage and marveled at the value each woman brought to their home and community. Exercises like this one sought to make people more present in their lives. As Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo write, 'the more consciously people make their history, the more they clearly understand the difficulties in the permanent process of their liberation, difficulties that they have to confront in economic, social and cultural domains' (Freire & Macedo, 1987: 66).

The political nature of these classes definitely led to some success in embodying an ethos that was committed to praxis. To illustrate, women who attended the project helped to set up what they called a service-users forum. This forum then formulated a collective complaint against the public health service about the discriminatory treatment they and others experienced when attending their local addiction healthcare service. Some women also joined a campaign against the closure of a local swimming pool. All of us joined thousands of others who marched against a government attempt to axe around 10,000 local employment schemes. This collective show of opposition worked, and the government of the day was forced into a U-turn on this decision.

The women's group I helped set up wasn't the only group the Community Development Project (CDP) I worked for ran. There was also a women's group called 'The Home and Self-Management Course' which was set up in the 1980s. I remember attendees telling me that its conservative-sounding name was much less likely to ruffle feathers in the domestic sphere because it didn't stand out amongst other community education programs for women that, unlike this course, were distinctly domesticating.[3] The CDP also had a computer center and a crèche. This latter service allowed us to implement a strict 'no class without crèche' policy, something that I hadn't encountered or ever even thought about before coming to work in community education.

This CDP is now closed, not by choice, but as part of a significant and sudden downsizing of the Irish community development sector during which thousands of workers lost their jobs and tens of thousands of

[3] See Slowey, 1979; Bassett, Brady, Ingles, & Fleming, 1989 for more on these and adult education more broadly at the time.

people lost important local supports (Harvey, 2012). The Home and Self-Management Course is gone, although the improved status of women in Ireland would likely have led to its discontinuation anyway. The women's group I set up has survived and is now funded through a national health-care budget and under the auspices of the same public health system it had campaigned against back in the 1990s. Its focus is still educational, but I wonder if the Freirean-influenced vision of a fairer and more just society has survived or if this has been sidelined for a more individualized model underpinned by a different philosophical perspective.

The Trouble with Education

Part of the reason such a strong radical focus was held by the CDP I started out with was that everyone working there was interested in creating learning environments that were worlds apart from the traditional school, college and university environments that many of us are familiar with. This very statement illustrates how there is a range of opinions on what education is supposed to look like and what purpose it is supposed to serve. Yet, today, when I ask many of my university-based students what their thoughts are about the education system, it isn't uncommon for people to maintain that by simply expanding and reforming these same schools, colleges, and universities, we can somehow create a better and more equal world.

There could be some truth to this assertion. Education could indeed be emancipatory. But only if we implement enough reforms to revolutionize traditional education and transform it into democratic learning environments that foster critical thinking and that collectivize people's efforts in acting in and on the world. This was the ambition of the CDP where I started my career as an adult educator. However, no matter how transformative one small community education initiative might be, its impact can never counter the effects of the mainstream education system, whose values and practices are overwhelmingly the polar opposite.

A Note on the School System

This next section is not an exhaustive history of the school system, I advise you to look somewhere else for that. What this section does do is to look to the past to help challenge the popular assertion above; that our

education system is ostensibly good, that knowledge is largely neutral, and that reforming our schools would automatically reform our society.

One place to start in refuting widespread positivity about schools and colleges is to consider the reasons why widespread access to schools came about in the first place. This wasn't to nurture people's intellectual capacities; rather, schools were made available to the public because of a convergence of motivations by the ruling classes, each of which sought to control the population. Not everyone realizes that the primary school model that we are familiar with today mostly began in Europe in the 1800s and mostly in response to the need for obedient and skilled factory workers. As far back as the early 1900s, critics were highlighting how these schools instilled (and still instill) many of the same values and practices that were required in the workplace. In the 1930s, the US philosopher, psychologist, and educationalist John Dewey challenged the method of instruction and indeed the nature of knowledge in schools where hierarchical 'rules of conduct' set out to prepare passive students for a future of obedience and compliance with the status quo (Dewey, [1938] 1997: 18–19).

Dewey wasn't the first to criticize traditional education's fixation on fixed scientific truths; in fact, one of the most impactful accounts of this can be found in the literary work of Charles Dickens, specifically *Hard Times*, which was first published in 1854. The opening two chapters of *Hard Times* introduce us to Cissy Dupe, a circus child with deep experiential knowledge of horses, who is ridiculed by her teacher Mr. Gradgrind, in favor of the accounts from a second child who lacks direct contact with the animals, but whose learnt knowledge from books is privileged for its seemingly scientific rigor (Dickens, [1853] 2012, 5–11).

Another prominent critic has been the philosopher and social critic Ivan Illich who, in the well-regarded book *Deschooling Society* (1971) also linked schools to the norms of industrialized societies including the use of bells and sirens to control people's movements, uniforms that control what people wear, harsh punctuality rules, clear hierarchies and deference to authority. Illich even went so far as to compare the Western school system to prisons, arguing both institutions impose conformity and passivity and reinforce, rather than undermine, social inequality (Illich, 1970: 32).

These assertions didn't go unnoticed at the time. The strongly humanistic and influential UNESCO[4] report *Learning to Be* (1972) asserted that schools should 'devote less time to distributing and storing knowledge … and more time to mastering methods of acquiring it' agreeing that 'certain kinds of school and certain forms of teaching must be strongly criticized, if on different grounds for different countries, and many aspects of school education call for thorough-going reappraisal and reformation' (Faure, et al., 1972: xxxii). UNESCO also criticized the way most curricula suppress artistic expression, something its authors position as an essential ingredient of critical-thinking writing,

> imagination is at the source of scientific invention as well as artistic creation. Any education which for rational reasons concentrates of teaching so-called objective facts rather than stimulating creative desire is going against the grain of what Albert Einstein experienced. 'The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science'. (Faure, et al., 1972: 61)

Schools and education more broadly have also historically served (and still serve) the imperialist, patriarchal, capitalist state in other ways, including by erasing the histories and knowledge systems of marginalized communities and indigenous peoples (Pirbhai-Illich, Pete, & Martin, 2017), by embedding a domesticating role for women (Connolly & Ryan, 1999), and by upholding deeply oppressive social systems. For instance, anti-literacy laws in the US in the 1700s made it illegal to teach enslaved Africans how to read and write (Cooper, 2024). Similarly, in Ireland, the British Empire imposed penal laws in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that restricted the teaching of both the Irish language and Catholicism. To circumvent attempts to suppress Irish culture, hidden outdoor 'hedge schools' operated to resist British colonialism and preserve the Irish language and history.

Another dark aspect of the history of education is how, throughout the 1800s and 1900s in particular, deeply racist, western systems of education were introduced to colonized countries, including across the African

[4] Which stands for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. It was founded in the European post-war period of 1945 to promote global peace and security through international cooperation in education, science, and culture,

continent, where the dominant thinking was that Africa was a backward, uncivilized place. The historian and political activist Walter Rodney details how, before colonization, African education differed from what colonizers introduced. Its outstanding features included its collectivism, many-sidedness, connection to social, material, and spiritual life, and its emphasis on emotional wellbeing. Rodney explains,

> There was no separation of education and productivity or any division between manual and intellectual education. Altogether, through mainly informal means, pre-colonial African education matched the realities of pre-colonial African society and produced well-rounded personalities to fit that society. (Rodney, 1972: 291)

There is no doubt that many schools have significantly changed since the 1800s and since philosophers like Illich critiqued their role in the 1970s. Many of today's schools are less authoritarian, and the modes of discipline have radically changed. Teachers are now encouraged to be student-centered, classrooms are more interactive, and there is an emphasis on group work. But many of the core characteristics that historically maintained the school system remain in situ to this day. Much traditional western education is still highly paternalistic, where teachers embody moral perfection and neutrality, and where learners must comply within an institution of carceral logic that cannot be trusted to determine what is right or wrong given its need to reify its own dominance (Le Master and Mapes, 2020: 402). And it isn't unusual for colonizers to still be presented as liberators with countries in the Global South still painted as non-democratized and, therefore, as a threat to Western capitalist value systems. Even recent attempts to de-colonize the curriculum have become mostly symbolic (Abu Moghli & Kadiwal, 2021).

There are other ways in which schools have not changed nearly enough if they are to even slightly resemble authentic environments of critical thinking. Many schools still exercise considerable social control through punishments like detention and exclusion, and many school goers report ongoing restrictions on bathroom breaks. Schools still reward individual over collective success mostly because of a dominant market logic that remains infused through the curriculum. Skills-based subjects, especially science subjects, are privileged over humanities and social sciences, and competitiveness is continually encouraged. It is also still not unusual for schools to follow a teacher-centric model where students sit in rows for

long periods and where everyone follows the same curriculum. Mostly, this is still assessed through standardized testing, much of which still focuses on rote memorization.

A good way to more deeply conceptualize other ongoing problems with traditional education is to divide concerns into pedagogic criticisms about how teaching and learning are organized in the first instance, then focus on equality-based criticisms about access, progression and outcomes.

Questioning how we Teach

Taking the former first, there are several high-profile theorists who criticize the dominant pedagogy in schools, colleges and universities. These include the educational theorist, Ken Robinson who argues traditional schools stifle creativity, something he interprets as the embodiment of multiple critical ways of thinking and being and something that we all instinctively hold. To use his own words, 'Creativity is a multi-faceted process. It involves many ordinary abilities and some specialist skills and techniques; it can be fostered by many different ways of thinking, and it draws on critical judgement as well as imagination, intuition and often gut feelings' (Robinson, 2011: 49). According to Robinson, the dominant forms of education actively suppress our creativity so much so that most people lose their creative competencies and confidence almost entirely. The challenge Robinson sets us is to encourage the leaders of education to create environments that cultivate imagination, creativity, and innovation.

Another important critic is Parker Palmer. In *The Courage to Teach* (1997), Palmer strongly asserts how schools repeatedly fail to authentically engage with the internal spheres of both students and teachers. By ignoring our 'inner worlds' and vulnerabilities, Parker maintains that schools create fissures between 'inner truth and outer performance' creating 'a split of personhood from practice' and a distrust in personal truths to the benefit of objective truths (Palmer, 2007: 18). Parker also views universities as institutions that mostly uphold a stagnant, impersonal and monolithic approach to education or, to again borrow his own words, 'though the academy claims to value multiple modes of knowing, it honors only one–an "objective" way of knowing that takes us into the "real" world by taking us "out of ourselves" (Palmer, 2007: 18).

A third opponent of the dominant model of teaching and learning in schools is, of course, the Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire who, in

Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1972), roundly criticizes what he describes as a depository approach to education where seemingly knowledgeable experts (the teachers) pour fixed knowledge into the minds of passive, compliant students in an environment where only the latter is thought to be learning anything. The traditional model, Freire argues, prevents authentic dialogue and the co-creation of knowledge that happens when we ask critical questions about real-world events. Instead, 'schools become easy spaces for selling knowledge which corresponds to capitalist ideology' (Freire and Shor, 1987: 8). There seems little doubt about the fact that this banking approach to education remains the dominant form of education, even when some participatory methodologies are introduced like group work or more student-teacher interaction (explored more in chapter 3). For the moment, it is enough to remember that Freire's central criticism is that this depository approach prevents people from questioning the circumstances of their lives.

The Hidden Curriculum

As well as these criticisms of pedagogy, the second important evaluation of how schools operate centers on equality-based criticisms, by which I mean the systemic barriers that limit access, progression, and outcomes for some population groups. Globally, girls are much more likely to be excluded from school. Sometimes this is because of laws that prevent them from attending. Other times it is because of cultural norms, economic imperative or because girls are the first in families to be taken out of education to help with domestic and care labor. Class also plays a significant part indeed some critics have described schools as occupational sorting machines, meaning a mechanism for the economic and political elite to maintain control by influencing the jobs people do (Robinson, 2011: 50; Spring, 2013: 12).

There are several exclusionary practices that illustrate this point. First, there is no denying that schools in wealthy communities enjoy better resources and facilities. Where these schools are privately funded, this can result in better teachers and more facilities and resources, all in an environment where those with material advantages can already afford extra private tuition. Second, research on mainstream education in Eurocentric countries has demonstrated multiple ways in which these structures both mirror and perpetuate systemic inequality. For example, a person's

ethnicity can directly impact how they fare in the education system, sometimes because of direct discrimination and sometimes because minoritized households are more likely to survive on lower incomes and limited access to social services (Biggart, O'Hare, & Connolly, 2013). There is also a less obvious but equally pervasive invisible network of social patterns that are sometimes expressed as a *hidden curriculum*. Writing over 50 years ago, Ivan Illich maintained,

> The school system today performs the threefold function common to powerful churches throughout history. It is simultaneously the repository of society's myth, the institutionalization of that myth's contradictions, and the locus of the ritual which reproduces and veils the disparities between myth and for rebellion against its institutional perversions. (Illich, 1972: 37)

Much more recently, research by Hopkins et al. 2024 describe the hidden curriculum as a set of unspoken norms and customs that are essential to understand if a person is to succeed. Another way to think about the hidden curriculum is to view it as is the lessons that are implicitly taught about who is valued in society and who is not, something that is reinforced through the language used in learning environments, the reading lists relied on, and the case studies presented.

Another important theorist to help us understand the hidden curriculum is Pierre Bourdieu. His theory of habitus details how our backgrounds and experiences are what unconsciously determine what we consider normal in society (Bourdieu 1884: 170). When education is saturated with white, middle-class, hetero norms, this alienates many millions of people who fall outside of this narrow experience. Their benchmark for success is to conform and align with the dominant habitus, or cultural customs, that reinforce the idea that the Eurocentric status quo is the normal and natural way to be.

Many people are not aware of the extent to which they maintain the dominant habitus in the day-to-day. But there is evidence to support Bourdieu's claims, including studies that demonstrate how teachers have very different expectations for their students because of preconceived ideas about social class, gender and ethnicity (for example, see Polakow, 1997; Smyth and Hannon, 2007; Radnor et al., 2007; Forrester et al., 2024). Repeatedly, these and other studies capture how the expectation for pupils from wealthy schools and communities is mostly to

become well-paid professionals like doctors and accountants. But these same careers are rarely considered suitable for children from underserved communities. Unintentional teacher subjectivity also contributes to very different outcomes, i.e., different grades, depending on the circumstances of a person's life beyond what they can control themselves (e.g., see Connolly, 2006; Meaney, 2016; Gayle et al., 2020). But instead of engaging with research studies such as these and decades' worth of theoretically based criticisms of the dominant education systems, a myth of *meritocracy* continues to dominate, a concept that tells us that a person's performance in school reflects their intelligence and that it is the individual effort they put in along the way and not the variety of social, economic, and cultural advantages that some people hold over others that leads to success.

Models of Community Education

Many people, including people working in community education, are aware that schools perpetuate inequality and lots of people work hard to do something about this. However, the most common solution offered is, again, individualized support that seeks to overcome barriers to education, especially barriers to higher education. Tactics for what is increasingly called *widening participation* can include financial supports, lower entry requirements, and bespoke pathways for priority groups, e.g., for disabled people, minoritized ethnic groups and people from low-income households. More and more, tertiary pathways are being created, including by community education providers, that claim to bridge the gap between schools and colleges. Widening participation may increase access to university, but it may ultimately represent not much more than a hollow gesture if it forces students into institutions that do nothing about dismantling the same structures that uphold the elitist status quo.

Other people view community education as quite separate from higher education. Whatever the relationship between the two, it helps to draw out different approaches to community education, a concept I first encountered through the work of the Scottish-based academic Ian Martin (1987) who determined three models: universal, second-chance, and radical. I have further developed these overlapping categorizations and will now discuss each in more detail.

Universal

Ian Martin describes a universal approach to community education as a consensus model, meaning one that uncomplicatedly perceives education as wide-ranging, adaptable, and inclusive. My understanding of a universal approach to community education is one where providers and educators adopt a one-size-fits-all approach. The courses on offer can be wide-ranging, the main characteristic that makes it universal is that a provider simply opens their doors and invites in anyone who wishes to attend. A clear advantage of this universal approach is that what is on offer is typically local to where people live and is organized in such a way that it gives bite-sized opportunities to return to learning in a less threatening environment than, say, a university. In other words, it allows people to dip their toe in without committing to college courses that are longer and often expensive.

It is important to advocate for community spaces for broad-based learning and at a surface level, a universal approach can appear uncontroversial. An open-door policy can create rich and diverse learning environments that don't single out certain population groups. They can also bring people into the education system who require supports for neurodiversity that they were previously unaware of or that weren't made available to them when they were in school. People can have lots of fun, make friends, and benefit from intellectual stimulation.

Its shortfall is an often-invisible assumption that we all come from the same starting point, meaning that everyone can access local education if they are interested in doing so. This simply isn't the case. Instead, a well-meaning, universally open community education course inadvertently upholds the status quo by failing to appreciate the challenges some people face, especially when earlier experiences of education were disappointing or traumatic. As a result, the people who are most likely to sign up for an open doors local education program, for example, in their local library, are often the same people who have had a reasonably good experience of school or college. Universal community education also does nothing substantive to reduce other structural barriers that prevent people from returning to education. Consider, for example, a low-income earner who is parenting alone and might love nothing more than to take a course in creative writing. Without childcare and transport costs, their likelihood of getting involved is minimal.

Second Chance

Alternatively, this same person might be able to sign up for a creative writing course if the providers work from a 'second chance' model. This applies when the principal purpose of community education is to give people a second shot at education in an environment that not only provides important wrap-around services, but that seeks to compensate for previous negative experiences, mostly a person's school experience. Unlike a universal approach, second-chance education offers tailored supports such as more one-to-one guidance, counseling, and literacy supports. To illustrate further, I know of a center that runs English language classes that also has a food bank, a clothes bank, and free legal advice that specializes in family reunification.

Much second-chance education also involves flexible delivery, mostly in environments that appreciate how people's circumstances differ. At a macro level, the organizers of second-chance education are often people who advocate for policy change and for greater social supports for people enduring the symptoms of systemic inequality that neoliberalism creates.

Its limitations include how second-chance education often still maintains a deficit approach where the finger of failure can be pointed at the individual who has underachieved and not the school system that failed to create the necessary conditions for learning. A second and growing problem with second-chance education relates to how, increasingly, many courses now principally focus on vocational learning. In doing so, they are continuing the historical process of directing certain population groups toward certain occupations. As chapter 4 will discuss in much more detail, European policy on adult and community education has increasingly focused on maintaining individual autonomy and economic competitiveness. As a result of this policy discourse, many second-chance initiatives have metamorphosed into spaces that focus on work readiness where the real winner is the capitalist economy, which benefits from a constant stream of up-skilled individuals who are primed to uncritically participate in an increasingly casualized labor-market.

I have direct experience in this as a former teacher of community-based professional qualifications in healthcare, something that I got involved in some years after I worked in the community development project I spoke about a little earlier and precipitated by my own need to change jobs so that I could mind my children when they were young. In recent

years and across many Eurocentric countries, a growing number of attendees of community-based healthcare courses are migrants, some of whom are new to healthcare, some who hold existing professional healthcare qualifications that are not recognized in their host country, and some with qualifications in other professions. I recently met a qualified teacher who was working as a healthcare worker in a private nursing home. Like many people on community-based healthcare courses, she had signed up for the course because it gave her a better shot at entering the workforce, never mind that this was in a low-paid, low-status job. Ebun Joseph describes this growing trend as an exercise in 'down-skilling' rather than 'up-skilling' people for jobs that they are often overqualified for (Joseph, 2020: 85).

Some providers of second-chance community education also don't pay enough attention to the discrimination people can face when they look for a job. Research by Natacha Soto and Sandra Ruiz Moriana (2020) found significant challenges for migrant women in Ireland across three levels of discrimination: gender, ethnicity, and religion. Like the qualified teacher I met, the authors found much evidence of qualified migrant women working as cleaners, au pairs, and in other low-paid jobs that were not related to their qualifications.

Radical

As I hope I have illustrated, both universal and second-chance models of community education can be nurturing and enjoyable and can produce benefits for some people. They can prevent loneliness, enrich people's lives in a host of ways, and have a politicizing dimension depending on the orientation of the educator and indeed the student. But they can also foster workforce mindsets that prepare people for precarious, often low-paid employment, create closed communities that exclude people, or do little to address the personal stigma some people feel because they didn't do well in school. Perhaps more fundamentally, they don't address the egregious levels of inequality laid bare in chapter 1, even though many of the participants of community education are the ones bearing the brunt.

A third, alternative model is a radical or critical approach that stands out from the other two domains because its principal focus is to expose structural inequality. To put it another way, it is an approach to community education that unapologetically sides with social interests and movements that are concerned with challenging the status quo as part of a

broader struggle to end oppression and discrimination. Because radical community education recognizes the deep connection between education and the social structures that determine our lives, its aim isn't to create individualized pathways to equality (although this can be a consequence). Instead, its aim is to massively reduce and ideally eradicate inequality altogether.

The history of radically politicizing community education very much depends on what part of the world you are in. It has been identified through the work of Danish Folk High Schools, the US-based Highlander school in Tennessee (Westerman, 2009), through community-based education in working-class neighborhoods in Scotland (Kirkwood and Kirkwood, 1989), within the women's movement in Irish settings (Connolly, 2005), through Asian Pacific consciousness-raising education that developed in the 1980s (Boughton, 2013: 240), in South Africa during apartheid (Hope & Timmel, 2014) and through work with peasants and land movements within Brazil (Freire, 1972; Kane, 2001). The educational philosophy that is associated with radical community education is critical pedagogy, something I explore in more detail in chapter 3.

