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and Community Education

The Adult Learner 2026



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Adult Learning

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Charity Reg: 6719

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RCN 20013042

2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street, Ranelagh, Dublin 6 D06 E0H1

Ph: 01 4068220

Email: journal@aontas.com

Website: www.aontas.com

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Editorial Comment

BERNIE GRUMMELL, EDITOR

In a time of accelerating social, economic, and environmental pressures, the theme of the 2026 edition of *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner* on “power and participation” draws on the Freirean tradition that recognises that education is always a political act, examining how various contexts, relationships and engagements of learning are immersed in and shaped by complex power dynamics. Articles explore the relationship between power and participation in terms of personal learning processes, but also how they act collectively to strengthen communities and address oppression, by creating spaces for critical engagement, solidarity and learning across a range of areas including global citizenship education, community education and spiritualism, as well as how they are enacted in contemporary practice areas.

As an Editorial Board we were interested in what meaningful participation in adult and community education looks like for both learners and providers, and how adult and community education is tackling some of the complex power dynamics and social injustices facing us today, challenging propaganda and disinformation, and creating spaces for collective action, social transformation and a more inclusive society.

Responding to this theme, the journal has three sections. Section One features three articles which offer varied theoretical focus from adult education. Section Two contains six case studies that provide valuable opportunities to learn from practice. Section Three contains two book reviews and a policy review.

Section One

The first article in the 2026 edition of *The Adult Learner* journal is a critical reflective piece about the *Community Education Against Disinformation (CEAD) Project Workbook* initiative addressing online disinformation and socio-political polarisation in Irish adult and community education in the face of “the pulling force of polarisation”. Grounded in critical, transformative,

relational, and trauma-informed pedagogy, Meyler discusses key insights about developing politically sensitive education, highlighting the importance of adult education approaches for facilitating emotional reflexivity, safe and brave learning spaces, and values-based dialogue to foster critical engagement, cohesion, and collective agency in communities affected by disinformation.

The second article examines the impact of participation for a group of international postgraduate students in a Global Citizenship Education (GCE) programme in Ireland, the STAND Changemakers Academy, in the context of a global polycrisis. It documents how the experiences of participants during the Changemakers Academy shaped their understandings of GCE, their own sense of identity and potential agency for collective action. Oelschlegel and Jay offer valuable learning about the potential and the challenges of GCE pedagogy as brave spaces to build resilient learning communities who are capable of grappling with and growing through sensitive issues, tensions and conflicts.

The final article in this section, *Power, Participation and Spiritual Development* is an autoethnography using Freire's concepts of limit-situations, generative themes, praxis and conscientisation to explore one women's spiritual development in post-Catholic Ireland. Higgins thoughtfully reveals how questions of power and participation shape the author's journey from a deposited, male-dominated institution-centred faith towards more critically aware spiritual practice, offering key insights for critical consciousness-raising through spiritually-based dialogical approach to adult education that can nurture meaning and belonging and sustain personal and shared action for a more socially just world.

Section Two

The focus on power and participation is continued in six case studies in the Practice section, with the first paper, *Learning Across Borders: Power, Participation, and Lived Experience in Adult Education*, revealing the transformative potential of adult education for empowerment, identity reconstruction, and community participation. Oniah offers a powerful account of how lived experience functions as legitimate knowledge within adult and continuing education, narratively reflecting on the journey of a migrant woman navigating the asylum system, direct provision, and resettlement policies in Ireland.

I am still part of the world even though I am behind bars offers a review of Footbridge to the Pathway initiative, the first complete, in-person, higher

education degree programme directly for prisoners in Irish prisons. Sartori et al.'s paper reveals the importance of the adult education pedagogy of actively using group dynamics and multi-layered methodologies for recognition, democratic learning and transformative possibilities opened up by the initiative from the perspective of staff and participants on the programme.

The third paper emerges from a dialogue between two doctoral students about *Engaging Communities Through Creative-Based Practices* across a formal university context in Canada, and a non-formal community-based programme for migrants and refugees in Italy. Liberti and Gemma's findings reveal the potential of creative-based practices—art-based methods and podcasting, respectively—grounded in collaborative, participatory and relational approaches, to reconfigure educational spaces as vital sites of resistance, care, and transformation.