Doing radical community education doesn't always mean running courses that carry an overtly political title. But it does mean consciously bringing a political lens to our work and seeking the authentic praxis Freire encourages which means a dynamic and cyclical process of reflection and action that is collective, genuinely transformative, and undertaken as a pathway to social change. Ideally, radical community education begins with community-based research that gathers the needs and concerns of people then creates the circumstances for people to analyze and act on these concerns. But this isn't always how it manifests. By way of example, a radical approach to a health and wellbeing course would seek to expose how these concepts exist in the context of the alienating nature of capitalism, and how it is the social determinants of health such as our housing, the nature of our jobs, the quality of the air that we breathe, and our proximity to climate catastrophe that impact our health the most (Maté, 2022: 319–320). As a group develops a collective understanding of health and begins to question its individualized focus, their response might be to build networks that seek to address the shared determinants of health. Where housing is identified as a primary determinant, people might get involved with community development groups or tenants' unions (for an example, see Dorman, 2007). Or people

might get involved in other collective spaces like trade unions or environmental justice groups. Overall, the shared goal would be to secure better housing, safer working conditions, or policies and practices that would reduce environmental pollution.

Another example of a radical model might be where a vocational childcare program would recognize and address how things like housing and food poverty affect children's experiences. Instead of blaming the guardians involved, future childcare workers might support food security or affordable housing initiatives. Their radically oriented facilitator might problematize the feminized nature of childcare, pose questions about repeated policy failures to adequately subsidize childcare, and encourage participants to unionize to win better pay and conditions for themselves. A radical approach to community education would also involve periodical evaluations to assess the impact of these actions. If their strategies are not working toward meaningful change, adjustments can be made.

As with other models of community education, there are also difficulties with radical approaches, including how the actuality of working in this way can be much more challenging than books like this make it out to be. This is especially the case when a teacher's politicizing ambition isn't shared by the adults who sign up for a particular program. Our effectiveness can also be hampered by the constraints of quality assurance frameworks in certifying learning. This increasingly bureaucratized aspect of education has become much more of a feature of community education than it once was.

It is also the case that, as chapter 1 identified, much once radical community education has been co-opted into the structures of the state. Some argue that an 'in and against' the state positioning is possible and believe that when civil society organizations hold governments to account, this is good for democracy (for example, see Crickley & Mc Ardle 2009; Lloyd, 2010). Others argue this is an unrealistic aspiration that ignores the fact that the reality for many state-funded community-based organizations who criticize the state is that they have had their funding removed (Bissett, 2015: 172).

Identifying Models of Practice

When I wrote the first edition of this book–*Community Education and Neoliberalism*–back in 2017, one of the tasks I undertook when analyzing findings from over 220 practicing community educators was to determine

the extent to which people were operating from a universal, second-chance and radical community education approach respectively. Research participants were asked to do two things: first, to indicate which of the statements outlined in the table below best described their approach to community education, and second, to identify which statement best described the model adopted by the organization where they work. The following emerged.

What this table tells us is that, ten years ago, 37 percent of community educators aligned themselves with a universal approach, 35 percent aligned with a second-chance approach, and 28 percent aligned their practice with a politicizing approach. At the same time, as many as 43 percent of these practitioners were at odds with their organization's approach, with the most notable contradiction being that over half (55 percent) of those who favored a radical approach were working within an organization that favored a second-chance model of practice. Some of the practitioners who fell into this category reported feeling isolated, of not feeling supported in the day-to-day, and a sense that the people they worked with often didn't understand the purpose of radically oriented practice.

Table 2.1 Models of Community Education

		Practitioners (%)	*Organisations (%)*
1	Where the emphasis is on offering a wide range of courses (vocational, personal, political) that are open to anyone who is interested regardless of where they live and what their background is. [universal]	37	26
2	Where the emphasis is on offering a wide range of courses (vocational, personal, political) specifically targeted at those who are considered 'educationally disadvantaged', thereby providing opportunities otherwise not readily available. [second chance]	35	58
3	Where the emphasis is on a political and politicizing act taking its lead from issues affecting people in communities considered disadvantaged. Its approach is collective over individual, and its hope is to influence wider social change. [radical/critical]	28	16

In 2017, 24 percent of those surveyed disagreed with the hypothesis that community education should target people in underserved communities. Most people who argued against this statement supported a universal model and often expressed strongly held opinions that upheld meritocracy. In other words, they downplayed or completely ignored the extent to which systems and structures control our life chances. These same practitioners were well-meaning and often voiced a commitment to equality. But they believed that the best way to achieve this was to be blind to differences such as race and class. As I have argued elsewhere, this meritocratic stance deepens rather than alleviates inequality because it misrepresents the impact of structural inequality on people's lives (Fitzsimons & Nwanze, 2022: 172).

In 2024, I again sought the opinions of practicing community educators, again using an online anonymous mixed methods questionnaire. I circulated this second questionnaire via the same community education networks I had used nearly ten years earlier and also across social media. Overwhelmingly, the most significant thing that I noticed from this repeat research was just how challenging it was to reach practicing community educators. Where over 220 people responded in 2017, just 51 people took part in the same study in 2024 at a time when my own profile was more pronounced.[5]

My own sense of why the uptake was so low is because the collective, once bustling network of community educators and community development workers employed across the Island of Ireland simply isn't there anymore. This isn't unique to this jurisdiction. Several years earlier, in the UK, Mae Shaw (2009) identified 'a profound crisis' at the heart of state-funded community development and community education where the neoliberal politics of the state has depoliticized and de-democratized practice through new public managerialist practices. This Shaw claims, has transformed community-based education and development practitioners into 'unwitting handmaidens' of the neoliberal project (Shaw, 2009: 1).

Just 51 responses are too few to present any meaningful statistical analysis, something that is also compounded by the non-representative nature of the sample. However, it is worth sharing how over half of the responses I received were from people who believed that community

[5] I was a PhD researcher when the initial round of research was carried out. I did work in community education which may have helped but I am much more established today and work as a professor in the same university.

education should have no political dimension whatsoever. Some people were vociferous in this assertion. For example, in response to the statement–*part of my job as a community educator is to politicize people*–one person wrote, 'politicizing people, has nothing to do with our role as community educators'. Someone else expressed the view that 'when politics comes into education everything goes to sh#t. Pardon my language but it's true politics ruins almost everything'. Amongst those who agreed with the statement, it was clear that there was a grounding in elements of radical community education. To illustrate:

> Community education should target a much broader range than just those who had negative experiences of school. I think it should include anyone who is part of socially, educationally, economically disadvantaged or excluded communities. In terms of the politicisation question: I think our role is to increase learners' critical literacies and critical consciousness in a wide range of areas

And again,

> Community education is a collective space where people can together discuss the issues that affect them not solely as individuals but as members of a community, including the community brought together in this space.

Some contributors named Freirean principles as central to their practice including one publicly employed practitioner with over 16 years' experience who describes their approach as 'informed by the Freirean principles of dialogue and problem posing' claiming 'outcomes-based learning models' are 'at odds with the way I work'.

In some respects, a fall in numbers and a sense that community education is less political than it was in the past is no surprise given the extent to which government cuts and forced mergers have transformed Ireland's community and voluntary sector. But this doesn't mean that radical community education isn't happening in other spaces including within tenants' unions, in feminist spaces, pro-Palestinian activism, and within left-wing socialist political parties. To illustrate, CATU Ireland (Community Action Tenants Union) sees member education as a core aspect of its mission. I have also previously documented a strong educational focus within reproductive rights movements (Fitzsimons, 2022), something I expand on in chapter 7.

Across these examples, it appears that politicizing community education is still happening, but not so much in publicly funded spaces as was the case when I first entered community development work in the 1990s.

Conclusion

As this chapter has detailed, my own entry into a career in adult and community education was foregrounded by an earlier career that I entered because of the social and cultural capital I gained through my class status. It didn't matter that I hadn't done well in school, a system that finds ways to advantage some population groups over others and, in doing so, maintains rather than challenges the neoliberal status quo.

The models of community education that I present make it possible to conceptualize a framework of practice that compares and contrasts different approaches. There may be benefits to universal and second-chance approaches, but unless we advocate for a radical model of community education, we unconsciously participate in and even grow an education system that prioritizes personal achievements and perpetuates clear social hierarchies whilst at the same time ignoring systemic inequalities and the collective needs of society. Knowing that different models of practice are possible, helps us tailor our own ways of working to best match our philosophical orientation.

The next chapter will introduce you to the main philosophies of practice that I am referring to and will further explain critical pedagogy as a philosophy of education that not only questions the notion of an autonomous self but argues that a lot of what we see as our own personal identity is, in many respects, derived from our proximity to power.

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CHAPTER 3

Philosophies of Adult Education: A Pathway to Critical Pedagogy

Philosophies of Adult and Community Education

If any of you have studied community education in college, you have probably taken classes that focus on the different philosophical approaches that are said to underpin education. My own experience of these classes, and the books that support them, is that they divide different viewpoints into distinct schools of thought about the nature of learning and, by extension, the way we should approach the act of teaching. This chapter highlights some of the problems of differentiating philosophies of education as well as highlighting some important advantages. It might seem quite dense and possibly alienating from the outset, but bear with me as, in order to properly dive into this discussion, I must first very briefly, and incompletely, explain what those distinctions are. This isn't because I support their strict dichotomization; it is to provide you with the necessary context for later analysis.

Liberal

Liberal philosophies are thought to have emerged at a time when instrumental, or practical knowledge, was being separated out from liberal inquiry, which mostly means the pursuit of knowledge, for its own sake. Liberal education takes its core ideas from classic ideals articulated many centuries ago and attributed to such key thinkers as Plato and Socrates who encouraged critical thinking as the cornerstone of learning. Whilst it

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is difficult to be certain about what these philosophers actually said due to the passage of time and the misunderstandings that can happen during the translations of their early writings, Plato in particular is thought to have developed our early ethical and political doctrines in metaphysics which focus on the nature of reality, questions about time and space and the relationship between our consciousness and the physical world (Meinwald, 2016: 20).

Central tenets of liberal approaches to education are thus individualist and introspective. In the context of adult education, liberal education typically focuses on people's intellectual growth and development through critical questioning (Micari, 2003: 28). It is often seen as the cornerstone of educational thought and is best understood as the pursuit of education in order to become more enlightened, meaning more intelligent, human beings.

Behaviorist

It was many years later, in the 1800s, that more scientific ideas about learning came to the fore. Mostly this was through the work of western psychology, which began to define learning as something that manifests as a change in behavior (Meriam & Bierema, 2013: 25). A behaviorist philosophy of education therefore emphasizes measurable change as the benchmark of learning. It is often associated with rote learning, which can be accused of being largely devoid of critical thinking, but which can be important when repetition and recall are required to carry out certain tasks. A good example is when a person is learning how to drive a car. Repetition, reinforcement, and immediate feedback are all essential requisites when teaching someone how to develop the automatic responses most drivers take for granted once they are used to being behind the wheel.

Some of the key thinkers associated with this school of thought include Ivan Pavlov, whose work on classic conditioning sought to demonstrate how people learn through repeated patterns of stimulation, something he demonstrated through his well-known experiments with dogs. Another key thinker is B.F. Skinner who developed Pavlov's earlier ideas into a theory of operant conditioning which is a three-part process of stimulus-response-consequence (or punishers). Skinner believed that an observable response, e.g., using wing mirrors effectively, changes because of a consequence, e.g., realizing that they improve our range of vision, maintained

through reinforcement or punishment e.g., the risk of crashing or the fear of failing a driving test. Learning thus occurs because we either reward or punish certain behaviors (Leeder, 2022: 28). For many of us, behaviorist approaches to education have dominated our own educational experiences be this our time in school, college or in vocational learning environment that has prepared us for paid work.

Progressive

A third philosophical orientation that is sometimes drawn out is progressive education, a tradition that was founded on a critique of traditional schooling. Or, to borrow words from the influential philosopher John Dewey, an environment within which 'the attitude of pupils must, upon the whole, be one of docility, receptivity and obedience' (Dewey, 1997/1938: 18). As this quote reveals, progressive education criticized depository methods that can still dominate in western schools. Dewey's very particular vision for change, and one he labored to create for most of his life, was to transform education from teacher-led, impersonal spaces to student-centered spaces that would prioritize experiential learning; or learning by doing to put it another way. This is seen as the pathway to problem-solving, critical thinking and a more engaged form of citizenship.

Progressive education movements remain active to this day. By way of example, The Portuguese Ponte Basic School in Santo Tirso, Porto, boasts no traditional classrooms, which it replaces with well-resourced workspaces. The school's values of solidarity and democracy are guided by a pedagogy that promotes responsibility, supportive autonomy, and active citizenship.[1] This model of challenging the status quo of curricular fundamentals actively takes on the external forces that control education (Quay & Seaman, 2013: 10–11) leaving proponents of progressive education as outliers in terms of today's dominant models of education.

Humanistic

Progressive education is not the only philosophy to ascribe to student-centeredness rather this is the core tenant of humanistic philosophies, an

[1] Find out more at https://www.escoladaponte.pt/o-projeto/ Sourced 22 March 2025. I am not familiar with this school rather found it easily from a google search.

approach to teaching and learning that is heavily influenced by contemporary psychology. Adult educators John Elisa and Sharan Merriam summarize four assumptions that underpin humanism: that everyone is essentially good; that we each have freedom to choose and the potential to succeed; that our core 'self' can be nurtured and can grow; and that we each carry personal responsibility (Elisa & Merriam, 1995: 116–121).

Humanism's most influential theorist is arguably the psychologist Carl Rogers, who sees the central ambition of adult education as to create the conditions for self-directed learning, which, in turn, enables each of us to reach our full potential and make important changes in our lives (Rogers, 1989: 135). For Rogers, 'the individual has within himself or herself vast resources for self-understanding' and 'for altering his or her self-concept, attitudes, and self-directed behavior–and that these resources can be tapped if only a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided' (Rogers, 1989: 135).

Another influential humanistic theorist, and again a psychologist that many people have heard of, is Abraham Maslow. His theory of human motivation is expressed via a five-tiered hierarchy of human needs namely: physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization with each of us responsible for our own growth and development (Mazlow, 1943).

Humanistic approaches to education are particularly common in community education where the default approach is often to put each person's development center stage and to encourage self-directed learning in safe, respectful environments, something that can be very different to what most of us experience in school. One community educator that I spoke to who works in a government-funded women's group captures this philosophy well when they describe this approach as 'education that empowers individuals from within their communities to understand the need for and to develop the ability to impact positive change either on a personal and familial level or a broader community level.' As her words reveal, it is not only the person who comes to her service that benefits. There can also be rewards for their family and the wider community, which can include more money circulating because of falling unemployment and, where people progress to higher education, a normalization of a pathway that might have otherwise been considered unattainable.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy, or radical education as it is sometimes called, challenges the individualistic focus of humanism which, as mentioned above, largely presumes that each of us is responsible for reaching our fullest potential, regardless of the circumstances of our lives. A truer understanding is offered by the critical pedagogy scholar Peter McLaren when he claims we are '*unfree* and inhibit a world rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege' (McLaren, 2009: 61, italics in original). To put it another way, this is a philosophy that argues it is impossible to separate the person from the oppressive structures of society including classism, racism, colonialism, sexism, ableism, ageism, and cis and hetero normativity.

Where humanism is concerned with how we, as individuals, can be different in the world, critical pedagogy is therefore concerned with how the world itself can be different. Critical pedagogy somewhat builds on *critical theory* which is generally regarded as having been developed within the German-based Frankfurt School through the work of theorists like Jürgen Habermas, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. Paulo Freire is often considered a key thinker in critical pedagogy, but other famous contributors who offer a fervent critique of traditional education are the writer and cultural critic Henry Giroux and the educator and social critic bell hooks.

Critical pedagogy argues that education can never be neutral rather it either maintains the capitalist status quo or seeks to transform it. One of the most frequently cited aspects of critical pedagogy (which I referred to in Chapter 2) is its critique of what is sometimes called the banking or depository approach to education. bell hooks describes this as a system that is 'based on the assumption that memorizing information and regurgitating it represented gaining knowledge that could be deposited, stored and used at a later date' (hooks, 1994: 5). Although this is the aspect of critical pedagogy that often gets the most attention, calling out banking approaches to education isn't about singling out and blaming individual teachers or about naming and shaming ineffective methods, it is about recognizing how the power structures and practices of the education system are designed to embed capitalist logic as common sense. A banking approach, it is argued, dulls our critical thinking and suppresses our true consciousness, ensuring conformity and preserving the existing capitalist power structures.

Transformative

Transformative learning is another philosophical orientation that, as with critical pedagogy, is mostly talked about as a theory of change. In this case, the change in perspective typically focuses on how people interpret the world. Transformative learning is often rooted in ideas ascribed to the American sociologist Jack Mezirow who views learning as something that often begins with what he calls a 'disorienting dilemma', which interrupts our often strongly held 'frame of reference' through which each of us understand our experiences (Mezirow, 1997).

Although not directly a transformative learning theorist, some of the ideas attributed to the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, especially his theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1987) was a significant influence on how Mezirow frames teaching and learning. The core tenets of transformative learning are that, through dialogic practices, experiential learning and critical reflection, we can re-construct our 'truths' in a way that enables a more inclusive and integrative way of thinking.

Mezirow's theory of transformative learning outlines how, without always realizing what we are doing, most of us assume our cultural norms values and beliefs are superior to others. Transformative learning theory outlines practices that challenge this deeply held belief across four processes. These are: (1) the act of elaborating on an existing point of view by seeking evidence to support our initial perspective; (2) establishing new points of view based on perceived shortcomings; (3) transforming our point of view as a result of critical reflection on previous misconceptions about other people; and finally, (4) transforming the dominant ethnocentric way of being through critical reflection (Mezirow, 1997: 5–7).

Aside from Mezirow, another key thinker is the adult education scholar Stephen Brookfield, who has explored the role of critical reflection in adult learning and transformative learning by emphasizing the importance of questioning assumptions, creating dialogic spaces, and cultivating critical thinking.

The Trouble with Philosophies of Education

There are several problems with interpreting adult education through these seemingly discrete lenses, as I have done, not least because this very act implies there are fixed, objective boundaries and inherent truths

instead of seeing language, and the naming of things, as itself, an exercise of power. This point becomes obvious by just a cursory glance of Habermas's often cited Theory of Communicative Action where he clearly aims for one singular universal and rational theory that can be universally applied.

This brings to the fore the second obvious problem with this approach in that each of these categories comes from deep epistemological traditions of scholarship that are both male centric and Eurocentric. Habermas is amongst a whole host of recognized and often still renowned theorists who only drew from the masculinist, western philosophical canon. When texts in adult education continue to rely on these theoretical foundations, they fail to even acknowledge that there are other ways to think about knowing. What about ancient and contemporary African and Asian philosophies, the multiplicity of indigenous perspectives, and the growing awareness (at least in some circles) of feminist and post-colonial approaches that offer more expansive frameworks for adult education?

A third, not unrelated concern is whether it is even possible to split theory and practice apart, an exercise which mostly ensures the former becomes a source of privilege held by those who are 'educated' who then look down on people who don't have this same theoretical understanding (Brookfield, 1987: 152–3). The reality of separating theory from practice is that it artificially divides so-called intellectual understanding from the real-world applications of ideas instead of thinking of these elements as a dynamic and co-dependent interplay.

Another (fourth) and equally important concern is that drawing out distinct philosophies of education glosses over many overlaps. Consider for example, how concepts of empathy, unconditional positive regard, and authenticity are typically aligned with humanism. But these principles are equally important across other philosophical domains. And although 'agency' is sacrosanct within the humanistic tradition, individuality is not denied in other categories, including in critical pedagogy, where individuality is located amidst social systems and collective experiences. Conversely, some compelling arguments have also been put forward that incorporate a political dimension within humanism, including by Rogers himself, who sees personal transformation as a pathway to a stronger democracy (Rogers, 1989: 325–6). A more rounded and educated person, Rogers argues, can act as agents for change. As Jennifer Weber argues,

> Humanistic psychology's contextualism leads to participation as an intricate and delicate dance of learner, teacher, and global context, contributing to transformational kinds of learning promoting change. Such a change considers globalization's demands, peoples' interconnectivity, quality participation, and learning environments committed to a concern for humanity. (Weber, 2014: 66)

There is also overlap between transformative theory and critical pedagogy and Jack Mezirow frequently stressed the influence of Paulo Freire on his writings. Mezirow closely aligned Freire's concept of conscientization with his own conceptualization of transformation, especially how important it is to expose contradictions in our social world and how important collective action is in advancing social change (Vaikousi, 2020).

A fifth and final problem is adult education's tendency to privilege certain perspectives over others and to skim over often deeply thought-out theoretical concepts (as I have done) without deeply understanding each domain. By way of example, Kevin Roessger argues that the field of adult education frequently homogenizes and misunderstands behaviorism and almost always introduces this philosophy through a negative bias that ignores its emancipatory potentials. Specifically, Roessger outlines an over-emphasis on 'methodological behaviourism' which mostly focuses on observable behaviors, and an under-appreciation of 'radical behaviourism' which sets out to analyze and describe behaviors in a more temporal context and with the inclusion of emotional, private behaviors (Roessger, 2012: 575).

Without meaning to minimize these problems, there are reasons why it is important to stand firm on the theoretical ideas that underpin our practice. First, without some sort of underlying philosophy, most people who find themselves in a teaching role tend to fall back on their own relativist experiences of education. In other words, they mostly repeat how they themselves were taught in school meaning the absence of theory inevitably leads to adult learning environments that are little more than an extension of schools–tightly controlled, seemingly neutral environments where there is an emphasis on the unproblematic transfer of canonical knowledge (or fixed truths) that have been decided upon by experts.

A second important reason for having a sense of our philosophy of practice is to counter a growing and dangerous neoliberal logic of anti-intellectualism. In *Fascism on Trial: Education and the Possibility of Democracy* Henry Giroux and Anthony DiMaggio likens growing US

anti-intellectualism through book-bans, a visible rise in white replacement theory and voter suppression, and the deliberate erasure of the history of oppressed groups to similar practices in Nazi Germany (Giroux & DiMaggio, 2024; 193). This is an emotive comparison, and the word 'fascism' may seem too extreme for some readers. However, the authors are clear about how the characteristics of fascism do indeed relate to global politics today. These characteristics are:

- An authoritarian, violent political system that is dominated by a leader who valorizes masculinity as an authority source and is supported by a cult of patriarchal personality.
- A militarized, white supremacist political discourse and process that holds a narrow vision of white, nationalist ideology.
- The dehumanization of political opponents including incarcerating critics and undermining electoral politics.
- An assault on migrants, minoritized ethnicities, the poor and religious minorities along with an erasure of reproductive rights.
- A politics of disposability, lies and agitation where people are scapegoated, and considered enemies of the state certainty and where critical thought is treated with hostility.

(Giroux & DiMaggio, 2024: 4–5).

The alternative to anti-intellectualism is to hold a strong philosophical stance that opposes the normalization of these traits, embraces dissent and that sees critical education as a counterweight to these beliefs which are growing across the globe.

Critical Feminist Pedagogy

One such philosophy, and the one I ascribe to, is critical feminist pedagogy, a consciousness-raising approach that draws heavily from critical pedagogy whilst ensuring a radical intersectional dimension. Intersectionality is an expression that was coined by the US civil rights advocate and legal expert Kimberlé Crenshaw, when she sought to articulate the problems with viewing oppressions on a singular axis of either 'race' or 'gender'. The concept of intersectionalism pre-dates Crenshaw, most obviously within the writings of radical Black feminists, including the aforementioned bell hooks, as well as Angela Davis and Audre Lorde.

It is an essential analytical tool that exposes the compounding nature of oppressions. However, in many circles, it is now widely accepted that the essence of intersectionalism has been watered down almost beyond recognition and transformed into a symbolic performance of institutional rebranding that is rarely accompanied by concrete changes that might meaningfully impact structural inequality (something I write about in more detail elsewhere including in Fitzsimons & Nwanze, 2022: 176–177).

Radical intersectionality understands the centrality of class struggle and the power of class allegiance (hooks, 2013: 2). It views capitalism as the central feature that gives rise to compounding oppressions because it *relies* on patriarchy, racism, colonization, and imperialism, all of which create the structures of class exploitation. It resists reducing its meaning to one of identity politics. This is a political perspective that was also first expressed by radical US-based Black feminists via The Combahee River Collective (est. 1974), whose members included Audre Lorde, Beverly Smith, and Angela Davis. Again, identity politics rejects single axes oppressions and again, this theory has been colonized and transformed into an all-purpose expression that underplays structural inequality in favor of 'opportunity'–a word that overemphasizes personal responsibility and individual effort (Salem, 2018).

Feminist critical pedagogy is undoubtedly underpinned by ideas attributed to Paulo Freire, especially the standpoint that we can only truly appreciate our existence when we historically position it within its economic, political, and cultural contexts. Freire models this principle across a vast catalog of around 25 books, some of which are in conversation with male colleagues and allies. These include *Literacy, Reading the Word and the World* (1987) with Donaldo Macedo (which includes a lengthy introduction by Henry Giroux), *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* (1990) with Myles Horton and *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education* (1987) written with Ira Shor. In the latter, Freire shares his own story of being born middle class in Recife, in the Northeast of Brazil. His family fell into poverty during the economic depression of the 1920s, an experience that opened his eyes to the profound impacts of poverty. When his family's financial situation improved, Freire describes how he temporarily forgot what he had learned until he began working with factory workers as an adult educator, where he began 'to reknow' what he had known as a child. Freire recalls his exile from Brazil following the US-backed military

coup of 1964 that overthrew the left-wing President João Goulart who was committed to redistributing wealth and introducing certain workers' rights. This period in exile strengthened his conviction that education alone cannot bring about the changes that are needed to create a more equal society (Shor & Freire, 1987: 28–32).

Freire was in exile when he penned the bulk of his most famous book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (first translated into English in 1970). Although not strictly speaking a Marxist, he was clearly influenced by Marx's emphasis on class struggle and by how our material conditions shape our human consciousness. Where Marx divides society into bourgeoisie and proletariat (see Chapter 1), Freire also offers a binary division of a privileged minority–who he refers to as *the oppressor*, and an under-privileged majority–who he calls the *oppressed*. He saw this social arrangement as bad for everyone because it 'engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed' (Freire, 1972: 21). Freire regards individualism as a powerful divide-and-conquer strategy that undermines unity and collective action by maintaining 'a *focalized* view of problems rather than on seeing them as dimensions of a totality' (Freire, 1972: 111, italics in original). Instead of believing personal effort and hard work are enough to overcome social barriers, he views meritocracy as not only mythical, but as an act of manipulation that is maintained through an illusionary partnership across social divisions. Pretending we are all on the same side masks the oppressor's real ambition, which is to make sure that everything stays the same (Freire, 1972: 116).

Education, Freire argues, should never be about imparting fixed knowledge. It should encourage people to question the validity of fixed knowledge and dominant norms. Holding this as a starting point ensures that when people come together to learn, many voices, and not just the educator's voice, should be heard in environments where participants challenge one another, including the so-called educator, as they name their world and collaboratively co-construct knowledge. To borrow words from Freire 'saying that word is not the privilege of some few persons, but the right of everyone. Consequently, no one can say a true word alone–nor can he [sic] say it for another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words' (Freire, 1972: 61).

An important part of Freire's theory of oppression is his description of *cultural invasion,* meaning the way in which the dominant worldview of the oppressor saturates society and dismisses alternative expressions and forms of creativity (Freire, 1972: 121–2). Similar to Gramsci's theory of

hegemony (discussed in Chapter 1), Freire believes certain myths hold together the false belief that society is free and equal including,

> that this order [the status quo] respects human rights and is therefore worthy of esteem; the myth that anyone who is industrious can become an entrepreneur, worst yet, the myth that the street vendor is as much an entrepreneur as the owner of a large factory; the myth of the universal right of education;…the myth of the equality of all men [sic]; the myth of the heroism of the oppressor classes as defenders of 'Western Christian Civilization' against 'material barbarism'; the myth of charity and generosity of the elites, when what they really do as a class is to foster selective 'good deeds';…the myth of private property as fundamental to personal human development (so long as oppressors are the only true human beings); the myth of the industriousness of the oppressors and the laziness and dishonesty of the oppressed, as well as the myth of the natural inferiority of the latter and the superiority of the former. (Freire, 1972: 120-121, brackets in original)

This is the context within which many ordinary people see themselves as inferior, which, in turn, creates a *culture of silence* by which he means passively accepting the circumstances of our lives. Capitalism thrives because people internalize the oppressor-led reality that "*to have* is *to be*" (Freire, 1972: 35, italics in original), with many people believing their wellbeing is tied up with their capacity to accumulate material goods. This logic explains why, in today's world, symbols of wealth such as designer clothes, expensive cars or other luxury items have become a marker of self-worth. Instead of critically questioning this logic, many ordinary people seek to own non-essential, often ridiculously expensive goods (or their imitations) viewing this as a form of liberation.

According to Freire, we each hold a deep desire to become more fully human, something he calls our *ontological vocation*. The root to a better world is to understand that our collective power is strong enough to emancipate both oppressor and oppressed (Freire, 1972: 21). Education that is influenced by this philosophy are those that adopt a problem-posing approach with the express intention of fostering what Paulo Freire called conscientização, on conscientization, which means politicization. This philosophy is, therefore, different from others because it expressly encourages activism beyond the classroom walls. Its hope is to inspire people towards a complex of action and reflection which are 'in such

radical interaction that if one is sacrificed even in part–the other immediately suffers' (Freire, 1972: 60). The resulting practice, or *praxis* as Freire calls it, is a continual cycle of action and reflection.

Freire doesn't provide an exact blueprint as to what this collective power looks like, but rather, views it as context specific. He did participate in parliamentary politics during his lifetime serving as Secretary of Education for São Paulo under a Workers Party administration. The sociologist and labor scholar Stan Aronowitz believed the part he played in mainstream politics reflected the historical circumstances at the time and not a break from revolutionary politics (Aronowitz, 1993: 19). Indeed, his actions can help illuminate how strict 'reform' versus 'revolution' arguments can create false tensions between potential allies that can lose sight of the importance of uniting counter-hegemonic actions.

The problems with Freire's philosophy

As with any set of ideas, there are flaws including Freire's ambiguity about exactly how we are supposed to defeat capitalism. His version of critical pedagogy has also been criticized for over-emphasizing historical materialism as epitomized through his strict division of society into 'oppressor' and 'oppressed', a binary that oversimplifies complex social dynamics and overlooks the intersectional dimensions discussed a little earlier. There are other issues too including presuming people are trapped in a culture of silence and not resisting dominant norms through alternative forms of cultural expression (Blackburn, 2000: 8–9). Moreover, can education be simplistically dichotomized into either banking or liberatory and is it really possible to transform our education systems into problem-posing havens Freire seeks to inspire?

Perhaps Freire's main weakness is the patriarchal nature of his writings. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* draws solely from a male perspective of the world and stereotypes women, subjugating their position in a patriarchal society and repeatedly denying the role of the dominant gender along with the dominant class. The word patriarchy, by which I mean the economic, social and cultural oppression of women by men, or 'institutional sexism' (hooks, 2000: ix), emerged from US-based consciousness-raising education circles just like the ones Freire envisioned when women realized that, even within the seemingly egalitarian rights-based movements, male abuses of power were endemic (Bryson, 2021: 50). It is true that patriarchy is sometimes misrepresented, misunderstood, and

oversimplified. KumKum Sangari (2020) notes its Eurocentrism arguing people who use the word mostly presume universality, minimize differences across nations and, especially in the case of liberal feminism, fail to recognize other axes of oppression. This doesn't excuse the way Freire, in reading the world around him, ignored the status of women altogether.

Freire did try to make amends for this unforgivable sexism in his later writings; however, he failed to fully address how many men, across all walks of life, continue to resist gender-based equality often because of the many advantages of masculine dominance patriarchy bestows on them. These advantages include superiority in the private realm, and how many men use coercion and sometimes violence to control women in an environment where this behavior can be entirely justified and authorized by the ideology of male supremacy (Connell, 2005: 83).

The discipline of adult and community education is not devoid of misogyny, something Kate Manne describes as a structural pattern of behavior that controls and punishes women for challenging the status quo (Manne, 2017: 63). One way this can manifest is through the occupational privilege many male academics enjoy in universities and colleges (Martinez Martinez et al., 2021; O'Connor, 2020), the same environments from which some of the texts I have cited emerge. These departments and schools claim to care deeply about equality and often outwardly critique the normalcy of masculinist, white-Western ways of being. But how many of these spaces ignore, minimize, or perpetuate precarious employment in academia, a phenomenon that disproportionately impacts women (O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019). And what about the way academic housework and student care is unequally held by women to the detriment of their own academic career making (Mirsa et al., 2011; Thamar et al., 2017). Adult and community education working environments can also be spaces that valorize women for being good work colleagues who don't make a fuss and can push back, often quite viciously, when women object to this framing.

One of the most influential writers to challenge sexism in Freire's writings is bell hooks, a prolific and important contributor within critical education in her own right. In conceiving of her theory of engaged pedagogy hooks details how she has 'taken the threads of Paulo's work' (hooks, 1994: 52) and woven these into a way of working that acknowledges gender-based oppression. Again, critical thinking is the cornerstone of the *engaged pedagogy* hooks first advocates in *Teaching to Transgress*

(1994) where she views teaching as an inherently political act and one that either perpetuates or seeks to dismantle systemic oppression.

Engaged pedagogy is an approach that builds on mutual participation and emotional connection, something that chimes with more recent work by Sara Ahmed (whose ideas I return to in Chapter 7). Ahmed equally views emotions, such as discomfort and anger, not as individualized traits but as a gateway into our social and cultural worlds (Ahmed, 2017). Both hooks and Ahmed believe that if we follow these emotions, they lead us to the exploitative nature of structural inequality.

Putting Ideas into Practice

Knowing where to start in putting these ideas into practice can be a daunting task, and it is important to be clear that the facilitators/teachers who organized consciousness-raising learning environments are not being asked to create unstructured, directionless spaces. Instead, their role is to ask critical questions that draw content *from* people rather than present content *to* people. One community educator I interviewed in 2015 describes how they sometimes enter a room carrying a suitcase full of randomly selected artifacts, which they then spill onto the floor. The next step is to invite people to consider how they, too, enter a learning community with a suitcase full of their own experiences and values. Where traditional education stuffs more knowledge on top of an already full suitcase, critical education unpacks people's suitcases and takes a good look inside. Through dialog and with the help of ideas through theory, each person is invited, over time, to re-pack their suitcase in a way that is coherent, meaningful, and affirming.

Sometimes, there are obvious visual markers that this is what is happening, including when chairs are organized into a circle and where the facilitator/educator sits with a group rather than stands behind a desk or podium. However, reorganizing the furniture does not guarantee a Freirean approach; indeed, it is not uncommon to find people sitting in circles where the dominant model is traditional, top-down teaching. These can be very uncomfortable and exposing environments, not least because, in full view of your peers, you cannot disengage if you are bored or distracted. Engaged pedagogy means taking a facilitative rather than lecture-style approach that creates environments where people can speak authentically, something I have seen happen in all sorts of learning environments. Sometimes, it involves experiential socially contextualized

exercises like the suitcase exercise, or provocative role-plays, social-skits and other problem-posing exercises (for examples see, Hope & Timmel, 1995; Sheehy, 2001; Crowley et al., 2015). Other common methods include using small group work to lateralize dimensions of power and individual reflection sheets that can help people to think deeply about topics in isolation, so they are not carried along by groupthink. Short inputs on theoretical concepts are also often necessary and can be very helpful, once these act as a stimulus for conversation rather than as a way of presenting indisputable facts. In my own practice, I often deliver these inputs at the *end* of a session.

Using Codes

In adopting these methods, the overriding challenge Freire sets us is to uncover and analyze 'generative themes' (Freire, 1972: 69). Freire details a method of using 'codes' to discuss and analyze these issues by which he means presenting back the ordinary circumstances of people's lives in a provocative way. Typically, a code takes the form of a picture, a piece of literature, a dramatization or any other portrayal that allows people to examine their circumstances in the third person. When a facilitator sets out to create a code, this begins by genuinely listening to a community or group paying close attention to the circumstances of their lives. For example, listening deeply to a group of young mothers parenting alone might reveal food poverty; for older people, it might be how their pension is not enough to allow them to heat their homes. For young mothers, a code might be a picture of a near-empty fridge. For the older people, it might be a picture of a person in a dimly lit room huddled over a small fire. Neither code offers a solution to the issues.

The next stage in using codes is a process of *decoding,* or what Freire (1972: 77) describes as 'moving from the abstract to the concrete' where the educator asks questions to illicit discussion. When I have used codes, I have been led by three phases of questions: descriptive—'what do you see?'; relatability—'how does this image relate to your own life?'; then analytic—'why do you think this is the case?'. Over time, this problem-posing approach helps communities and groups to identify the points at which they can strategically intervene to address the oppressive circumstances within which they find themselves. Ira Shor and Paulo Freire describe this process as 'a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it' going on to suggest that by

'reflecting together on what we know and don't know, we can act critically to transform reality' (Shor & Freire, 1987: 98). Introducing a code can be nerve-wracking, and it is understandable that people can worry it won't work. Ann Hope and Sally Timmel, the co-authors of the *Training for Transformation* workbooks, suggest that a code works when 'we recognise a generative theme has been tapped when a group suddenly comes to life' (Hope & Timmel, 1995: 76).

There is other fundamentals that are required for these methods to work and that are particularly important in the context of growing right-wing rhetoric. For example, many of the historical texts I have drawn from fail to highlight the importance of creating trans-affirming environments that respect and honor people's true gender identity. This can be done by openly challenging transphobic comments and allowing people to self-identify their names and pronouns, actions which can spark cis people to become aware of and critically analyze their privilege in the context of growing transphobia (Chapple, 2020). It is also important to create anti-racist environments that understand white supremacy as the root cause. Adult educator and expert on critical race theory Lilian Nwanze-Akobo outlines six essential ingredients in creating these environments:

- All practitioners, but especially white educators, must reflect on their own identity and the extent to which their own internalized racism impacts their practice.
- Educators must reject color-blind ideology (i.e., claiming not to see race), an avoidance stance that perpetuates racism.
- Dialogic, inclusive methods should be adopted that encourage an exchange of biographical stories.
- Educators must embrace discomfort and be ready to make mistakes.
- There must be a commitment to both individual and collective activism.
- All of us should embrace an ethos of love.

(Nwanze, 2024: 58–64)

On this latter ingredient, Nwanze writes,

> This ethos of love is the force that will compel an educator to create 'community' where a student can safely share experiences rather than a regimented lecture hall focused solely on meeting learning outcomes. Love will compel a teacher to listen critically and learn from the stories shared by

> the marginalized student. It will refuse to reduce anti-racism initiatives to a tick-box exercise and will cause a practitioner who ordinarily is a beneficiary of (white) privilege to use that privilege to open doors for others–doors that can only be opened by whiteness. An ethos of love will cause a practitioner to recognize that a racialized student walks into the classroom with an extra layer of baggage put upon them by a white supremacist society. (Nwanze, 2024: 64)

To conclude, this chapter briefly examined the various philosophies typically associated with adult education and, by extension, community education. I detailed the problems with carving out discrete philosophies but also highlighted the importance of holding a clear philosophical stance in the face of rising anti-intellectualism. Only then can we create learning environments that interrupt oppressive structures.

Some of you are probably raising your eyebrows when considering the momentous and complex task that is being set out, including deep listening and designing and de-coding codes all of which push the boundaries of set curricula. It is also the case that not everyone who comes to a group is open to politicizing processes and there can be resistance to these methods. As this community educator puts it, 'conscientization is very important to me in my practice but it is up to each individual if they use their experience to be politicized, I would never see it as my job or as an outcome to achieve.'

The remaining chapters in this book explore these challenges first by addressing the dominance of a policy-led job-ready paradigm and then examining the phenomenon of professionalization and the restrictive nature of accreditation as a ubiquitous feature of modern education systems.

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CHAPTER 4

Community Education, Lifelong Learning, and Employability

In Chapter 2, I talked about my first job in community education which was to open and manage a community education project called The Star Project, which was for women who had a background of opioid use. What I haven't told you yet is that two years after the project was set up, I led a successful application for a government grant to transform The Star Project into a community employment (CE) scheme. These CE schemes were introduced in 1994 to address long-term unemployment in remote rural communities and in areas of urban disadvantage. In the government's own words, their role was to enhance 'the capacity of communities to function as cohesive social structures' (Department of Social Protection, 2015: 5). In practice, CE schemes combined community development with elements of labor market activation (see Patterson & Dowd, 2010 for another example). One of the principal benefits of their roll-out, especially for mothers, was that they allowed employees to dip their toe into the world of work whilst also putting much needed money into their pockets without removing their entitlement to a lone-parent welfare payment which, on its own, was woefully inadequate.

Transforming The Star Project into a CE scheme allowed us to pay attendees and to hire a third member of staff. It also meant that our work needed to be more structured and arguably less responsive. From that point forward, there were three days of class, a half-day of guidance, and one day of work experience. This latter aspect of the revised program

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created an important opportunity for these women, most of whom had never worked in paid employment before. Partly, this was because their struggles with addiction led to poor health, challenges with reliability, and reduced productivity during periods of active drug use. But it was also because of a broader cultural landscape where hundreds of thousands of Irish women, including working class women, were prevented from taking up paid employment for decades, meaning there were few, if any, support structures in place.

There were hundreds of CE schemes across Ireland. Each allowed mostly women to work part-time, often in essential services that were otherwise underfunded by the state, including as community childcare workers, administrative assistants, community development workers, and health support workers. As well as providing a stepping-stone into the workplace, CE schemes also came with a training grant, meaning people could gain certain skills and qualifications.

For the participants at The Star Project, there was a very particular challenge though as, although many of the women were eager to get some experience in the workplace, it was difficult to find employers who were willing to give them a chance. This was even though it came at no financial cost to the employers. When we approached the multi-national supermarket chain Tesco, they refused to help without ever meeting anyone from the project. Other big employers also declined the offer of an extra pair of hands, leaving us with no option but to over-rely on one or two smaller companies who plugged in the gap as best they could. These employers were local to the area and were mostly more sympathetic to the reasons people turn to drugs, including the challenges of poverty and the limited opportunities people see in their lives. Overall, though, there weren't enough opportunities to sustain the work experience element, meaning many women passed through the CE scheme without completing this component, something that would have undoubtedly helped them get a much-needed foothold in the labor market.

I open with this memory from my time as a community educator to illustrate how, no matter how much personal development and self-improvement is undertaken, even the most well-meaning, individualist lifelong learning practices have little or no control over the discriminations certain people face when they look for work. This doesn't just happen to known opioid users but to a range of population groups. One demographic that is particularly discriminated against across the continent

of Europe is Romani people (or Roma), an ethnic group traditionally associated with a nomadic lifestyle. According to the European Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), one-third of all Roma over the age of 16 face discrimination when looking for work (FRA, 2022). Similarly, Muslims, and people assumed to be Muslim, face high levels for occupational discrimination and prejudice (Akthar-Sheikh, 2016) as do many migrants, especially those with the intersecting challenges of poverty, language barriers, and lack of recognition of overseas qualifications. These factors often force many migrants into low-paid jobs like factory work and domestic and care work, sometimes as part of a rapidly expanding *gig economy* which Amelia Horgan identifies as typified by highly exploitative short-term, flexible, bogus self-employment work that strips away some of workers most basic rights (Horgan, 2021: 52–53). This gig economy helps contribute to a situation where, overall, non-naturalized migrants earn nearly a quarter less per hour than their peers (Lawrence et al., 2023).