Collaborative Pathways into Higher Education by Downes explores ways for integrating the learner voice within a collaborative partnership between SETU–An Cosán and the AONTAS Adult Education Summit. Its dialogic based workshop distils key guiding principles—of communication, trust, learner voice, flexible design, resource sharing, collective action, and reflective practice—as core to the development of a whole-systems model for sustainable and inclusive learner-driven pathways to higher education.

Ancient Practice and Modern Participation illustrates the value of participatory peer-led approaches that connect learning and lived experience through the case study of the Winterage Festival facilitated by the Burrenbeo Trust in Clare. Watson et al. demonstrate how place-based, culturally significant, informal learning activities can strengthen engagement, support collective action, and sustain learning over time as a model for adult and community learning.

Strengthening Workforce Capacity for Early Numeracy Through Communities of Practices and Reflective Continuous Professional Development by Liu et al. explores a partnership between Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services, schools, and a third-level institution to support educators to embed numeracy more intentionally within everyday routines, providing valuable practice-based evidence for a call for sustained professional development for early numeracy in disadvantaged communities.

Section Three

Section Three comprises of two book reviews and a policy review. José Pedro Amorim reviews *Radical Educators in Grassroots Contexts*, a collection about radical educators edited by Mayssoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock. Chelsea Whittaker reviews *Understanding the Experiences of Adult Educators: Narrative Lessons for Professional Knowledge, Values and Practice*, a collection of narratives from adult education practitioners edited by Caitlin Fahy, Maria N. Gravani, Stephen O'Brien and George K. Zarifis. Nuala Glanton critically examines the third FET Strategy, *Creating Futures – Further Education and Training Strategy 2026-2030* through an Adult and Community Education lens.

I wish to thank all of our authors and reviewers for these important contributions to *The Adult Learner*.

My thanks also to members of our Editorial Board, for all their hard work and commitment throughout the year to bring this edition of the journal to life. I'd also like to acknowledge and sincerely thank Rosemary Moreland for her wonderful work and care-filled stewarding of the journal as editor for the last number of years.

The editorial staff and leadership of AONTAS have been a continuous guide for everyone involved in the journal, enacting a learning culture and adult education practice throughout all aspects of the production of the journal from which we thank them.

Editorial Board

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Giuliana (Peña) Mc Keown, AONTAS, Publications and Design Officer,
Co-Secretary

Contributors

JOSÉ PEDRO AMORIM is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto, Director of the Master's in Adult Education and Training, and researcher at the Centre for Educational Research and Intervention. He is a member of the board of the Paulo Freire Institute of Portugal and of the European Literacy Network Association, a founding member of Arco Maior Association (which runs a socio-educative project for youth “at risk”), a member of the Editorial Board of *The Adult Learner* (Ireland), and an advisor to the Portuguese Association for the Education and Training of Adults.

JOHN BALFE is a lecturer and researcher in the department of humanities at South East Technological University, teaching on programmes in social care, early childhood and child, youth and family. John has 14 years' experience working in the Irish Probation Service and prisons as a Senior Probation Officer and has research interest in restorative justice. John is a CORU registered Social Worker and Social Care Worker and holds a master's in social work, a master's in teaching and learning, and is currently in year four of his Doctorate in Social Science at University College Cork specialising on regulation of the social professions.

JOSEPHINE BLEACH was Director of the Early Learning Initiative (ELI), National College of Ireland from 2008 to 2026. Bleach holds a PhD in Education from Trinity College Dublin. Bleach began her career as a primary school teacher, before getting involved with national initiatives by the Department of Education and Skills, including Home School Community Liaison, Early Start Pre-School Intervention Programme, and School Development Planning Support Service. Bleach is a widely published academic with research focused on Community Action Research; parenting; early learning; literacy; numeracy; professional development; community development; and policy development and implementation.