Despite these structural factors, much community education across Europe and beyond has become embroiled in the delivery of programs that are sharply geared towards an employability agenda that ignores occupational exclusion and low pay, whilst also paying hardly any attention to the occupational interests or talents of the people who attend these programs. There is also often zero focus on the urgency of focusing on skills for the regenerative sector such as in renewable energy, waste reduction, or green infrastructure despite unprecedented levels of environmental damage that global society is failing to address.

As Chapter 1 has outlined, this pivot towards employability hasn't happened by accident rather, this chapter locates it as part of a European-led lifelong learning agenda that is mostly concerned with enhancing competitiveness and economic growth with policy after policy delivering on the neoliberal priorities of a flexible, adaptable mobile workforce. I begin this discussion by focusing on key European policy interventions before presenting a closer examination of the Irish situation, a case study that is likely similar to what is happening in other European contexts.

What is Social Policy?

Firstly, it may help to be clear about what I mean by social policy and give some sense of its role and functions. A useful starting point is to be clear about what I mean by *the state*, a concept that can be difficult to

define. I understand it as a convergence of contradictory institutions, each of which has different roles and hierarchies. The government is one of these institutions, the civil service is another, and the police and judiciary another.

The job of government, at least on paper, is to collect and spend money on behalf of its citizens, pass laws that are in everyone's interests (some of which are determined through the courts) and represent the totality of the state when it interacts with other nations. *Social policies* are a set of guidelines, principles, and practices that governments implement as they go about managing social concerns. Johnathan Dickins, who is a Lecturer in social work, identifies a social policy triangle with three overriding objectives—'to ensure the welfare of citizens, to promote the values of individual responsibility and family autonomy, and to uphold economic freedom and prosperity' (Dickins, 2010: 27). Note the centrality of family in this description. Typically, the policies that are developed, again on paper at least, are about promoting equality, protecting vulnerable people, improving the overall health of a nation, and promoting inclusion by ensuring people have access to the resources that they need to get on with their lives.

The simplest way to understand how social policies are implemented is by considering their role in fulfilling the state's responsibility in administering social programs across key domains including welfare, education, healthcare, housing, employment, and social security. Many social policies are accompanied by dedicated budgets; however, this isn't always the case, and some policy initiatives rely on existing resources or are hampered by inadequate funding. If a country is a member of the European Union (EU), an economic and political union of most European countries, many of their social policies begin here.

Community-based organizations are not only *the recipients* of the grants associated with social policies, but they have also positioned themselves as important stakeholders in *the development* of social policies. Some community-based organizations have produced toolkits that explain the political system and that encourage communities to make submissions to policymakers. One such example is *Finding your way around poverty, welfare and family policy* (2007) by Hilary Curley.[1] The author encourages 'those involved in anti-poverty work' to understand policy 'as

[1] For another example, see Brian Harvey's *Tools for Social Change. A resource guide for community work with migrant workers and their families in Ireland,* 2008.

a circular flow' with 'the learning and experience gleaned from groups working at local level informing the policy-making process at national level which in turn makes decisions, designs programmes and allocates resources, thus continuing to fuel the work of groups at the local level' (Curley, 2007: 8).

There may be some benefits to learning about social policies and attempting to influence their contents, however, a weakness of this and other similar publications is that they fail to capture how social policy is not neutral but rather is deeply connected with the prevailing socio-economic model. Under capitalism, this is to manage rather than eradicate inequality by sustaining the very structures that create disparities in the first place. As neoliberalism has become more entrenched since the 1990s, many critics have repeatedly argued that social policies have actively deepened an economic model that relentlessly sets out to prioritize material interests over the interests of people (Allen, 2013; Harvey, 2005; Hurley, 2014; Laruffa, 2022). It is no coincidence that there has been a deluge of social policies under neoliberalism, most of which focus on how best to shift social policy responsibilities that were once held by the state onto the shoulders of individuals, communities, and other non-state actors. The sheer volume of social policies that set out to prioritize efficiency and infuse market logic have, in truth, been difficult to keep up with.

Lifelong Learning and the European Employability Agenda

For community education, the most impactful set of policies are those that focus on lifelong learning. One of the first influential reports on lifelong learning was UNESCO's *Learning to Be: The world of education today and tomorrow* (1972) which is often referred to as The Faure Report after its chair and former French Minister for Education Edgar Faure.[2] These social actors involved in devising early policies on lifelong learning weren't principally concerned with driving forward a neoliberal agenda but were motivated by a range of ambitions beyond the economic. *Learning to Be…* was strongly grounded in a humanistic philosophy of education (see Chapter 3) which means that it viewed learning as

[2] The report was written by all-male members of the International Commission on the Development of Education established by UNESCO and led by Faure.

essential for a person's personal and social growth. It was an optimistic document that began with the belief that nations have the potential to become 'learning societies' (Faure et al., 1972: 263). *Learning to be…* re-imagined education in the context of the rapid social change of the time, including technological advances and globalization and it is largely attributed with laying the groundwork for the concepts of lifelong learning that have since followed.

Regrettably, UNESCO's dominant focus on humanist characteristics and a holistic approach to education wouldn't disappear but would not be as enthusiastically carried forward into future policy interventions as its authors likely hoped. Certainly, the European Commission (EC), which is best understood as the executive branch of the European Union, accelerated its interest in lifelong learning from the 1990s onwards, so much so that it became a central concern. However, there was a sharp shift in tone as the EC took the lead in defining lifelong learning as, more than anything else, an instrument of competitiveness and economic growth and as principally concerned with matching workers with labor market demands.

The justification for aligning lifelong learning with the needs of the labor market was because technology was creating a more competitive world within which the commonsense logic was to prioritize economic growth over everything else (Kinnari & Silvennoinen, 2023). The first policy to take this tone was the *White Paper on Teaching and Learning—Towards the Learning Society* (*Teaching and learning*) published in 1996 and the culmination of multiple conversations about lifelong learning within G7 communications,[3] the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and UNESCO (Hake, 1999).

One of the key features of *Towards the Learning Society* was the extent to which it outlined the role of 'human capital' in building the so-called 'knowledge economy'. Words like human capital can seem relatively harmless at first glance. However, in his detailed analysis of European policy on lifelong learning, Kevin Hurley (2014) compares the EC's interpretation of human capital with controversial ideas about human capital that were first put forward by the neoliberal Chicago school economist T.W. Shultz in his thesis *Investment in Human Capital* (1961). The

[3] The Group of 7 at this time consisted of the US, UK, Germany, France, Italy, Canada and Japan.

work of Schultz, a Nobel Prize winner for economic science, is important to understand. He was one of the first economists to re-interpret the word *capital* beyond physical assets like money and other financial assets, land and infrastructure, natural resources, and technology and machinery. Shultz argued capital also included people or, in his own words, 'counting individuals who can and want to work and treating such a count as a measure of the quantity of an economic factor' (Schultz, 1961: 3). Investing in individuals, he argued, was therefore just as important as investing in other assets if the end game was to derive long-term economic returns.

These ideas were, and still should be, controversial and Schultz knew this. Certainly, he included the benefits of improving a person's earning power, but even he conceded that commodifying people was contentious writing, 'our values and beliefs inhibit us from looking upon human beings as capital goods, except in slavery and this we abhor' (Shultz, 1961: 2). But Shultz justified this framing nevertheless by viewing market growth and market success as the key determining factor. In other words, whatever reservations he may have had about treating people as commodities, he set these aside in favor of the view that people simply had to be seen as a form of capital if the neoliberal vision was to succeed.

This is the theory of human capital that appears to have underpinned policy discourse and indeed EC practice since the 1990s. When the year 1996 was designated The European Year of Life-Long Learning, this firmly established adult education as a priority concern of the European agenda and from this point forward, all EU member states were instructed to create domestic policies on lifelong learning. This is the context within which the EC's influential communiqué *a Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (European Commission, 2000) described lifelong learning as the pathway to a more sophisticated knowledge society placing significant faith in technological progress claiming Europe had entered a 'knowledge age' continuing 'lifelong learning must accompany a successful transition to a knowledge-based economy and society' (p. 3). It instructed education and training systems across Europe to adapt to this new terrain where 'lifelong learning is no longer just one aspect of education and training; it must become the guiding principle for provision and participation across the full continuum of learning contexts' (p. 3).

It would be misleading not to acknowledge that *A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* did discuss active citizenship, but its interpretation was extremely limited. Active citizenship was defined as 'whether and how

people participate in all spheres of social and economic life, the chances and risks they face in trying to do so, and the extent to which they therefore feel that they belong to and have a fair say in the society in which they live'. Unsurprisingly, exercising this form of citizenship was couched in a person's employability, which is described as 'a core dimension of active citizenship' (European Commission, 2000: 5).

The focus on lifelong learning from the 1990s onwards laid the foundations for a slew of policies. Detailing each one, in turn, would be both boring and impractical. Table 4.1 offers a summary of some core policy interventions, many of which were catalysts for the development of domestic policies in member countries and beyond.

The extent to which EU member states embraced these European policies depended on whether support for Europeanisation was (and is) reflected in the behavior of domestic political actors (Rees et al., 2010). Not all nation states were always cooperative. For example, the *Better Regulation Agenda* (2004) aimed to improve the performance of civil society organizations in service delivery by implementing cost-benefit analyses and measurable outputs. But it faced significant opposition from several EC Directorates-General (DGs) as well as by some member states because of its focus on 'the economics of regulation, rather than on environmental and social values' (Lofstedt, 2007: 425).

An essential feature of policy implementation was new public managerialist practices which, as Chapter 1 outlined, pushed forward a neoliberal agenda by introducing business logic through a culture of outputs over inputs, performance indicators, competition, efficiency and accountability (Lynch et al., 2012: 3–4). New public managerialism doesn't happen all on its own; the policies outlined in the table above are just some of those that help aid the transition from needs-based funding models to the performance-based models that dominate today. New public managerialism also isn't typically resisted rather, because of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971: 12) most people buy into and internalize its pro-capitalist principles. This allows policies and practices to be implemented despite these practices not necessarily being in the best interests of the majority of those impacted.

Embracing new public managerialism involves adopting the principle of partnership which, from the 1990s onwards, became a cornerstone of today's so-called liberal democracies. The influential sociologist Anthony Giddens described this 'movement of double democratization' (Giddons, 1998: 72) as 'the third way' by which he meant an approach to politics

Table 4.1 Summary of key European lifelong learning policies

Teaching and Learning—Towards the Learning Society. White paper on education and training European Commission	1996	This policy emphasized lifelong learning which it understood as skills focused where the role of education was to promote innovation, stimulate employment and contribute to social cohesion within a rapidly changing, knowledge-based economy
Memorandum on Lifelong Learning European Commission	2000	As discussed in more detail above, this memorandum promoted education as an ongoing process emphasizing access to learning, innovation, and inclusion. The Memorandum individualized learning highlighted the importance of skills-based learning and viewed education into employment as a route to active citizenship
Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality European Commission	2001	This document reported back on how the 2000 memorandum was received across member states. It summarized responses concluding members viewed lifelong learning as essential in making 'Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based society in the world' (p. 3). It re-emphasized flexibility, measurability and transferable knowledge, all of which were to maximize employability
A Programme for Education and Training European Commission	2002	This document formed part of the lead up to the Constitution of the EU (or The *Lisbon Treaty* as it is better known) which was ratified in 2007. It further emphasized lifelong learning as an economic imperative prioritizing it alongside human resource development policy. It asked EU members to measure outcomes through formal accreditation

(continued)

Table 4.1 (continued)

Action Plan on Adult Learning (2007–2010) European Commission	2007	This action plan outlined five key priorities for member states: 1. Increase participation in adult learning 2. Improve the quality of adult learning 3. Develop learning opportunities for older people 4. Address the needs of disadvantaged groups 5. Provide second-chance opportunities for early school leavers
The *European Strategic Framework for Education and Training* (ET2020) European Commission	2009	Again, targets were set for member states this time as four strategic objectives: 1. To make lifelong learning and mobility a reality 2. To improve the quality and efficiency of education and training 3. To promote equality (of opportunity) 4. To ensure social cohesion and active citizenship
Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning Council of the European Union	2011	This focused on addressing long-term unemployment It describes adult education as playing a 'major role…by enabling adults–in particular the low skilled and older workers–to improve their ability to adapt to changes in the labour-market and society' (p. 1) It asks member states to get better at monitoring adult learning by inviting them to focus on learner surveys and the assessment of competencies (p. 6). Members were told to report on adult-learning policies as part of the joint progress report on 'ET2020'
Action Plan on Adult Learning (2012–2014) European Commission	2012	This action plan laid the groundwork for future policies that promoted flexible learning pathways to improve access to adult education

(continued)

Table 4.1 (continued)

Social Investment Package European Commission	2013	The social investment package encouraged social innovation and investment in human capital once this is evidence-based. It again pushed civil society organizations to focus their efforts on measurability and cost-effectiveness
Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults European Commission	2016	This recommendation targets adults with low skills levels and with low or no qualifications, setting out to enhance literacy, numeracy and digital skills
European Skills Agenda European Commission	2020	Another policy intervention that strengthens concepts of lifelong learning with an emphasis on how adults can access digital and green skills. It also sets targets, this time, that by 2025, half of all adults should be participating in learning that emphasizes reskilling and upskilling every year
Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027) European Commission	2021	This action plan sets out to improve digital literacy and skills for all ages. In particular, it identifies community education as central to this ambition, especially in disadvantaged and rural areas
Council Recommendation on Individual Learning Accounts European Commission	2021	A recommendation that promotes personalized learning pathways and individual learning logs for citizens so they can access education and training in order to facilitate lifelong learning so workers can reskill or upskill
European Education Area (2025 Target) European Union	2022	The European Education Area aims to create an integrated learning area so that people can move freely between countries when accessing education. It includes a focus on improving adult education, vocational education and non-accredited learning

that could somehow fuse left-wing and right-wing political ideologies in a way that would soften the sharp edges of each and ensure a central role for civil society in shaping social policy.

Lifelong Learning Policies–the Irish Experience

From this point onward, I will shift my focus to the Irish experience, a country whose modern social policies on adult and community education didn't begin with the EU's sharp turn towards employability but date to the late 1960s. The Irish government's interest in adult learning also didn't come from within parliament but followed pressure from an emerging practitioner-led adult and community education sector, much of which centered around a then-fledgling advocacy organization called AONTAS (est. 1969).[4] This was at a time when Ireland held an identity that was a fusion of Catholicism and Nationalism and where women were particularly oppressed, including through bans on divorce and on entering the workforce and a ban on contraception and abortion. It was extensive research by those convening AONTAS that convinced the government to establish a committee on Adult Education which produced *Adult Education in Ireland* (1973), a report which is commonly known as the Murphy Report. The report positions universities as key providers of adult education and describes its purpose as to ensure 'adults who are no longer participants in the full-time school system may learn whatever they need to learn at any period in their lives' (Committee on Adult Education, 1973: 1).

There is no getting away from the fact that the Murphy Report is overtly sexist and is filled with language and assumptions that would be considered entirely unacceptable today. However, when I introduce my own my students to the report, a recurrent observation they make is that many of the issues uncovered remain unresolved to this day, including how money and time are barriers to participation, how formal education overly relies on traditional teacher-centered models, how adult learning is underfunded, and how the profession of adult education is under-appreciated and therefore under-supported. The report's main impact was to create an adult education section within the Department of Education from which a national network of Adult Education Organisers (AEOs) was appointed in 1979. Some of these AEOs became actively involved in setting up independent often radically oriented, community-based organizations (Fleming, 1989; Inglis et al., 1993). The Murphy Report was

[4] AONTAS, is the Irish word for union. It is also an acronym for Aos Oideachais Náisiúnta Trí Aontú Saorálach, which translates as national adult education through voluntary unity.

also the first time the state acknowledged that many people were having challenges with reading and writing, especially in rural areas. The additional research it recommended, which was carried out by AONTAS, ultimately led to the establishment of Ireland's National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) in the late 1970s.

There was also a second government report, in 1984, called *Lifelong Learning: Report on the Commission on Adult Education* and commonly known as the Kenny Report. This report further expanded adult education provision by creating Adult Education Boards with their own dedicated budgets, including for vocational education and ring-fenced budgets for adult literacy and community education. There is no doubt that many adults in Ireland needed support. A 1997 OECD led *International Adult Literacy Survey Report* found that one in four adults in Ireland had literacy difficulties. These results made headline news with NALA describing the report as an embarrassment to the Irish government which led to the doubling of the adult literacy and community education budget and an increase of NALA's funding by 60 percent (National Adult Literacy Agency, 2010: 59).

The European Influence

As adult education services were growing, most Irish people had, for the most part, embraced EU membership (granted in 1972) in part, because Ireland was receiving more financial aid from the EU than it was contributing. Even with the financial aid Ireland received, support for Europeanization wasn't a given; in fact, accepting our European identity involved negotiating complex post-colonial characteristics, which continue to this day, especially because the six counties of Northern Ireland remain part of the UK. The task for pro-European politicians was to convince the electorate that there were benefits to joining the EU. And so, as the sociologist Katy Hayward explains, they encouraged people to embrace a dual identity of nationalism along with, and not instead of, a European mindset (Hayward, 2009). Later, Brexit would further impact Irish identity by underscoring a difference between Ireland and the UK whilst also evoking greater feelings of attachment to Europeanness. And it would arguably bring the prospect of a united Ireland closer to becoming a reality because citizens in the North of Ireland voted against Brexit and in favor of Europeanness.

In the 1980s, European funding helped establish most, if not all of the host organizations of the CE schemes that I talked about when opening this chapter through an important injection of funding from the European Social Fund (ESF) Poverty 1 and 2 program. This funding made a big difference in many people's lives, but the projects that ran these schemes sometimes had to compromise their values to align with a funding stream that emphasized self-help and individualist solutions over collective community concerns. In other words, although projects in receipt of European Structural Investment Funds appeared autonomous, the pressure to act in unison with the policies they received money through encouraged managerialist practices and performance-based models where organizations had to prove their efficiency against defined benchmarks that typically supported the status quo. In 1990, these European funding schemes were replaced by a domestic Community Development Programme.

The Irish partnership landscape was also favorable during the 1980s; in fact, from 1987 to 2006, Ireland was considered a model case for social partnership with several agreements formally negotiated between the state, trade unions, and employers. In 1996, a third 'community pillar' of civil society organizations was added, which included civil society partners representing the community and voluntary sector. These agreements were popular with politicians and the public alike, mostly because of their supposed power to tame industrial and political unrest which, in turn, is said to have contributed to an influx of multinational financial institutions, many of whom opened their European headquarters in Ireland where they availed of favorable corporation tax policies.

There were also many critics of social partnership, with most challenges centering around how the benefits of Ireland's Celtic Tiger period of economic growth were not evenly spread and that the wealth created was only possible because of light touch regulation for financial institutions, an inflated and unsustainable property bubble, and a range of fiscal policies including tax breaks for the wealthy and welfare cuts for the poor (Allen, 2000; Doherty, 2011). There were also criticisms of the community pillar's involvement in social partnership including that this pillar was never fully integrated (Meade, 2005; Stafford, 2011), that engagement detracted from grassroots activism (Lee, 2003), and that the process co-opted political opponents (Meade & O'Donovan, 2002; Powell & Geoghegan, 2004: 241). Overall, research by Peter Stafford revealed that participating in social partnership structures was 'merely a

box-ticking exercise' rather than any meaningful attempt at shared leadership (Stafford, 2011: 78). One could argue that the most impactful action of the Community Pillar was their decision *not* to sign up to the social partnership agreement *Sustaining Progress* (2002) which led to the pillar's expulsion from the process (Larraghy, 2006: 395–6).

The first domestic adult education policy that explicitly followed the wider European agenda on lifelong learning was the *Green Paper, Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning* (Government of Ireland, 1998). This was quickly followed by *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education* (Department of Education & Science, 2000). The ethos of social partnership had, by this stage, rippled through society, and these policies stand out for their high level of consultation with the community and voluntary sector, academics, further education providers, and members of the public. This consultation influenced the tone of both documents. Although *Learning for Life* (2000) has a strong vocational dimension, it equally offers a vision for society that is built on raising consciousness, citizenship, cohesion, cultural development and community building (Department of Education & Science, 2000: 28). And it includes a chapter dedicated to what it describes as 'the Community Education movement' which offers two perspectives on community education: (1) as an outreach arm of public providers and (2) as an ideologically led collective process that is closely linked to community development. Many people welcomed this public acknowledgment of the work of the community and voluntary sector and an admission that it was inadequately funded. However, these equality-sounding overtures did not disguise the fact that *Learning for Life* mirrored the EC's lifelong learning concept of human capital, and support for the knowledge economy and for this reason producing an adaptable and flexible workforce remained its central concern (Murtagh, 2009: 164–5; Shannon, 2019: 104).

One positive outcome of *Learning for Life* was its appointment of publicly funded Community Education Facilitators (CEFs) across the country, some of whom came from the community sector and, therefore, had a strong grounding in Freirean-oriented practice. This created important connections between the community and voluntary sector, and the public sector. What the white paper didn't do was inject money into existing community sector projects. I'm talking about those projects that had sprung from the bottom-up each one of which, by the government's own admission, 'to a greater or lesser extent' were involved in 'delivering training, educational or social awareness programmes within

their own communities' (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 2002: 33).

Despite its social justice-sounding ambition, Irish policy and practice would, from this point forward, be significantly influenced by the EC lifelong learning agenda, including the European Council's *Lisbon Strategy* which determined that the EU's guiding ambition was 'to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' (European Parliament, 2009: 1). One early indication of this was when, in a keynote address to an AONTAS national conference on community education in 2000, the tone of then Minister for Education Sheila de Valera's intervention was to insist on 'accountability' and that community education delivered 'an end result not just a process' continuing that, despite policy overtures in support of a needs-based model, 'funding of a project cannot be solely justified on the worthiness of the client group' (in Fleming, 2004: 12).

A different tone was not the only thing to change. There was also a sharp demand in seeking quantifiable outcomes which began in 2002 when the government contracted a not-for-profit research collective called Nexus to design software that would measure the impact of the community sector's work. For the first time, collecting data became a feature of the work–something that has grown exponentially ever since via multiple versions of often complex and time-consuming models. Around the same time, Community Development Projects (CDPs)—which are independent projects funded as part of the national Community Development Program, were informed that their annual workplans must now demonstrate value for money and not just previously established principles of building capacity and meeting the needs of underserved communities.

Things took a dramatic turn when social partnership, and indeed the Irish economy collapsed in 2008 as part of Europe-wide financial crisis that saw trillions of euros of public money pumped into European economies through bank bailouts (Ladi & Tsarouhas, 2014: 172). When unemployment grew as a result, Ireland was one of many countries to introduce social policies that mandated people in receipt of unemployment benefits to enroll in adult education courses to retain their full benefits.[5] Some people may have benefitted from these programs. However,

[5] These activation measures were brought in by via a *National Employment Action Plan* (NEAP).

research has evidenced the significantly negative impact compulsory adult education can have on a person's wellbeing and their capacity to engage with that particular program (O'Grady, 2008; Ylisto & Mari Husu, 2021). This practice continues and migrants are often particularly targeted for employability-related compulsory education and training that matches market need (Breidahl, 2017).

The following year, a government report called *Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes* (2009) or the McCarthy Report as it is commonly known,[6] determined that there was 'little evidence of positive outcomes' from community development initiatives (Government of Ireland, 2009: 41). The comment caused understandable outrage and protest across many communities. People picketed the offices of certain politicians, openly objected at information sessions, and organized sectoral gatherings to propose alternatives.[7] The most prominent and united objection was through the actions of The Spectacle of Defiance and Hope (hereafter the Spectacle), a creative resistance movement made up of community leaders, community workers and artists that had consciousness-raising education at its core. Thousands of community workers marched through Dublin in 2011, 2012 and 2013. Each march was preceded by dozens of locally organized workshops that set out to raise public awareness and build momentum for the protests. Despite the best efforts of everyone involved, and support from left-wing politicians and some corners of the trade union movement, the actions of the Spectacle didn't prevent a rapid and substantial downsizing of the community and voluntary sector through forced mergers and harsh funding cuts that resulted in the closure of over one hundred and sixty CDPs nationwide. The activist, community worker and central organizer of the Spectacle John Bissett describes this downsizing as a neoliberal 'strategic turn … which signaled a sharp authoritarian turn in the state's position vis-à-vis the community sector' (Bissett, 2015: 174). Some groups did survive but did so under different managerial structures and only because they shifted at least some of their focus towards a lifelong learning employability agenda (Magrath & Fitzsimons, 2020: 42–43).

[6] This is because the chairperson of the special group on public service numbers and expenditure programme was the economist Colm McCarthy.

[7] These actions are reported within editorial and news accounts within Spring/Summer editions of the Community Sector magazine *Changing Ireland* www.changingireland.ie.

Further Education and Training

The next significant government intervention in advancing the EU's neoliberal lifelong learning agenda was to create a brand-new Further Education and Training Authority called SOLAS,[8] which opened in 2013 to oversee all publicly funded adult, community and further education in Ireland. Again, the justification for SOLAS was new public managerialist motivations of transparency and accountability. Where it differed from previous policy-related practices was that its first *Further Education and Training Strategy 2014–2019* did not involve the high levels of consultation that had become a normal feature of civil society-government relations but rather took many people by surprise when it was published in 2014. That policymakers failed to engage in even the most minimal level of consultation proved not only the absence of genuine partnership but that they didn't even bother to create the illusion of caring. This absence of practitioner and other stakeholder voices resulted in the near exclusion of community education which was only mentioned as part of a labor market focus and only as a mechanism for recruiting so-called 'hard to reach' learners (SOLAS, 2014: 4). Policy expert Denise Shannon outlines how,

> The FET Strategy presents 'skills' as the policy panacea for the social and economic challenges faced by Ireland in the wake of the economic crisis. In a similar way to lifelong learning in the White Paper, skills are poised as the answer to an internationally shared reality. (Shannon, 2019: 108)

Shannon argues that this orientation from lifelong learning to skills is mostly a linguistic one that continues the same European-led move away from concern for educational inequality towards employability.

The table below summarizes the chronology of this and other key policy documents (Table 4.2).

This was the context within which I first surveyed Irish-based community educators in the mid-2010s when one of the strongest themes to emerge was how unhappy they were with the impacts of the strong employability agenda they were busy acclimatizing to. One comment echoed a much broader sentiment when a community educator told me it was 'becoming increasingly difficult to challenge inequality on a societal

[8] This stands for Seirbhísí Oideachais Leanunaigh Agus Scileanna.

Table 4.2 Summary of key Irish lifelong learning policies

Adult Education in Ireland (also called The Murphy Report) Committee on Adult Education	1973	This first report dedicated to adult education outlined a series of recommendations that would address adult learning needs. It called for research on literacy standards and began the process of a clearly defined adult education programme
Lifelong Learning: Report of the Commission on Adult Education (also called *The Kenny Report*) Commission on Adult Education	1984	This policy led to the implementation of some of the Murphy Report's earlier recommendations. It offered a structured approach to addressing the learning needs of adults and led to the establishment of Adult Education Boards across the country and to ring-fenced budgets for adult literacy and community education. Many of its wider recommendations were not implemented
Green Paper on Adult Education Government of Ireland	1998	This consultation document was written with the support of academics in the Department of Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University. It invited wider commentary from stakeholders and the public in identifying key areas for development which included access to education, professionalizing teaching within adult education, and secure funding streams
Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education Department of Education and Science	2000	Building from the Green Paper, this policy document outlined the government's policy on adult and community education. Its focus was lifelong learning which would address personal, social, and economic needs across six priority areas namely: consciousness-raising, citizenship, cohesion, competitiveness, cultural development, and community development

(continued)

Table 4.2 (continued)

Further Education and Training Strategy 2014–2019 SOLAS	2014	This was the first comprehensive strategy by SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority in Ireland. It aimed to deliver a higher quality learning experience leading to better outcomes for all learners, focusing on active inclusion, skills for the economy, and improving the quality and accountability of the FET sector
National Skills Strategy 2025 Department of Education and Skills	2016	This strategy aims to develop a workforce equipped to meet the changing demands of the economy. It emphasizes lifelong learning, career progression pathways, and strengthening education-business linkages. It casts the role of adult and community education again as a pathway to hard-to-reach 'workers'
Future FET: Transforming Learning 2020–2024 SOLAS	2020	The second FET strategy built upon the previous one, emphasizing the development of a more integrated, flexible, and responsive FET system. It focused on creating pathways to work and higher education, fostering inclusion, and promoting lifelong learning to adapt to changing societal and economic needs
National Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy SOLAS	2021	Again, produced following a period of consultation, this ambitious strategy sets out to ensure that all adults have the required literacy, numeracy, and digital skills to fully participate in society
Community Education Framework SOLAS	2024	This framework, developed in consultation with providers and other stakeholders, provides guidelines for the standardization of community education. It emphasizes its role in promoting social inclusion, active citizenship, and personal development, and outlines best practices for program delivery and evaluation

level as we are restricted to the value for money approach of funders' and that community education 'does not hold the ethos it had formerly' with this contributor continuing,

> It has been co-opted by the State into training. I have great difficulties reconciling this with my political beliefs as I don't really want to be training people so the multi-nationals will have good little workers until they decide to pull out. If the labour-market is to benefit, then I would rather it was benefited by educating people so they can create worthwhile jobs for themselves and others in their community.

Other comments included repeated reports of excessive paperwork and that, as this community educator employed in the public sector puts it:

> the government pay lip-service to community education and local communities... the reality is they are only interested in getting people on education and training to show they are doing something about unemployment…the only figure that matters is output in terms of bums on seats.

Within a year of these thoughts being expressed, Ireland's *National Skills Strategy* (first published in 2007) had been updated (in 2016) to include an introduction that unambiguously located its purpose as 'to restore full employment and build a sustainable economy' (Department of Education and Skills, 2016: 7). The revised *National Skills Strategy* did mention adult and community education just once, and again only to reach 'low-skilled and older workers [who] are less likely to be to be offered, or to seek, upskilling from employers' describing these 'workers' as 'also the most vulnerable to ongoing changes within the workplace' (Department of Education and Skills, 2016: 96). However, its central focus was clearly to serve the needs of capital by creating an 'agile' and 'flexible' workforce who can respond rapidly to economic shifts in a profit-driven world. Less obvious was any concern for the need to address inequalities inherent in the labor market or to support people's choices in terms of what their interests and ambitions might be. It is worth repeating the extent to which these policies represented a missed opportunity in creating jobs that could be aligned with the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which seek to address the urgent social, environmental, and economic challenges we face.

The near total neglect of community education, especially in the first FET strategy, was poorly received by academics and practitioners alike, and their objections ensured that Ireland's second FET strategy, *Future*

FET: Transforming Learning 2020–2024, re-instated a process of extensive nationwide consultation. As one would expect when people involved in adult learning were consulted, the word 'community' was back on the agenda; indeed, it featured over 60 times in *Future FET*, including in the strategy's opening paragraph which positioned FET as 'for everyone' continuing:

> It is available in every community in Ireland, and offers every individual, regardless of any previous level of education, a pathway to take them as far as they want to go. It can offer personal development and fulfilment, a link to community and social networks, and a range of supports that reflect the diverse base of its learners. It also offers great opportunities to move into exciting and interesting vocations and careers, or a platform to develop the skills that will allow someone to flourish if they go on to further study in higher education. (SOLAS, 2020: 8)

Under a sub-heading 'Rooting FET in the community' Ireland's second strategy emphasizes how 'one of the greatest attributes of FET is the way it has grown organically from the commitment in communities to come together to learn, develop and innovate to address local issues and promote local opportunities (SOLAS, 2020: 45). It describes community education as playing 'a critical role in this regard' (p. 45) and praises the rootedness of existing community education practice. *Future FET* promises to develop a community education framework to 'provide an enhanced basis to both record and promote national and local good practice, learner achievement and progression, and the overall benefits of community education and of 'learn local' in general' (p. 46).

When this *Community Education Framework* was published in 2024, it was again unambiguous in its support for community education stating:

> SOLAS believes Community Education includes both formal and informal learning, addressing learners' personal development, building skills while offering educational options through simplified pathways, and further opportunities to progress to other areas of FET and beyond. (SOLAS, 2024: 4)

There is no doubt that the language of the Community Education Framework is positive and equality focused. It names the principles of community education as justice, equality, solidarity, empowerment, transformation, led by the community, quality, respect, inclusion, accessibility,

and participatory (Solas, 2024: 9). It also describes the importance of group work and peer-to-peer learning.

In 2024, most of the community educators I engaged with were familiar with, and had read, the Community Education Framework and also other key policy documents.[9] This indicates that, although many community educators are skeptical about the impact of policy and the process of consultations, they continue to dedicate time and effort to engaging with the policy process, no doubt hoping that they will be listened to and that their recommendations will be acted upon.

However, one of the central features of neoliberalism is that when social policies are co-designed with civil society partners, they typically include positive, values-driven language that creates an overall impression that we are all on the same team in our call for equality. But these positive-sounding overtures are never matched with the massive and radical reforms that are needed if we are to address structural inequality. Collaborations of this nature are therefore mostly hollow and form part of neoliberalism's wider depoliticization and co-option agenda that ensure the concerns of ordinary people are overshadowed by the interests of the elite.

In the case of the Community Education Framework, the language of equality helps conceal contradictory aspects including its emphasis on monitoring community education in the context of funding 'based on good quality data and positive outcomes' (SOLAS, 2024: 20). This is alongside passive language throughout, for example by describing people as 'experiencing' homelessness, poverty and social exclusion (p. 9), disassociating these phenomena from the social policies that create them in the first place.

Measuring Learning

There are important points to be made about the measurement matrix at the center of this an indeed most of the policies discussed in this chapter. First, measuring many of the benefits of community education such as nurturing a person's capacity to socialize, addressing loneliness, improving health and wellbeing, supporting work readiness, and fostering

[9] The specific documents that I asked about are The White Paper, The FET strategies, the National Literacy Strategy, the National Access Plan, and the Community Education Framework.

a person's capacity to analyze the world around them is pretty much impossible. Second, seeking to measure something is not a neutral act; rather it fundamentally alters the thing we are seeking to measure. I agree with Amelia Horgan when she notes how the practice of measuring gears our efforts 'towards the generation and massaging of representations', a process that creates perverse incentives where 'instead of doing the stated tasks of a job, more and more time is spent recording partial or totally one-sided representations of that work' (Horgan, 2021: 57–58). These same representations, Horgan argues, are then used to shape the parameters of future conditions for funding thereby creating a new and distorted reality. Practitioners understand these limitations. As this community training center employee puts it:

> The Community Education Framework is generally welcome from the point of view that the sector may be supported and in particular financial support for a very underfunded sector. However, it should be noted that the flexible nature of Community Education needs to remain in place and that the sector is not boxed in with tight controls, which I fear may be the approach of this framework.

What becomes clear is just how little choice publicly funded providers have given their dependency on government funding. Their challenge is to seek to stay true to their social justice agenda amidst pressure to deliver services whilst also being accountable to both funders and communities.

Bottom up Policy Interventions

Ireland's Community Education Framework is a good example of the extent to which today's neoliberal-driven social policy process is now co-opting practitioners by tying them up in the process of designing equality-sounding policies without any real intention of implementing these policies beyond a performance of radicalism that is almost always coupled with a central task of quantifying our work into units of outcomes.

Community education can play its part in an employability agenda. In fact, it has a long history of training adults for essential jobs and mostly in supportive, person-centered environments. But these types of programs are alongside other ambitions and agendas that include seeking to address structural inequalities, something that will never be the central vision of

contemporary lifelong learning policies. Instead, history teaches us that the lifelong learning discourse conceals a neoliberal agenda that prioritizes market wellbeing and efficiency over collective wellbeing and social justice.

Ignoring the process of policymaking is a daunting task and one that can seem impossible when to do so would jeopardize badly needed government grants, but it can help to be aware of the dimensions of power at play and to appreciate the extent to which reporting to funders and engaging in endless cycles of policy design absorbs significant time and energy. This in turn redirects people's focus towards bureaucratic processes and away from grassroots organizing. Raising awareness of these limits may help people strive for what Táíwò describes as 'constructive approach' that sees the trap of substituting performativity for the pursuit of very specific goals and redirects our energies towards bringing about actual change (Táíwò, 2022: 12). To this end, praxis can include collective efforts to positively shape social policy including by creating bottom-up policies that force neoliberal actors into change.

There are examples of bottom-up interventions that have forced the hands of policy makers. In South Africa, local health activism groups that were historically denied access to health information took it upon themselves to do their own community-research resulting in important health information campaigns and a change in government policy regarding HIV treatments (van Pinxteren et al., 2022). In the US, community-based participatory research 'made substantial contributions to policymaking for health equity' by providing evidence about the impacts of diesel pollution that was difficult for policymakers to ignore (Cacari-Stone et al., 2014).

These examples show how research can be leveraged to promote health equity. In particular, these examples are of community-led participatory research being used to build bridges between research and policy change something Marjori Mayo believes universities should help initiate (Mayo, 2020: 152–153). But designing and supporting egalitarian strategies for change have always been a minority pursuit of universities, institutions that are themselves experiencing an authoritarian turn that is characterized by a radical reorganization of power where new public managerialism has also transformed these institutions through an efficiency model that has commodified education and infused business logic throughout (Fleming, 2021). There are some examples of universities defying this agenda. In the UK, collective activism that led to important policy changes was led by a community of students through The Fossil Free Careers Movement

(est. 2021) which, to date, has pressured 11 universities into refusing to forge new relationships with oil, gas and mining companies. Instead, they have adopted ethical career policies that explicitly exclude fossil fuel industries.[10]

This work isn't easy. Indeed, Cacari-Stone et al. (2014) alert us to the challenges of pursuading policy makers to engage with their community-based and grassroots research on health equity amidst the real-world events I have outlined, their own institutional constraints, and the influence of wider media discourse. Despite these constraints, these researchers offer a workable model to improve the liklihood that pressure from below will deliver on change as: clearly defining a problem; creating awareness and getting this on policy makers agendas; constructing policy alternatives; deciding on which policy to pursue; implementing the policy through collective pressure; and evaluation (Carari-Stone et al., 2014: 1616). These are simple enough suggestions and easier to write on a page than put into practice, but without some sort of strategy, it is difficult to know where to begin or how to focus collective efforts effectively.

In conclusion, perhaps our goal when it comes to policy should be to invest our energy at the grassroots where real change can begin, and expend less energy legitimizing consultation processes that are performative. Maybe then we can change the circumstances under which policies are creatd and shift some power dynamics towards the common good.

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CHAPTER 5

Community Education and Professionalism

If you have read the previous chapter, you will know that a central argument I put forward is that, because of neoliberalization, many community actors can unwittingly help to domesticate community education by spending significant amounts of time channeling their efforts into endless cycles of consultation, reporting, and chasing funding through lengthy application processes that typically under-deliver. A consequence of this situation is that often, these tasks leave less time for the actual work of face-to-face adult learning.

One aspect that stands out in terms of other tasks that sometimes get prioritized is the extent to which, in the last ten years or so, data collecting has consumed an increasing share of community educator's time. As discussed in Chapter 4, generating metrics can be prioritized over the actual work of even the most basic student support never mind the labor involved in seeking a more equal world. Mostly, the data that is collected is quite personal. It includes identifiers like a person's social security number, their date of birth and a contact number or email in case the provider needs to get in touch. Some providers gather details on a person's education and employment history, their ethnicity, their religion, their gender, and even their sexuality. This is not unique to community education, in fact, gathering data on people has become so commonplace, we often don't think twice about it aside from the obvious concern about the time that it takes to complete the task.

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Collecting information in this way can help us direct someone to the right program or can help put someone in touch with other services they might benefit from. But there is a much more sinister aspect to the task that we should all think about namely how normalizing data collection contributes to a redefinition of privacy where algorithms are now used as a form of surveillance, the purpose of which is to manage populations (Crampton, 2015).

There are two main aspects of this task we should question. First, it is not unusual for people to innocently share data without knowing that their information will be used for an entirely different purpose. Perhaps the most well-known example of this was when the social media platform Facebook handed over the personal identifiers of over 87 million people to a company called Cambridge Analytica. The platform's users had taken a seemingly innocuous personality test, the likes of which it is not a stretch to claim could find its way into community education classrooms. The results of this particular test were, however, handed over to privately contracted researchers based in Cambridge University who integrated them with other data from the social media platform, including people's political posting, their likes, and their friends lists. Together, this information was then used to target people with personalized political advertising, including during the Brexit referendum and the 2016 US elections (Isaak & Hanna, 2018).

This scandal helped awaken people to the perils of handing over their data. Indeed, asking people to fill in lengthy and complex application forms now often justifiably raises suspicions about how this information will be handled and potentially shared. This is especially the case for people without secure citizenship who may worry that sharing their information could result in them getting deported.

But another problem is how important it is to remember just how intimidating and overwhelming excessive formfilling can be. Again, migrants are particularly vulnerable, especially those more familiar with another language than the dominant tongue being used. We must also not forget people with low literacy levels and people with limited vision who need more accessible ways to engage. Overall, form filling, be this because of justifiable concerns about data collecting, fears about deportation, or issues with accessibility create a significant barrier to participation in community education. Yet despite these concerns, many of the organizers and deliverers of community educators increasingly view data collection

as both unproblematic and as just another part of their job, albeit one that can be onerous and particularly time consuming.

Much the same can also be said for the efforts that go into grant chasing and the policy consultation work I talked about in chapter 4, all of which are often viewed as evidence that community education work is having an impact. In fact, excelling at these tasks can feel decidedly professional, a term that, like 'community,' is generally viewed positively and as beneficial for all. Being 'professional' is good for the skilled community educator who should expect better working conditions (more on this later). Professionalism is also supposedly good for communities who should benefit from higher standards of practice because the people that they deal with are better at their jobs. However, some critics question these assumptions, including M.S. Larson, who believes professionalizing occupations is mostly a neoliberal mechanism that concretizes class structures and ensures elite professions, in particular, are the real beneficiaries of the cultural and economic benefits this status brings (Larson, 1977).

Critiquing the professionalization of community education and community development work is not new. In fact, debates on its benefits and pitfalls date back to the 1940s within North American literature (Hawley, 1969: 124), the 1960s within British literature (Smith, 2006), and the 1980s in the Irish context (Cinnéide & Walsh, 1990; Whelan, 1989). Typically, those in favor of professional status for community workers argue that working closely with underserved communities requires specialist skills and knowledge. Those against believe professionalization can alienate the very people it seeks to support by shifting practice from grassroots protest that seeks systems change towards structured, professionalized campaigns and local service delivery (Eagleton-Pierce, 2018). Another challenge is that professionalization excludes certain people because it typically means you need to have a certan qualification to get paid for the work you do.

The Professional Paradigm: Origins and Implications

Before discussing these debates in more detail, it is important to unpack the concepts of *professionalism* and of *professionalization* including their history and application, so that we might determine their social significance. This is especially important given how, in today's world, the concept of 'being professional' is applied, often narrowly, to just about

every aspect of our working lives. More and more, it doesn't just relate to our competency in performing certain tasks but extends to a whole host of accepted benchmarks. We are expected to dress professionally, which usually means wearing smart and often expensive business attire, to behave in a particular way which usually means staying calm and respectful regardless of the circumstances, and to speak professionally which usually means with a middle-class accent and often through the medium of the English language. These markers perpetuate a culture where to be professional mostly means to conform with middle-class standards and aesthetics. Behaving in the opposite way, for example by showing emotion or dissenting against hierarchical leadership, can be labeled as unprofessional, a practice that subtly marginalizes people who don't conform to dominant, western, capitalist-friendly ways of being. *Professionalization* is something different. This word describes the steps an occupation must go through to become a closed profession. Being a closed profession means only people with certain agreed qualifications can enter, or to put it more simply, you probably don't need qualifications to become a pet-sitter, you do to become a pharmacist.