JULIE BOOTH is Senior Coordinator of Community Services Programmes with the Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland. Julie holds a BA honours degree in Early Childhood Education and Care. Julie coordinates the design, delivery and evaluation of the early years, primary school, second level and after-school programmes, including STEM Family Learning, Educational Guidance and English as Additional Language (EAL) programmes. Julie supervises coordinators who deliver Community Services Supports in Dublin

Inner City and provides a high standard of support and guidance to foster meaningful impact to all who can engage with programmes at the Early Learning Initiative.

AISLING M BURKE is an Assistant Lecturer of the Department of Marketing, Enterprise, and Digital Communications at Technological University of the Shannon (TUS). The author's research interests and activities lie in tertiary and adult education, global business management, and cross-cultural communications.

EMMA CARROLL is an Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Business and Financial Services at Technological University of the Shannon (TUS). Emma was awarded her PhD in 2024, with her research focusing on attendees' perceptions of events during turbulent times. Her research interests include industry-based learning, assessment design, and student experience.

LÁNA CUMMINS is the Assistant Director of ELI (Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland) National Centre, with responsibility for expansion, research, advocacy, and development of ELI programmes across Ireland. Lána's research areas focus on prevention and early intervention, early childhood care and education, parent support, children's disability services, social class, inequality, and qualitative research methods. Lána is currently working towards a PhD with National College of Ireland and Maynooth University entitled Social Class Dynamics in Parents Experiences of Early Childhood Disability Services.

COLM DOWNES is a Project Manager in the Faculty of Education and Lifelong Learning, South East Technological University, bringing over 25 years of experience across adult, community, further, and higher education sectors. With a specific interest in access to higher education and social inclusion, his career has spanned roles in Dublin City University, Technological University Dublin, Maynooth University, and the Irish Universities Association, where he has contributed to a wide range of educational initiatives and policy development. Through innovative project management and strategic collaboration, his current work focuses on increasing participation in education for individuals and communities who are most distant from traditional learning pathways.

SARA GEMMA holds a degree in Literature and Modern Philology. Since October 2023, she is a social project manager and a PhD candidate in Italy in Teaching and Learning Sciences: Inclusion, Technologies, Educational Research and Evaluation. Her research interests, within experimental and intercultural pedagogy, focus on the analysis of educational pathways and

teaching methodologies, particularly in non-formal education, aimed at addressing issues such as educational poverty, marginalisation, and social exclusion among the most vulnerable groups.

NUALA GLANTON is an Adult Education Officer with Cork Education and Training Board managing, adult literacy, community education, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision in the North Cork area. Nuala has over 25 years of experience as an adult education practitioner and is a member of the Adult Education Officers' Association (AEOA) and the editorial board of *The Adult Learner* journal. She is also a PhD student at University College Cork's School of Education, completing doctoral research on the values of Further Education and Training in a neoliberal policy paradigm.

PATRICIA HIGGINS is an interfaith minister, spiritual accompanier and intercultural community worker based in North Donegal. Drawing on practitioner experience in interfaith ministry, Ignatian accompaniment, and community development, she accompanies adults navigating inherited beliefs and co-creating ceremonies rooted in their values. Her autoethnographic research explores spiritual literacy for pluralist adult education settings. She is a writer and speaker on faith and spirituality, having published articles on spiritual empowerment in Irish contexts, including contributions to Womancraft Publishing's most recent compendium on Women's Circles.

SARAH JAY holds a PhD in Social Psychology from the University of Limerick (UL) and was a recipient of Irish Research Council postgraduate funding. She has worked as international postdoctoral research fellow funded by the Irish Research Council and the Marie Curie CoFund CAROLINE scheme. She currently holds an Associate Professor post in the Department of Psychology at UL. Her research focusses broadly on social identity processes, well-being, education, empowerment, and social justice. She has expertise in both quantitative and qualitative methods, and her priority is applied real-world research, often among marginalised communities.

KEVIN (PSEUDONYM), Prisoner Portlaoise Prison – is a student of the education unit in Portlaoise Prison, part of Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board and has completed multiple modules on the Footbridge to the Pathway degree project with South East Technological University. He is chairman of the Red Cross Volunteers in Portlaoise Prison, and as part of this role spearheaded and coordinated a water survey initiative. Kevin has Community-Based Health and First Aid (CBHFA) training, and is committed to ensuring that groups such as travellers, foreign national prisoners, and

prisoners with disabilities are represented in prison community forums.