The study of professionalization, and the role of education within this, is a longstanding aspect of the social sciences with contributors including professors in adult education Houle (1980) and Cevero (1988), sociologists Larson (1977), MacDonald (1995) and Freidson (2001), and research professor Goodson (2003). It is hard not to be struck by the fact that all these contributors are white, and that, with the notable exception of M.S. Larson, they are all men. It seems likely that, at least to some extent, their perspectives on professionalization have been shaped by their own positionality as people who are likely to benefit from professional status given the additional forms of social and cultural capital they hold.

This charge also extends to one of the first modern-day social scientists to write about professionalism, namely the American educator Abraham Flexnor who in 1915, argued that only very specific jobs should be considered professions. Flexnor claimed the status of 'professional' mostly suited the western medical profession, an occupation that prioritized the common good over benefits for the doctor and that required specialist knowledge that they could only get through specialist training (Flexnor, [1915] 2001). One of the first people to expand on these ideas was Cyril Houle, who believed any occupation could professionalize once it clarified its defining function and adhered to certain criteria (Houle, 1980: 35). Houle defined these criteria as specialist knowledge, which usually

means a recognized qualification, but also other benchmarks including agreed standards of practice, continuous professional development and a regulatory authority that would oversee professional membership (Houle, 1980: 40). Examples of the regulatory authorities he had in mind include the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) and the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) in Singapore. Importantly, these and other regulatory authorities are typically created by a self-appointed elite who, at the point of professionalization, are therefore the people who get to control acceptable standards of practice and to determine a profession's relationship with the state (MacDonald, 1995: 7–8).

Unsurprisingly, professionalism is a contested concept, and agreed professional standards change and evolve over time. What it means to 'be professional' can also greatly vary depending on a person's own philosophical perspective. Speaking personally, I have been accused of being 'unprofessional' at times when I have been proud of the approach that I took. This includes not using PowerPoint when leading a class on Paulo Freire, not wearing a suit jacket for a job interview, and being 'too passionate' about my work. This latter accusation, by someone in a position of power, was probably because of how I regularly get frustrated with the status quo and because I sometimes express anger or sadness when facilitating groups. Accusing someone of being too emotional misses out on how emotions are intimately connected with motivation (Hope & Timmel, 1995: 8), meaning they are often the genesis of change.

I'm sure I am not the only person with these sorts of experiences, and it can help to critically examine the power dynamics that shape professional authority. While recognizing the inherent reductionism in drawing a strict dualism between neoliberal managers and emancipatory educators (O'Neill, 2014: 151), few people would disagree that, in today's world, authority *from above*, be this from a regulatory body or a boss, holds greater esteem than authority *from below and around*, such as that which is conferred on us by communities, or authority *from within* meaning that which we give ourselves through self-confidence and our belief that we are doing a good job (Fitzsimons & Dorman, 2013: 53).

Sometimes, authority from above can curtail important social justice work. Throughout 2024, there were several times when acts of solidarity with the people of Palestine against genocide, military occupation, and systemic oppression by Israel (Amnesty International, 2024) led to disciplinary action against educators. The International Criminal Court (ICC) even issued arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu and former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, accusing them of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Nevertheless, when Maura Finkelstein, a tenured associate professor at Muhlenberg College, Pennsylvania, temporarily reposted a statement from a Palestinian American poet on her Instagram account, this led to both a faculty and staff committee advising she should be sacked (Quinn, 2024). This wasn't an isolated example. At the University of Texas, two teaching assistants were fired because they sent students an email in which they expressed support with the people of Palestine (Stark, 2023). And in Oakland, a teacher was fired for wearing a Free Palestine pin to class (Shaban et al., 2024).

Setting these examples of authoritarian power aside, it is also important to more deeply analyze the extent to which creating closed professions is an exclusionary act. Consistently, research has shown that upper and middle-class populations are mostly the ones who gain entry to universities (McCoy et al., 2014; Tompsett & Knoester, 2023), making them more likely to get the qualifications that are now often needed to be employed as a community educator. The dynamic this creates is that those in the driving seat of determining practice probably deeply care about inequality but can lack first-hand experience of living with its consequences. Again, this critique isn't new. Writing over forty years ago, a Dublin-based community activist called Mary Whelan dichotomized professionals as either 'insider' or 'outsider' community workers, arguing that, at a critical juncture in the professionalization of community work, class privilege was the principal determining factor in who got the paid jobs and who was expected to 'volunteer' without pay in less prestigious positions (Whelan, 1989). My own sense of working in community education in the 1990s was that when outsider community workers (of which I was one) took up representative positions, for example on state-civil society partnership boards, they often did so without properly consulting the communities they purported to represent. Moreover, their familiarity with middle-class habitus (see page 46) meant that they were more inclined to agree to compromises that local people might not have settled for. Substituting in this way can, therefore, silence more oppositional voices and suppress dissent where, without necessarily realizing it, outsider professionals have become the vanguard for neoliberalism and the facilitators of what Paulo Freire calls a cultural invasion where they impose their culture, values, and ways of thinking onto marginalized or oppressed communities in the guise of helping or educating them (Freire, 1972: 152–153).

It is important at this stage to point out that, for the most part, community education has not been professionalized to the same extent as other occupations including being a schoolteacher, a university lecturer, or a social worker. Most Western countries don't have regulatory authorities for adult educators and people with a variety of qualifications, and none can be found working with adult learning groups in community contexts. This does not mean that many of the hallmarks of professionalization that I have outlined are not present. For example, most employers will seek some sort of qualification, be it in social work, social care, or some other recognizable profession. Sometimes, in some countries, people working in publicly funded posts must have a teaching qualification, especially if the courses they are running are accredited (which is discussed in the next chapter). There is also professional support that helps determine what acceptable practice looks like. These include the European Union's Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe, or EPALE for short which provides support, resources, best practice guidelines, and professional development for people working in community education across EU member states.

Some of these practices are welcome. Determining core competencies helps us to affirm the work we are doing and helps ensure practitioners have the confidence and skills to do a good job. Well-run professional programs for practitioners also build analytical capacities and ensure expertise in important skills. Without these dedicated spaces, we end up supporting a culture more typical of traditional models of education where, as Stephen Brookfield puts it, much of what we do is 'in the air of professional culture we have grown up with, accepted uncritically, because colleagues, experts and textbooks have told us this is how teaching works' (Brookfield, 2017: 21–22).

Dedicated, reflexive professional programs that are underpinned by critical pedagogy are, therefore, welcome and important. But these spaces can be problematic too and not just because of barriers to entry, but because most of the theory that is consumed on professional programs is still drawn from white, Western perspectives with a lot more work to be done to meaningfully decolonize dominant curricula and disrupt our citation patterns.[1] They can also be expensive spaces to access because of exorbitant fees and an absence of wrap-around supports like childcare.

[1] Sara Ahmed models the extent to which this can be achieved in her book *Living A Feminist Life* (Ahmed, 2017).

Community Educators—More Regulated and Less Valued

For better or worse, pre-requisite professional standards of practice are creeping into adult and community education. Where things often lag is the terms of pay and recognition for the work that adult and community educators do. Most community educators earn nothing close to what many professionals earn. Indeed, as I have researched elsewhere (Fitzsimons & O'Neill, 2024; Fitzsimons et al., 2022; O'Neill & Fitzsimons, 2020), the push for professionalization from below is often because of a justifiable desire to improve substandard working conditions both in terms of pay and career progression. Each of the studies that I have conducted uncovered disproportionate levels of short-term pay-by-the-hour contracts and many instances where adult educators work part-time but not by choice.

When I asked community educators about their work as I was preparing to write this book, working conditions were one of the strongest themes to emerge. This was in response to an open question: 'Is there anything else you would like to say that I have not thought to ask?' One respondent, who works for a public sector provider and who has been working in community education for over ten years, told me, 'It would be really useful to explore the awful working conditions for tutors within the public sector' continuing, 'most [funders] are student focused whilst completely ignoring the basic working rights of the person delivering the course.' This very point is made by the adult education academic Jerry O'Neill who writes,

> As educators we sometimes miss the irony that what we advocate for the good of our students' development as learners, we rarely call for in our own development as educators. Most of us would, in some way or another, believe in and practice a form of pedagogy that has a social and dialogic element. In trying to achieve this, we work hard to create appropriate and safe spaces for such learning to occur. But do we fight as hard to create similarly appropriate spaces, temporal and physical, for our own development as educators? (O'Neill, 2014: 153)

Insecure working conditions for adult educators and discussions on their relationship with professional status is not new, rather, in Ireland, it has been talked about as far back as the government commissioned

Murphy Report of 1973. This recommended training for adult educators, clear professional pathways, and financial support for volunteers (Committee on Adult Education, 1973: 92). Similar recommendations were repeated in the government's first official policy on adult education published in 2000 (Department of Education & Science, 2000: 150–154).

Adult educators are not alone. In the realm of education, we can see similarities with early childhood education, an area that has also embarked on a professionalization process in recent years. This has contributed to tensions between improving the status of early childcare qualifications and squaring this with low pay and job insecurity in jobs where the administrative workload is growing and where performance monitoring is also on the rise (Mooney Simmie & Murphy, 2023: 246–250). Little wonder these workers also feel undervalued amidst a context where market-driven demands erode the community-oriented aspect of early years' education work and where top-down managerial models prioritize efficiency over staff wellbeing. As an aside, higher education and further education have also not been immune to increases in the use of casual and precarious contracts to hire lecturers and researchers, something that is now well documented.

Across these domains, we now have working environments where people who hold uncertain contracts and who are often fearful that work could dry up, can do little else but accept authoritative direction from above, including from funders, meaning they must conform to externally determined measurable outputs, and not systems change, as the benchmark for successful practice. This sense of having to say 'yes' to everything, is highlighted by Lopes and Dewan (2015: 33), who describe the extreme pressures people can be put under for fear of missing out on future work.

Precarity is also gendered with gender-based essentialism strong in many workplaces. This includes how women are clustered in care-based occupations that often pay less than other occupations, including community education. Couple this with women's own need for flexible and part-time work as they carry the social burden of domestic and care labor and it is easy to see how precarity in education has a greater impact on the lives of women than on people of other genders (Lopes & Dewan, 2015; O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019).

But it is important to be clear about the fact that insecure pay, poor contracts, and a lack of occupational support are not unique to educators but are part of a wider neoliberal-driven casualization of labor. This is actualized through flexibilization, casualization and self-responsibility often in the form of zero-hours contracts that give workers no guarantee of any hours at all (Jaffe, 2021: 95) and bogus self-employment contracts (Horgan, 2021: 4) where it is the vulnerable employee that carries all the risk. Little wonder that another theme to emerge from my primary research is as one voice puts it, 'it can be challenging finding tutors who can take work in an ad hoc, precarious way' something they link to a funding model that 'is sporadic' at best.

Can Unions Help?

Historically, trade unions have played a role in balancing professionalization with workers' demands for decent pay and conditions. Everyone has a right to join a union, and each union has the right to collectively bargain on workers' behalf as stated in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (Article 23.4). However, these too have experienced their own period of professionalization and, as Adrian Kane argues, one of the lasting impacts of social partnership (discussed in Chapter 4) has been to transform the culture within trade unions, sanitizing the once revered notion of collective struggle in favor or a more legalistic and public relationship approach (Kane, 2023: 32–33). Many people, including those on the political left, are beginning to lose faith in the trade union movement as a force for change. This pessimism may be premature as there are indications that the decline in union density that occurred in recent decades has plateaued, especially amongst women (Geary & Belizon, 2021: 8).

Community educators can play a part not just in building the trade union movement but in bringing their skills and knowledge about critical education into trade union spaces. We know that the push for better working conditions involves a synergy of praxis-oriented actions towards lasting structural change, and community educators have a track record in re-politicizing our unions by reuniting them with their history of teach-ins and educationally focused political organizing (Grayson, 2011; Mayo, 2020: 83). As the labor movement educator and union organizer Jane McAlevey writes, 'the point of unions isn't their buildings or bureaucracy; it's political education, solidarity, and confidence building amongst

the many that comes from people acting collectively, including strikes, for their own betterment' (McAlevey, 2020: 244).

Conclusion

As I wrap up this chapter, I am struck by my own paradoxical relationship with professionalization. On the one hand, I see the potential for depoliticization, on the other, I see the importance of paying people well for the work that they do and in creating structures that promote their occupational wellbeing and development. It is important to push for an environment where meaningful professionalization is more than just establishing formal qualifications that lock the people at the heart of a phenomenon out of closed professions but that it is serious about creating critically thinking practitioners. If the existing professional structures don't do this, for example because university courses are too expensive or inaccessible for other reasons, we must create communities of practice that exemplify genuine professional growth. These networks can (and often do) provide spaces for practitioners to exchange ideas, improve their skills, and critically reflect on their practice in a collective space.

In considering how to manage the tensions I have outlined regarding professionalist discourse more broadly, our own counter-hegemonic actions can play a role in resisting and slowing a depoliticization process that expects us to conform to institutional pressures and norms that disconnect practice from its radical, justice-oriented roots. Drawing on critical pedagogical methods, we can introduce critical dialogue about power and oppression ensuring our focus is maintained on consciousness-raising and social change. And as we co-create curricula, we are modeling an alternative that is often not considered in other spaces. Where we might not have much success in rejecting the rigid performance indicators that can surround our paid work, we can qualitatively document its impact and collectively reflect on better ways to capture the value of our work.

We can also model shared leadership, collective organizing, and collective decision making, each of which challenge dominant professionalist narratives and create spaces that are underpinned by alternative values. Resisting authority from above–be this from a powerful regulatory body or a hierarchical organizational structure, ensures credibility from the communities we work with, our peers and our inner-selves are the driving force for standards of practice.

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CHAPTER 6

Community Education and Accreditation

A strange thing happened to me when I was working in the community education section of a large Dublin-based housing association in the late 2000s. Part of my job at the time was to deliver a six-week *Certificate in Housing,* which was accredited by a UK-based professional body for people working in housing and communities. On this occasion, there were 12 students in my group, some of whom worked in the community and voluntary sector, some who worked in housing associations like the one I was with, and some of whom were tenants of social housing. Overall, the course went well. There was lots of energetic discussion, and some important relationships were built. I felt confident that I had created an inclusive, group-led environment that encouraged critical thinking, that unearthed many housing-related social injustices and that encouraged learners to act for meaningful change.

When it came to setting the assignment, I was keen to harness people's enthusiasm and to hold a critical pedagogic approach. So, I organized people into small groups and asked each group to choose any housing-related issue at all that they felt passionate about and then create a social analysis spiral that would uncover the personal, community, economic, and political factors at play.[1] From what I can remember, the themes people settled on were around the stigma associated with public housing

[1] This exercise was designed by Banulacht, an Irish-based independent development education organisation disbanded in 2009 in part due to the severance of State funding.

C. Fitzsimons, *Community Education and Neoliberalism*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-03743-5_6

estates, overcrowding, homelessness, and inadequate public services in some of their communities. Once these analyses were complete, each group was then asked to write a plan of action for how a community might intervene if they were to begin to address the issue. The purpose of this assignment was to equip people to take on the multiplicity of challenges housing and community workers face by taking a 'sustainable approach to assessment' which means an approach that prepares people for what might be needed in the future and 'as a way of rethinking outcomes, curriculum and pedagogy away from a focus on disciplinary knowledge to what students can do in the world' (Boud & Soler, 2016: 401). This assessment *for* learning approach differs from an assessment *of* learning model where the purpose is to evaluate learning based on the contents the teacher chooses to introduce. Overall, the social analysis spirals and the written pieces that accompanied them were insightful, at times profound, and always informative. There were some spelling mistakes, and the English wasn't always perfect, but nothing out of the ordinary for the qualification level which, in this case, was at the lower end of the national qualifications' framework.

What was strange was what happened when I presented this work to the external examiner who had flown from England especially to oversee the work. They didn't marvel at the work as I had done. Instead, this outside adjudicator admonished my efforts by telling me that I had set the wrong assignment. As far as they were concerned, adults who were studying at this level were not allowed to analyze. Their task was only to describe phenomenon and to show they had learned certain practical skills. The extern was also unhappy about too much variety. They would have preferred a more uniform approach, mostly because this would make it easier to compare each project against the other and rank them from best to worst. These students would get their award, I was told, but I wasn't to make the same mistakes again.

This story highlights a growing tension between the accreditation of learning and the importance of holding firm on creating learning environments where people not only think curiously and collectively about real-world events, but they also imagine possibilities for change. Technically, you could argue the examiner was correct. If I too had applied the strict accreditation rules that confirm that a program, and an institution, meets agreed quality standards, verbatim, I might also have reached the conclusion that *analyzing* is something reserved for programs at its higher end of the national qualifications' framework. What this encounter shows,

and what this chapter will argue, is that modern-day accreditation systems can sometimes limit critical thinking as they prioritize standardization over a more analytical and exploratory approach to learning.

What does it Mean to Learn

When learning is accredited, it usually refers to condensed periods of planned learning like the certificate in housing I have just told you about. But learning is much more than this. Across western literature, it is typically described as something that begins at birth and continues throughout our life as we adapt to our surroundings and negotiate, then re-negotiate, our position within the world. The British Professor of Adult Education, Alan Rogers maintains that most of what we learn is unintended, meaning it just happens every day throughout the course of our lives. Scrolling on the internet, watching television, reading a book, or talking to other people all expose us to new information that can change the way we think (Rogers, 2002: 46). Other times, deep learning can happen because of a significant life event like having a baby, starting a new job or when something unexpected happens like redundancy, bereavement, or a health scare.

Not all these examples necessarily result in learning. Most theorists agree that learning happens when our perspective on something changes or, to put it another way, when something transformative happens. Some theorists separate learning in childhood from learning in adulthood, most recognizably the work of adult educator Malcolm Knowles, who is attributed with developing the concept of andragogy. According to Knowles, andragogy explains how adults learn differently because they are motivated to do so but also because they have a wealth of experiences to draw from. Schooling is principally about developing skills, Knowles argued, with adult education 'primarily concerned with providing the resources and support for self-directed inquiry' (Knowles, 1980: 19). Andragogy, is premised on certain assumptions namely that, as people mature, they begin to self-direct; they accumulate 'a reservoir of experience' that becomes a 'rich resource for learning'; they are more open to learning; and that rather than learn something for later on in life, adults apply learning immediately which shifts their focus from learning for the sake of learning to learning to improve one's life (Knowles, 1980: 44–45). Critics of the concept of andragogy argue this west-centric, individualist and simplistic approach serves more as a philosophical stance that ignores

structural concerns than a coherent theory of learning (Hartree, 1984; St. Clair, 2002). There have also been challenges to Knowles's largely unsubstantiated, western-friendly dichotomization of adult and child learners (Moll, 2023).

When learning does happen, it can be profound and extremely personal. As the community activist and as the educator Parker Palmer argues in the courage to teach (Palmer, 1997), learning happens where there is deep engagement with the subject, oneself, and with others. To truly learn, Palmer argues, we must demonstrate a deep vulnerability that enables us to question our often firmly held beliefs. Palmer is amongst many theorists to agree that learning happens through the lens of our experiences and our cultures, meaning it is subjective and shaped by circumstances. In other words, learning is not about the passive ingestion of a set of fixed truths, it is an active process where knowledge is constructed based on how it connects with our lives. This doesn't mean that there is no room for academic knowledge. If that were the case, I, for one, would be out of a job. What it does mean is that the role of academic knowledge, or theory as it is sometimes called, isn't to present fixed truths about how the world is but to support critical inquiry in a reflective and engaged manner.

According to Stephen Brookfield, encountering theory can significantly interrupt how we think about our lives and can cause us to completely rethink often deeply held assumptions on what we hold as the truth by allowing us to stand back from our lives and see a bigger picture. Brookfield also sees theory as essential in disrupting groupthink in adult learning environments which he describes as 'a mutual reinforcement of pedagogical correctness and a corresponding dismissal of inconvenient points of view as irrelevant, immoral, or ideologically unsound' (Brookfield, 2017: 179). It is only by engaging in the ideas of others, he argues, that we stay intellectually alive, so long as no materials are considered off limits, too radical, or too contentious.

At the time of writing, the growth in book bans in the US, but also long histories of book bans in other countries, including India and China, confine the landscape of learning by limiting access to information and clearly, and intentionally, suppressing our critical capacities. Even when books aren't banned, many of us are so acclimatized to how much academic writing is tucked away behind expensive paywalls, something that is also now commonplace across journalism.

In many ways, a constructivist view of learning invalidates much canonical knowledge, by which I mean the accepted knowledge in a particular field, most of which has clearly been erected by excluding certain histories and perspectives. Again, these include the colonized histories of racialized and minoritized communities and the ongoing impact of white supremacy, the sexist oppression of women and the continuing prevalence of gender-based inequality, and the struggles of working-class people when they fight for a better world. Even within the seemingly neutral science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects, the cultural anthropologist Bianca Williams describes a 'fiction of objectivity' that is deeply biased towards preserving an unequal, racist, and patriarchal status quo (Williams, 2016: 72). Likewise, bell hooks claims scientifically verifiable truths are themselves simply stories; interpretations of certain sets of data that are easily replaced with other truths when a new set of data is presented (Hooks, 2010: 49). Again it is worth restating that these factors ensure contemporary education curricula continue to reflect western colonial values that marginalize indigenous knowledge including oral traditions and community-based learning, ensure Eurocentrism, and maintaining white supremacist hierarchies that are resistant to decolonization beyond the performative (Matasci, 2022).

Explaining, and Problematizing, Accreditation Today

A common misconception when discussing how the act of learning is validated through certification is to assume that this practice relatively recent. Actually, awarding degrees for learning dates back to the thirteen century meaning accreditation is nearly as old as universities themselves (Hargreaves-Mawdsley, 1963). For vocational learning, the history of accreditation has been more ad hoc, and with more scope for providers to independently determine what constituted a good course (Coolahan, 1981: 87–88; Clancy, 2005: 95). But, as we will see, this heterogeneity has diminished in recent years as accreditation systems have become more standardized and regulated. Universities and vocational colleges also both boast a long history of interconnected, self-conceived peer evaluations as educators have sought fresh perspectives on their work so they might improve their own practice.

The now ubiquitous concept of *learning outcomes* (more on these later) also has a long history. One common starting point is often attributed to US based educational psychologist William Spady's work

on 'competency-based education' (Spady, 1977). Spady later redefined this competency-based model to 'outcome-based education' by which he meant 'focusing and organizing everything in an educational system around what is essential for all students to be able to do successfully at the end of their learning experiences' (Spady, 1994: 12). Spady's motivation came from a space of criticality believing that traditional education mostly mimicked the factory floor (p. 16) and was too focused on time-based learning, curriculum, and assessment all to the detriment of meaningful, demonstrable skills and knowledge. An outcomes-based approach, Spady argued, ensured a macro view of learning where errors are seen as developmental and doing well is directly reflected in what students can do or know at the end of a learning experience (p. 18).

Explaining Accreditation

Across both tertiary domains (by which I mean higher education and vocational or further education), degrees, diplomas and certificates are still the dominant mechanism through which providers certify that their graduates have indeed learnt and have reached a certain standard within a particular field of study. A lot has changed in how we manage this process and contemporary models of accreditation have developed at pace and amidst much discussion from educationalists at to the benefits and pitfalls of these changes. But what does 'accreditation' actually mean? According to Lee Harvey, 'accreditation' means 'the establishment or restatement of the status, legitimacy or appropriateness of an institution, programme (i.e., composite of modules) or module of study' (Harvey, 2004: 208). Today's benchmarks typically focus on three core areas: maintaining standards, creating systems of accountability, and committing to continuous improvements, each of which are promised through increasingly complex systems of what is typically known as *Quality Assurance*.

In terms of policy developments, most European models of QA emerged on foot of *The Bologna Declaration* which was signed by 29 countries in 1999 and which set out to create one coherent framework for education to compare, standardize and measure learning through one unified credit transfer system. Three years after Bologna, *The Declaration of the European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training,*

and the European Commission, or The Copenhagen Declaration (European Commission, 2002), promised similar convergence measures for vocational education.

Signing up to Bologna meant signatories were largely choosing to ignore the obvious tensions of creating one system across diverse contexts, traditions, and languages. It also meant that, suddenly, government ministers and their teams of civil servants and not educators, were now responsible for the landscape of education. Specifically, policymakers, who did often consult with education providers, set about developing national frameworks of education that were mapped to one singular European Credit Transfer System (Joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education, 1999: 3) or ECTS for short. The principles that underpinned ECTS were access, transparency, and competitiveness. The underlying motivation was laid bare a little later in a 2004 communiqué as 'to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' (European Commission, 2001: 3).

Taking Ireland as a case study, it introduced its own National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in 2003. The NFQ is hierarchical, with learning measured vertically from levels 1–10 with 1–6 typically considered the domain of vocational (or further education), and levels 7–10 broadly the domain of universities. Behind these 10 levels, there is what's called a Grid of Indicators that sub-divides learning across the categories of 'knowledge', 'skills', and 'competencies' (KSC). Learning outcomes are the mechanism through which these KSCs are assessed. As a person moves up the framework, the outcomes they must demonstrate become more complex. This is the logic that guided the external examiner I talked about at the beginning of the chapter when she wanted me to apply a more simplistic measurement than 'analysing' at the lower levels of the framework.

These same education frameworks also center employability as the over-arching desired learning outcome, not covertly but overtly. To illustrate, Ireland's NFQ is explicit about its promise to 'learners' that they will benefit from a more coherent career progression 'thereby avoiding education and training cul-de-sacs'. It also promises employers an easier way to measure the standard of potential employees, so they could identify 'the most appropriate fit' for the position they are seeking to fill (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2003: 6–7).

By 2005, the role of Quality Assurance, or QA in upholding this system was becoming clear. Education ministers in Ireland and indeed all other signatories of the Bologna agreement were by now bound by the first *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG). This document outlined the QA requirements each nation would have to uphold to ensure standards were effectively monitored and that these standards would at the same time promote student and graduate mobility and employability across Europe.

These standards (updated in 2015) rely on four core principles of QA: to assure sufficient quality in the programs they provide; that QA should respond to the diversity of systems, institutions, programs, and students; that QA should support the development of a quality culture; and that QA should take into account the needs and expectations of students and all other stakeholders and society (European Higher Education Area, 2015: 6). Across Europe, QA frameworks promised all education would be fit for purpose, trustworthy, concerned with the common good, accountable, open, and transparent and aligned with industry expectations. In practice, QA introduced a tiered system of accreditation where a person's work is now often assessed across three tiers (1) their teacher/tutor, (2) another educator who internally verifies grading has been fair and consistent, (3) and an external authenticator who assesses the appropriateness of assessment in totality and the rigor of grading overall (Coss, 2024: 42). Only then can a certificate, diploma or degree be awarded.

Not all community education is accredited. Indeed, the snapshot of practice across 51 different locations that I gleaned in preparing for this book uncovered how one-third of the practitioners I engaged with never accredit their programs and just seven providers always do. In Ireland, community educators had to fight for the right to offer accredited programs arguing that the locally based learning that was happening outside of the traditional education system deserved formal recognition. The research report *Can you Credit it*, published in 1994, gave three reasons why 79% of graduates and 74% of providers wanted formal recognition, namely that adults from underserved communities had the right to secure credits once they could display the required competency; that accrediting their work would improve their employment prospects including in community development; and that accrediting community-based learning created a pathway to professionalization (Kelly, 1994: 64, 74).

The Trouble with Accreditation

In some respects, the timing was bad as these bottom-up demands to have community-based education formally recognized coincided with the Bologna process and the sharp, neoliberal-friendly rise in policy interest that I described in chapter 4. Since then, the educational psychologist and policy expert Stephanie Allias had detailed how qualifications frameworks and learning-outcomes approaches have been 'spreading around the world like wildfire into well over 100 countries' even though, 'similar problems would manifest themselves' (Allias, 2014: vxii).

These problems begin at policy level. There has been significant criticism of the Bologna process which, as Sarah Croché (2009) puts it, is mostly a political project that has redefined how education is governed in Europe under the guise of collaboration and shared progress but where it mostly narrows the focus of education to commercialized models that actively uphold employability-related mobility. Lee Harvey agrees and describes the accreditation route in totally as 'highly political and is fundamentally about a shift of power, but a shift concealed behind a new public management ideology cloaked in consumerist demand and European conformity' (Harvey, 2004: 207).

A second issue is the extent to which the language associated with these increasingly bureaucratic systems of accreditation is highly contested. I'm talking about the terms 'best practice', 'fit for purpose', and even the notion of standards. Dealing with the latter first, the typical criteria that is used to set standards almost always reflect the values and expectations of the status quo. When standards become standardization, this enforces uniform approaches and uniform solutions, limits innovation, critical thinking, creativity, and diversity, and undermines collective problem-solving in favor of the efficiency standards typical within neoliberalism.

Much the same observations can be made regarding who gets to decide what practice is best and whose purpose education should be fit for. By way of example, if one were to ask the Trump administration about the purpose of education, they would likely point to an executive order signed in January 2025 that describes its role as to enforce 'patriotic education' and to eliminate funding for the advancement of trans rights.[2] Contrast

[2] The order is called Ending Indoctrination in K-12 schooling and can be read in full at this link: https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-radical-indoctrination-in-k-12-schooling/. Accessed 16 March, 2025.

this with the opinion of the US trade union, the National Education Association, who determine the purpose of education is to create environments where everyone 'deserves a safe, welcoming, affirming learning environment' including people of all genders, people with different abilities and where racial justice is a core pillar.[3] Given the variances across these two approaches, it seems reasonable to assert that any attempt to agree on one singular purpose of education, and indeed to define how agreed quality benchmarks might evaluate this, is largely ineffective.

Concerning quality, there are tensions between how educators conceive of a good quality educational experience and how neoliberal-friendly QA systems conceive of the very same thing. For educators, there can be high levels of mistrust in approved QA frameworks that often appear more concerned with measurability and accountability than the transformative, and often disorienting impact a program of study can create. One Australian study found that educator mistrust in top-down structures of QA were so pronounced, the author concluded that the best way to ensure quality was to resist formal quality assurance measures at all costs (Anderson, 2006: 171).

Criticizing Quality Assurance policies should not be equated with disregarding quality, in fact, community education's rootedness in Freirean consciousness-raising education, emphasis on practitioner self-reflection, and long-established practice of bottom-up quality assurance frameworks in support of democratic, participatory practice (e.g., AONTAS, 2009) help document a long-standing tradition of collaborative evaluation between educators and participants/learners.

As well as a narrower policy focus, the slippery nature of the language of accreditation and the dissonance in Quality Assurance outlined above, a fourth concern relates to the awkwardness of numeric measurements in capturing learning in the first place and the assumptions this practice upholds. To illustrate, at level 4 of Ireland's NFQ, educators are expected to measure a student's 'competence insight' which is defined as confirming they can 'assume partial responsibility for consistency of self-understanding and behaviour'. At level 7, the 'competence insight' to be assessed is defined as ensuring that a graduate can now 'express an internalized, personal world view, manifesting solidarity with others' (Quality & Qualifications Ireland, 2021). I, for one, find it impossible to

[3] See the website https://www.nea.org/professional-excellence/just-and-equitable-schools/core-values for further information. Accessed 24 March 2025.

apply objectivity to such obviously subjective concepts and see the task as one that privileges western values of objectivity and quantification in a way that largely disregards holistic, relational, and collective ways of knowing. These factors lead me to agree with the assertions of Susan Orr when she claims that the business of assessing learning is better understood as 'a messy practice where multiple subjectivities and contingencies affect the ways that judgements are made about students' work' (Orr, 2007: 647).

Arguably, the aspect of contemporary systems that get the most attention is the approach that is typically taken to learning outcomes. Unlike William Spady's critically oriented and student-centered outcome-based approach, today's model now narrowly views learning outcomes as pre-defined statements of what a person is expected to know, do, or demonstrate because of a learning experience. In practice, pre-determined learning outcomes help commodify education transforming it into sellable units that, according to Trevor Hussey and Patrick Smith have become 'a vital component of the new managerial regime' where learning outcomes 'have been misappropriated for managerial purposes and that this misuse has led to their distortion to the point that they are presently ill-conceived and incapable of doing what is claimed for them' (Hussey and Smith, 2002: 221).

In practice, learning outcomes have lost their potential to support the complex, over-lapping and ever-evolving concepts of knowledge, skills and competencies (KSCs) because they have been instrumentalized into a checklist of pre-determined statements of intent that are written by people who have no connection with the individuals and communities who sign up for the courses these are applied to. This approach has many disadvantages including pushing educators towards a depository approach where the division of what is to be learned into discrete pre-defined units privileges the dominant canonical knowledge that I talked about earlier on. In other words, prescribed learning outcomes stifle self-determination and limit the potential to co-create curricula. And because there is a disproportionate focus on the end product with no room to acknowledge unanticipated and delayed learning outcomes, it is no wonder that many educators find themselves practicing assessment driven teaching.

When education happens in a way that is geared towards testing outcomes, be this through an exam, an essay or group project, the more likely model is a 'retrospective', backward-looking, quantitative model of assessment instead of a 'prospective' bottom-up model that is more forward-looking, holistic, qualitative and reflective (Biggs, 2001: 21–22).

Meanwhile, the emotional dimensions of having one's learning assessed by someone else (Fitzsimons & Dorman, 2013: 52) often get lost amidst an ever-growing mountain of box ticking and form filling that accompanies internal and external verification processes. It is little wonder that, for many educators, writing learning outcomes and using these as a benchmark for assessment has mostly become a bureaucratic task that people take on because they are told to work in this way, and not because they necessarily think it's a good idea.

A further impact on adult and community education is that, although many educators initially rejected instrumentalism, many now normalize accreditation on the basis that the labyrinth of rules, regulations, checks, and balances that have been introduced are neutral and necessary. This has contributed to a culture of peer observation, or surveillance where QA serves as a tool that normalizes high levels of control within institutional structures. Another manifestation of this hegemonic acceptance manifests through an exaggerated process of self-regulation where educators and the institutions they work for have themselves created systems of bureaucracy that are above what many QA policies demands. This has contributed to a culture of continuous improvement where people expend much energy chasing unobtainable objectives in the service of an external monitoring process that is stressful, disempowering and that leaves educators feeling controlled (Seema et al., 2016: 121). Things can always be better, we are led to believe, and the people who are best positioned to determine how to improve our practice are distant from where educators work and where individuals and communities learn.

Imagining Alternatives

It is hard to deny the assertion that whoever controls the curriculum ultimately controls whose version of events matters (Giroux, in Freire & Macedo, 1987: 18–19; Shor & Freire, 1987; 75–6) and I have been struck by the extent to which many people working in adult and community education have resigned themselves to today's highly regulatory environment.

It can be hard to know how to begin to challenge this status quo. One starting point is to simply question the things that are now considered normal and inevitable. When I teach other educators about accreditation, I often begin by reminding them that national qualifications frameworks they work to and the rigid surveillance structures that uphold them are

socially constructed, or to put it in another way, they are made up. Few, if any of the people in these groups have ever thought deeply about the presumptions that they have internalized including a sometimes deeply held belief that formal accreditation is both objective and necessary. Most people have never thought about the policy decisions and political priorities behind the often-oppressive structures they work within.

Once we begin to ask questions about the structures of accreditation, we are more likely to interrogate how we interpret curricula, something Paulo Freire agrees can be controlling, inflexible, anti-dialogic, and more conducive to banking approaches to education (Shor & Freire 1987: 75–6). I agree with Brid Connolly when she outlines how curricula should be 'flexible enough to change radically when you are actually working with the learning group' because 'the learners and others involved may identify a topic or subject area, but once in the programme, you discover that the learning needs are very different' (Connolly, 2008: 110).

Perhaps the best-known scholar to imagine alternatives is Stephanie Allias. In her book, *Selling Out Education* (Allias, 2014), she stresses the importance of not treating education providers as businesses and not forcing them to function within market-driven quality assurance frameworks but preserving their role as spaces that are mostly concerned with cultivating knowledge, critical thinking and creativity. This cannot be retained, Allias argues, if we insist on fragmenting knowledge into isolated units. Instead, she proposes curricula that are broad enough to ensure a critique of societal norms, including norms about the false dichotomy of teaching and learning. Of course, this is only possible if there is a substantial increase in public funding that can reduce or eliminate altogether any reliance on the private market whilst also ensuring decent terms and conditions of employment for educators (Allias, 2014: 253). Allias also calls for collective action across trade unions and professional bodies that oppose individualistic, consumer-driven models that encroach on how learning is organized in favor of an education system with much more expansive goals (Allias, 2014: 253–7).

It is important to remember that not everyone engaging in community education is seeking formal recognition for their efforts. As this practitioner puts it,

> Some people come to community education because they are not accredited, and they prefer not to be forced to do an accredited course which is

> sometimes the case today. Some students may not be interested in education to upskill but rather to make friends, socialise, keep the brain active and I feel that unaccredited courses are perfect for this.

The participants in this study evidence how much community education still manages to honor this commitment to non-accredited learning. Non-accredited learning is not inferior or in any way more basic, as it is sometimes framed, it is simply a different, often more accessible, and a less arduous pathway to learning. Creating and celebrating non-accredited spaces can result in learning environments that are more inclusive, more flexible, and more collective where groups can engage on their own terms in response to real-world issues affecting their communities without the bureaucracy of formal assessment and institutional gatekeeping.

But we know that this too is under threat as research has indicated significant challenges in maintaining non-accredited courses due to a lack of sustainable funding (Cobain et al., 2023: 47–48). Again, my own research finds much the same thing with one publicly employed community educator explaining 'there is considerable pressure from my employing agency to achieve accreditation, this is not always what the learner signed up to do and it takes autonomy away from the individual'.

Where we do work within the confines of accreditation, it is important that we think beyond the formal or prescribed curriculum and take a broad view that honors unintended learning outcomes and attends to the journey as well as the destination. We must also pay attention to the extent to which our own fixed ideas about quality assurance structures can limit the possibilities many systems do allow, but that we have grown accustomed to excluding ourselves. From my own practice, the experience with an external examiner I shared at the beginning of this chapter has been greatly outweighed by the opposite experience where innovation and creativity has been praised and encouraged. And where constraints are felt from within our own institutions, it is our responsibility to ask critical questions about the systems we are creating, many of which are losing sight of the holistic and collective benefits of education.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that accreditation can be beneficial for community education. Recognizable qualifications can build confidence, improve job prospects, and open pathways to higher education. Certifying learning

can also encourage people to sign up for courses in the first place and can improve people's literacy, numeracy, critical thinking and much more. Quality Assurance systems can also help educators by ensuring robust processes of evaluation are in place and help continue the long-standing practice of peer-evaluation where fresh eyes and a less entrenched perspective helps us do our job better.

But, I hope I have demonstrated that accreditation can be problematic when enacted through a neoliberal agenda that first seeks to commodify education, then sell it to those who can afford it. This particularly jars with community education's ambitions across all models of community education: universal, second-chance, and radical. Each of these models takes a more holistic, person-centered approach. It is only by re-evaluating our relationship with accreditation that we can even begin to advocate for a more holistic model of education and a system that, at least in some spaces, can challenge the status quo. Community education that embodies critical pedagogy and praxis is part of this challenge–an idea I will return to in the next and final chapter.

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CHAPTER 7

Re-kindling Community Education in Neoliberal Times

This final chapter draws from real-world examples to offer practical approaches to community education where the aim is to politicize and liberate through collective acts of resistance and transformation. Beforehand, I want to explicitly state my contention that, as Paulo Freire determined when discussing education more broadly, there are two different approaches to community education. First, there is an approach that is pro-neoliberal and therefore domesticating. This might not always be intentional or obvious. For example, the people who organize a financial literacy course in a low-income neighborhood might mean well, but if their course only focuses on budgeting and self-discipline without drawing any attention to wage inequality, these educators are framing poverty as an individual failing and not as something that is caused by structural oppression.

The second approach to community education, and the one that I favor, is where it is oppositional, overtly political, and potentially liberatory. Again, this might not be immediately obvious, especially to outsiders. Take for example a cookery course that sees part of its role as to expose the negative environmental and social impacts of the global food trade. Its organizers are not only tuned into how the mass importation of avocados from Central America to Europe and North America has caused deforestation, water and labor exploitation (Sommaruga & Eldridge, 2021) but they educate others about this too. This doesn't just mean encouraging people not to buy avocados, it means using critical

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dialogue to raise awareness of collective actions that seek to pressure the global food industry more broadly.

The central difference between the financial literacy course and the politicizing cookery course is philosophical. The former is probably influenced by a humanistic approach that might help people to manage their day-to-day struggles, but which ultimately seeks to make people feel better within their own exploitation instead of motivating them to challenge or resist it. The latter, which could even be an accredited course, is clear about the structural causes of inequality and about the role of education in exposing and acting on this.

I have argued that adopting this radical approach works best when its underlying philosophy is the critical, feminist pedagogy that I outlined in detail in Chapter 3. By way of recap, at the heart of this philosophy is the assertion that we live in a world that is egregiously unequal. I have drawn from several statistical sources to back up this claim including *The World Inequality Report* 2022 (Chancel et al., 2022) and work by the charity Oxfam (2021, 2024). Statistics are important, but on their own, they can shield us from the stories behind such devastating phenomena as globalization, climate change, imperialist war, gender-based inequality, and poverty—occurrences which are not mutually exclusive and which are all aspects of a neoliberal capitalist system that prioritizes greed over need.

Think for just one minute, about the impacts on Gaza's vulnerable civilian population when Israel blocks and restricts access to food, water, medicine, and essential supplies, as they regularly do, despite this being a clear violation of international law. Or about the virtual absence of an appropriate international response to the climate-related flooding in Pakistan in 2022 which caused thousands to die, and which continues to wreak havoc on the lives of over 30 million people (Ali et al., 2023). Think about the 100 plus people who drown in the Mediterranean each month because they are knowingly denied the right to regular, safe pathways.[1] And what of all the negative consequences of the neoliberal-led privatization of housing and healthcare where it has become normal for families to live for long periods in tents and housing hubs, and unremarkable when people are forced to crowdfund for cancer care.

[1] This figure is according to the International Organisation for Migration and can be found at https://www.iom.int/news/iom-chief-nearly-100-disappeared-or-dead-mediterranean-2024-underscoring-need-regular-pathways.

The statistics I rely on don't just quantify poverty and exclusion, they reveal how a person's proximity to power determines their capacity to amass much more money than they will ever need. Privatized housing and healthcare, unjust international trading rules, imperialist incursions, and environmental degradation each create a financial boon for elites including property speculators, healthcare insurance companies, the fossil fuel industry, and the multinational corporations that cause high levels of environmental harm. Where this wealth inequality was once passively accepted, more and more people are becoming alert to just how unjust a situation this is. There are signs that the global mood is shifting. When the 26-year-old US citizen Luigi Mangione fatally shot Brian Thompson, the CEO of United Healthcare in 2024, many people felt sympathy for Mangione because he tapped into widespread frustration about the American health insurance system. The hashtag #FreeLuigi wasn't about approving of the violence he perpetrated, it was an emotional response to growing insurance costs and denials of legitimate claims for healthcare both of which undoubtedly cause the deaths of many thousands, if not millions of people. Perhaps less contentious, many people found themselves rooting for the thieves who, in 2025, stole millions of euro worth of jewels from The Louvre, jewels that one could argue were themselves stolen from their countries of origin by colonizers.

This book has detailed how this global inequality hasn't happened by accident and is not the result of individual shortcomings within those affected, even though we are conditioned to think this way. Instead, neoliberal friendly governments have exacerbated global crises not because of incompetence or disinterest, but because they choose to align themselves with profit-making private interests including healthcare insurance firms. Politicians could make different choices. They could introduce meaningful wealth taxes that could go some way in leveling the playing field. Instead, they have allowed unelected oligarchs to position themselves at the highest level of politics, where they exert influence through money and their control of key institutions, especially media outlets and online social media platforms. The philosopher Olúf ́ẹmi O. Táíwò calls what we are witnessing part of an 'elite capture' where an advantaged few have been empowered to steer resources and institutions that could serve the majority toward their own narrow interests (Táíwò, 2022: 23).

Many people wonder how and why this model persists and it can be difficult to understand the resilience of centrist politics and disheartening

to see progressive, justice-oriented social movements struggle to grow. One reason why this is the case is because egalitarian ideas are repeatedly undermined by neoliberal power systems, including through co-option, as has been the case with much grassroots community education.

There is no doubt that our relationships with the institutions of power are complex. The critical theorist Louis Althusser uses the concept of 'interpellation' to help us understand why so many of us absorb the status quo. This, he determines, is a process through which each of us unconsciously ingest the set of assumptions that are held by the social institutions of the family, education, religion and legal systems that principally surround us. Our relationships with these structures are complicated and tensions and contradictions often emerge as we move through the world and engage with other perspectives and contexts. However, Althusser believes that the strength of our original upbringing is profound as, from the moment we are born, and throughout our lives, we are 'hailed' by the social institutions that recognize us as the same (Althusser, 1971). Putting it another way, it is the dominant hierarchies of class and also other intersecting structural oppressions that protect those with privilege as they unconsciously self-identify in a way that construes their way of being as neutral and natural, and at the same time views alternative ways of being in a negative light.

Whilst Althusser demonstrates the invisible forces within which individuals are hailed by social constructed apparatuses, hegemony emphasizes how dominant ideologies continue to manufacture consent through social and cultural norms. This helps explains why people rarely question individualism, 'a learned ideology—a worldview that regards each person as disconnected from the collective and acting in an atomistic, self-propelled way in the pursuit of private self-interest' (Brookfield & Holst, 2011: 119). As a result, most people accept the hegemony of meritocracy meaning that we are each responsible for our successes or failures and that if we work hard enough, our efforts will be rewarded.

The Depoliticization of Community Education

The history of much community education is that when people seek to raise collective consciousness towards an anti-neoliberal point of view, this has often resulted in governments, along with their corporate and media partners, actively suppressing their capacity to operate by absorbing their work into the structures of the state making it hard to sustain a collective,

coherent vision for change. Where independent community education providers have been neutered or closed, they have sometimes been replaced by public programs where staff may value an equality-focused ethos but where their capacity to influence change is limited because of ongoing employment precarity. Little wonder many community educators can feel disillusioned and sometimes even burnt out.

Some of the 51 practitioners I spoke to express this sense of disillusionment. One practitioner, with over ten years' experience told me, 'It seems to be that it is almost impossible for community education providers to continue to survive. The erosion of any specific piece of funding is having a hugely detrimental effect'. This is not an isolated voice as others also shared thoughts on how 'many community groups have been lost' because of austerity politics and, from someone else, how 'endless pressures from governance and compliance' are destroying any chance that state-funded community education can be anything other than a domesticating model. Regrettably, another strong theme to emerge from this small-scale study is the extent to which mainstream community education's rootedness in social justice movements appeared almost completely lost. A surprising number of practitioners were strongly of the opinion that, putting it bluntly, there is no room for politics in community education. This is despite their work often being at the forefront of managing the symptoms of inequality with marginalized and underrepresented groups.

All education is political whether this is overtly communicated or not and even when this is not something the educator is aware of. As captured in the foreword to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,

> Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes 'the practice of freedom' the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (in Freire, 1972: 13–14)

Claiming to be neutral and apolitical may sound like an admirable ambition, but it is the same individualist philosophy that upholds inequality.

I believe that, together, we can retain and grow the politicizing agenda that is urgently needed at a time of such gross inequality and when authoritarianism is undermining the public sphere. Being against capitalism isn't

nearly as controversial as it used to be. And as my earlier example of a cookery course sought to illustrate, we can teach critical thinking in all sorts of ways. Unless we at least try to become agents for change, we resign ourselves to the fact that community education will at best create individualized opportunities for some people in a largely unchallenged world, at worst, unquestionably service the labor market by funneling certain people into low-paid precarious work. I agree with Henry Giroux when he writes 'the role of educators as public intellectuals has never been more important, especially at a time when they are under attack across the globe by far-right radicals, intent on turning them into agents of indoctrination, bigotry, and propaganda' (Giroux, 2024: 1553). Collectively, we must labor to create a critical counterweight that prevents radical histories from being lost and that teaches people how to think critically and from a place of love.

Radical Community Education—A Four Point Plan

Sometimes, one of the central challenges in seeking to work as a radical community educator is knowing where to start, indeed the scale of the task can be so overwhelming, it is often easier to do nothing at all and to instead succumb to feelings of hopelessness. However, as Paulo Freire writes, hopelessness paralyzes us, immobilizes us. We succumb to fatalism, and then it becomes impossible to muster the strength we absolutely need for a fierce struggle that will re-create the world' (1992: 2). This is the perspective from which Freire encourages optimism and from which he challenges us to cultivate hope through activism. bell hooks shares this conviction determining 'hope emerges from those places of struggle where I witness individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them' (hooks, 2003: xiv).

One set of ideas that I find useful in overcoming hopelessness comes from the feminist, activist and cultural critic Sara Ahmed who uses the metaphor of *bricks* to symbolize ideas and actions that might seem insignificant in isolation, but that can collectively build resistance (Ahmed, 2017: 242). In *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook* (2023) Ahmed proposes a set of strategies that can move us in the right direction including constantly questioning the way things are, asserting people's right to occupy spaces they are typically excluded from, and, for those of us who hold privilege, laboring to ensure we don't assert a dominant presence.

The symbolism of bricks and the strategies Ahmed suggests above can also be applied to community education. A brick might be teaching healthcare in a way that includes the social determinants of health, inequalities in access, and the denial of reproductive healthcare. A brick might also be sharing your own work-based precarity with the attendees of an employability program and contextualizing both phenomenon in the wider push for a low-paid, flexible workforce. Ultimately, Ahmed believes we are stronger when we work collectively, an a key characteristic of brick-building in a community education context will always be creating conditions that uncover common patterns of oppression that connect individual experiences to wider systems of exploitation.

Apply Theory to Our Work

But what are the foundations that help support the wall of resistance that is needed and how do we ensure it is strong enough to even begin to challenge existing relations of power. One starting point is a solid theoretical grounding. This must be more than familiarizing oneself with the critical feminist pedagogy I support in Chapter 3, it means practicing these ideas in environments that are characterized by deep levels of respect and where the right for people to self-determine is sacrosanct.

Sometimes I see adult and community educators who are familiar with consciousness-raising theories of dialogic learning adopting a superior or dismissive stance when appraising the work of other educators who might not yet be familiar with the ideas that underpin this approach. Instead, humility and openness are what is needed if we are to build the sort of trust that is needed for true dialogue and meaningful praxis, that cyclical unity of action and reflection that I also talked about in Chapter 3. As Freire writes, 'True reflection leads to action, but that action will only be a genuine praxis if there is critical reflection on its consequences. To achieve this praxis, it is necessary to trust in the oppressed and their ability to reason' (Freire, 1972: 41).

Without theory, many educators understandably replicate the methodologies that dominate in traditional education, and it should be acknowledged that many adults enjoy aspects of banking approaches to education. But politically sounding traditional education tends to replace dialogue with debate, and underestimates the potential of discussion groups, reflective exercises, or critical arts-based methods in lateralizing power dimensions within adult learning groups. As a result, the dominant

cultural norms and social relations including the sexism, racism, ableism and classism that exist outside of a group equally play out inside of an adult learning group (Heron, 1999: 54). There can also be situations where courses claim critical pedagogy as their anchor but sanitize the more revolutionary and activist aspects of this theory. One community educator I spoke to puts it like this,

> It is almost like Freire has been put through a strainer, and what has been left is that the radicalism and the connection between education and society is gone... We have watered it down to a large extent. We have maybe kept some aspects of the methodology, you know, 'the methodology is ok', the active learning, the group-work, the discussion, the notion of teacher as the learner as well, all of that stuff, but what we have gotten rid of, is the radicalism and the notion of education as a form of social transformation.[2]

Reclaiming its emancipatory potential involves working critically, collectively, in a way that is relevant to people's lives but also in a way that shouldn't sideline activism. As bell hooks (1992: 146) explains,

> One of the concepts in Freire's work and in my own work that is frequently misunderstood by readers […] [is] many times people will say to me that I seem to be suggesting that it is enough for individuals to change how they think. […] Again and again Freire has had to remind readers that he never spoke of conscientization as an end itself but always as it is joined by meaningful praxis […] praxis is not blind action, deprived of intention or of finality. It is action and reflection.

Given the significant challenges in actualizing these ideas, it can help to draw from some real-world examples and to infuse this with some practical strategies that can guide our work. The first real-world example I will briefly introduce is a feminist performance protest led by the interdisciplinary arts collective Las Tesis (est. 2018) that demystified theory and showed how praxis can direct opposition towards the structures of the neoliberal-patriarchal state. Las Tesis was formed in Chile by four young artists–Sibila Sotomayor, Lea Cáceres, Daffne Valdés, and Paula Cometa. This collective may not explicitly call themselves a community education group, but their work undeniably involves consciousness-raising and collective learning at a community level.

[2] This quote it taken from the study that underpins the first edition of this book.

It all began when these performers called for people to join them in the artivist performance 'Un violador en tu camino' which translates as 'A rapist in your path',[3] which was first performed in Chile in 2019 when La Tesis used both virtual platforms and in-person workshops with feminist groups to build the movement. Its founders have described the pedagogy that underpins their work as one that 'goes beyond the idea of the classroom' and embodies critical thought as part of a fight-back against the failures of formal education to recognize different 'styles of thinking that don't necessarily follow the norms of what is classified as "theory"' (Draper et al., 2024: 120). The street theater Las Tesis have created, and which has been repeated across the world, calls on people to join forces in collective public spaces to call out rape culture and indite the state and wider society for the ongoing oppression of women. As Débora de Fina Gonzalez writes:

> In a clear synergy between feminist theory, art, and activism, the performance offers the possibility of critique and denunciation in women's own voices, based on their shared experiences. Through the performance, the broader outraged chorus of the Chilean social revolt also becomes feminist. (de Fina Gonzalez, 2021: 549)

The work of Las Tesis enabled women and gender non-conforming people to reclaim public squares and institutional settings they had been historically excluded from (Pinzauti, 2023) and strengthened the fight against gender-based violence both interpersonal and structural.

Meet People Where They Are at; But Make Sure not to Leave Them There

Las Tesis' performance is an example of high-profile global activism. More often, community education is low-key, and through everyday workshops and short courses. A practical strategy that is often evoked, both historically and within this book, is the idea of meeting people where they are at. This expression usually refers to the importance of beginning all our

[3] Translated to English as "Patriarchy is a judge. That judges us for being born. And our punishment. It's the violence you don't see. Patriarchy is a judge. That judges us for being born. And our punishment. It's the violence you already see. It's femicide. Impunity for my murderer. It is the disappearance. It's rape. And it wasn't my fault, neither where I was nor how I was dressed (×4). The rapist was you. The rapist is you."

interactions by listening to, honoring and respecting the circumstances of a person's life without judging them for where you might think they should or could be. To illustrate, a person who is homeless and living on the street should be greeted with what Carl Rogers calls 'unconditional positive regard' (Rogers, 1992: 827) and their truth should be recognized. But our job is not to shield them from political conversations that explain the social determinants of their lived experience. Another way to word this is to borrow an expression often associated with feminism–that the personal is political. What this means is that it is our responsibility to name and validate oppression. This might not be the first thing we do when someone is in the middle of a homelessness crisis as their challenges are likely to be too immediate for that. But that doesn't stop us from locating their circumstances within the neoliberal housing policies that are to blame (Hearne, 2022).

Some strategies are important to interrogate including how marginalized voices, including the voices of homeless people, are not always amplified in a way that seeks to challenges structural inequality. Creating conditions for people to speak on their own terms about their own lives has been a guiding principle of much community education work is often infinitely better than another person speaking for you. The trouble arises when platforming stories of oppression becomes an end in itself. This creates what Olúf´ẹmi O. Táíwò calls a discourse of 'attentional injustice' that, although sometimes (but not always) a positive experience for those most affected, lacks political analyses and thus effectively takes the focus off those who create systemic inequality in the first place (Táíwò, 2022: 72). Think about how it is no longer unusual for homeless charities to organize football teams or singing choirs. These actions can bring joy to those involved and also much needed attention to the chronic injustice of housing inequality but unless there is a focus on its structural causes, these practices risk normalizing homelessness and portraying it as a failure within the person that individualized solutions can resolve. The alternative, Táíwò argues, is 'constructive politics' which doesn't exclude or silence people, but ensures our focus is on creating alternative systems and structures and not just including marginalized voices in an otherwise unchanged world.

Storytelling must remain a fundamental part of consciousness-raising community education because of its power to highlight the impact of oppressions. And when stories are connected to structural oppression, they can act as a catalyst for change. One way this was brought to life was

through the work of the Irish-based Abortion Rights Campaign (ARC). In the mid-2010s, ARC held regular 'Speak Outs' which were workshops for people to tell their own stories, break the taboo of not speaking about abortions and remove censorship. Importantly, these Speak Outs were also advertised in a way that called out politicians and others for their inaction and were held alongside values-clarification workshops, conversations about choice workshops, and banner and prop-making workshops leading up to ARC's annual March for Choice. All of these actions were part of a much broader collective campaign for reproductive rights that involved legal challenges, collective protest, and civil disobedience. Together, these actions culminated in a successful pro-abortion movement ensuring abortion on demand was legalized in Ireland in 2018.[4]

Create Brave Spaces as a Strategy for Change

It is easy to present seemingly perfect examples of politicizing practice like the work of Las Tesis and ARC when most of us know that the activism this involves is much messier in real life. It can be challenging and daunting to try to create the right conditions for dialogic learning especially at a time when hate speech and xenophobia are rising globally,[5] and when there is an alarming rise in transphobia (ILGA Europe, 2024). My experience is that racist, sexist, homophobic and transphobic views are being expressed more openly than before in some of the adult learning groups I work with. This makes the task of creating welcoming spaces where people who have been historically marginalized can express themselves, at times, almost impossible to create.

Recognizing and addressing problematic power dynamics in groups, especially the dominant weight of white-western ways of being and the presumption of cis-heteronormativity involves creating *brave spaces*. These are not the same as what were historically called *safe spaces*–a discourse that actually favors the capitalist-friendly status quo making them a mechanism for silencing certain voices (hooks, 2010: 87–88; Pawlowski, 2019). In writing about brave spaces, the academic Lucia Pawlowski

[4] This was via a national referendum which was required to remove a constitutional ban on abortion. Opinion polls had suggested for some time that the electorate wanted to legalize abortion but politicians were the only ones with the power to call a referendum.

[5] See https://press.un.org/en/2023/gashc4393.doc.htm. Accessed 18 March 2025.

draws from previous work by Arao and Clemens to outline just how safe space ideology does this (Pawlowski, 2019: 64). She singles out seemingly reasonable and certainly normalized practices like giving everyone the right to agree or disagree, affording the right to opt out of uncomfortable exchanges, not allowing personal verbal attacks and assuming people won't take things personally. These often taken-for-granted assumptions can seem reasonable. But Pawlowski demonstrates how they are wrapped up in a certain perspective of respect that, without authentic dialogue becomes a powerful and discriminatory cliché that detaches people from their material conditions and perpetuates rather than ameliorates social hierarchies.

Brave spaces are different. They invite and embrace controversy and difficulty, interrogate the reasons why people might prefer to opt out, acknowledge honestly, when challenges towards people are entirely justified, and ask people to own their intentions and impacts on others. Sometimes it is educators that resist brave spaces the most. As bell hooks puts it, 'it is often professors and not students who want to maintain the "safe" classroom because it is simply easier to demand that students cultivate an atmosphere of seamless harmony in the classroom and harder to teach them how to engage in meaningful critical dialogue' (hooks, 2010: 88).

The most frequent example I have come across of the limitations of a safe space mentality is when on more than one occasion, people who, like me, are white have objected to me naming white privilege. Although not always the case, my dominant experience has that objections mostly come from working class men who deny holding white privilege, and sometimes also male privilege, believing this doesn't apply to an already oppressed group. On one occasion, a Black woman candidly and angrily responded to a claim that racism was overstated and 'wasn't really that bad'. My commitment to holding a brave space, which I knew about because of theory, prevented me from stopping the woman sharing her truth as candidly as she did when she openly criticized this perspective. For my part, I didn't offer a right to reply, I simply validated her experiences by illuminating how different my life was to hers because of my own whiteness.

Work Collectively and at All Levels

Another way that I believe the ideas presented throughout this book can be brought to life is by working at all levels. By this I mean:

- At an individual level, where we advocate for, or seek to provide, individualized support for example through childcare, counseling, or legal supports.
- At community level, through the groups we lead and are part of.
- At institutional level, meaning within our own place of work or social movement as well as within other organizations be these trade unions, or established civil society or campaign groups.
- At political/systems level, meaning that we sometimes engage with government and policymakers in pushing for structural change.

Some radical writers are skeptical about this last point and are doubtful about how any change can come about through non-oppositional engagement with the structures of the state. Sarah Jaffe (2021: 104) argues that spending valuable time collaborating with the neoliberal state at best marginally mitigates the worst effects of neoliberal capitalism work, but in doing so, embeds the continuation and normalization of inequality. Equally, the philosopher and feminist Audre Lorde argues that any collaboration with state structures will never amount to structural change (Lorde, 1983: 99).

I agree that we must remain critical of alliances with the neoliberal state, especially given the history of co-option this book has laid bare. At the same time, it can be helpful to share some practical strategies for navigating everyday situations for people who are working in state-funded organizations. Mae Shaw and Jim Crowther (2014) provide some useful rules of engagement through their model of either *strategic participation* or *strategic non-participation*. The former, 'strategic participation', means choosing to engage with the institutions of the state (and beyond) when to do so expands the pool of those typically invited into decision-making and where there is some prospect of progressive change from the interaction. The work of Lynn Ruane, a former community worker now government Senator in the upper house of Irish parliament is one such example of this. When I interviewed Lynn for another project, she detailed her approach to politics which begins with maintaining strong relationships with grassroots community groups working across a range

of issues, including gender-based violence and anti-poverty work. Rather than spend time in parliament arguing against legislation she knows will be passed, Lynn regularly collaborates with these groups in reviewing the laws that pass through her hands with the express intention of reducing harm (see Fitzsimons, 2025: 46–7).

'Strategic non-participation' means consciously deciding not to give time to a particular task determining that a more effective approach is to disengage and use the time this gifts you to build grassroots, politicized spaces that are characterized by criticality and care. An example of strategic non-participation could be deciding not to spend time developing policies that you know are performative or skipping events that might be presented under the guise of equality but are not truly egalitarian. Some Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), initiatives fit this bill where they can claim a focus on inclusivity, but lack real attempts to implement the level of change that is needed. Many aspects of my own experience of EDI chime with Sara Ahmed's observation that these structures mostly do nothing at all to disrupt contemporary society's powerful under-belly of white, masculine signifiers noting they are instead 'a technique for rearranging things so organizations can appear in a better or happier way' and a way of 'rearranging a series that does not disrupt that series' (Ahmed, 2017: 98). One example I have seen is where a lot of energy was directed towards writing a report about a specific project, whilst the actual work that the report described was mostly left undone.

Final Thoughts—Community Education in a Challenging World

The day-to-day business of working with groups is challenging, especially when so many of us are weighed down with excessive bureaucracy of data collection and accreditation. One of the aims of this chapter, and indeed the book in totality, is to encourage readers to apply the strategies I have outlined above: (1) bring theory to your practice, (2) meet people where they are at but don't leave them there, (3) create brave spaces, and (4) work collectively and at many levels as we labor to create the conditions for a more just and equal society. Seeking to act on the world in this way can sometimes feel like you are making your life harder than it has to be (Ahmed, 2017: 235). But the alternative is for community educators to abandon the pursuit of equality completely through the guise of objectivity and neutrality. We might not always get it right, but

consciousness-raising education can empower people to explore their past and their present and can infuse hope about their potential future.

There are signs of hope. Grassroots climate action movements, most of which include critical education as part of their work, are forcing institutions to divest from the fossil fuel industry including through campaigns like Fossil Free Careers (discussed in Chapter 4). And although, as I write, the colonial Israeli project continues the occupation of Palestine, the civil society led Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement is gathering significant momentum. This would not have happened without some education behind it. Labor education is also contributing to workers' unionizing again and to a re-growth in industrial actions that demand fair wages and safer working conditions.

In conclusion, community education has a part to play in building alternatives to the world that we live in today. Many of you reading this book probably weren't part of the pervasive rise of neoliberalism, the defunding of much historical practice and the professionalization of adult and community education but are a new generation of community activists who have inherited these circumstances. It seems reasonable to conclude that, just as many radical aspects of this work began outside of government-funded spaces when I started out in the 1990s, it has now traveled back to social movements meaning its organizers have the freedom they need to do the job, but they are often not paid for their time. I imagine many of you have innovative and fresh ideas about how to rekindle community education, ensuring it continues to advance values of equality, justice, and environmental sustainability. I hope this book can act as a useful resource in advancing this very important work.

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I dedicate this to everyone involved in community education who shares my belief that it can be a locus for change. Another world is possible.

Camilla

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Index

C. Fitzsimons, *Community Education and Neoliberalism*,
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