FEDERICA LIBERTI holds a Ph.D. from the University of Naples Parthenope, with a focus on Pedagogical and Psychological Sciences (Department of Medical, Motor, and Well-being Sciences). Her research interests include adult education, social representations of care practices, and spaces of mutual care. Her work integrates cross-cultural perspectives, feminist imaginaries, arts-based practices, and activism. She explores how vulnerability, identity, and relationships shape experiences of care and learning in contemporary society.

WEIYI LIU is a Researcher at Early Learning Initiative (ELI), National College of Ireland. In her role at ELI, Weiyi monitors and evaluates programmes delivered across Dublin's inner city and nationwide to support children and their families. Her work also involves quantitative and qualitative data analysis, integrating findings to inform programme development and practice. Weiyi holds a PhD from the Institute of Education at Dublin City University. Her research interests include early childhood education and development, with a particular focus on children's learning within family and community contexts, heritage language learning, and literacy development.

AISLING MEYLER is a research officer with AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation. Aisling supports the Head of Research in the delivery of all National FET Learner Forum events, developing reports, and delivering and analysing large-scale mixed-methods data. Aisling also supports new learner research initiatives, providing an evidence-base to support AONTAS' advocacy work. She leads the AONTAS Community Education Against Disinformation project. She has a background in the community and voluntary sector and is passionate about peer led initiatives. She loves martial arts and playing music.

LISA OELSCHLEGEL holds an MSc in Psychology of Global Mobility, Inclusion and Diversity in Society and an MA in Peace and Conflict Studies. Over the past decade, her work has combined research and practice across Europe and Latin America, collaborating with international and community-based organisations as well as public institutions in the areas of migration, violence prevention, and social inclusion. She currently works as an independent researcher and consultant alongside her role as national coordinator of the Alternatives to Violence Project Ireland, a volunteer-driven organisation delivering participatory workshops across Irish prisons.

DEBORAH ODEWORITSE ONIAH is a lawyer, researcher, writer, and speaker whose work bridges law, trauma studies, and lived experience. As a

migrant woman and single mother who journeyed through Ireland's Direct Provision system, she brings a powerful rights-based and survivor-informed lens to her scholarship and advocacy. Deborah's research explores access to justice, integration policy, domestic violence, and the structural dimensions of inequality. She is the author of *Beyond the Label*, a reflective work on migration, identity, and resilience. Through her writing, teaching, and community engagement, Deborah amplifies marginalised voices and champions dignity, participation, and transformative change.

BRIGINA O'RIORDAN is the Assistant Director of ELI's (Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland) Community Services Programmes in Dublin inner city. She holds a Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching and Learning from National College of Ireland and BA in Communications Studies from Dublin City University. Brigina's role in ELI is to oversee the development, implementation, and evaluation of ELI's programmes with early years services, afterschool, primary and second level schools in the local community. Her research interests include community action research, implementing literacy, numeracy, and STEM programmes in marginalised communities and parent support.

SARAH SARTORI manages pathways from further education into higher education for South East Technological University (SETU), chairs SETU's Sanctuary Committee, and is a board member of the Alternatives to Violence Project. She holds a PhD in Adult and Community Education and has been working with people with convictions since 2010, leading out on multiple arts-based research projects exploring and communicating the experiences of prisoners and former prisoners. Passionate about transformative education, she played a key role in the establishment of the Mountjoy Prison and Maynooth University Partnership and "The Footbridge Project" in Portlaoise Prison with SETU.

CATHY STEENSON is the Early Numeracy and STEM Coordinator in Early Learning Initiative (ELI), National College of Ireland. Prior to joining ELI Cathy worked in the early years sector for 30 years. Cathy holds a BA in Early Childhood Teaching and Learning and an MA in Child Family and Community Studies. Cathy's role in ELI involves working with early years services, afterschool programmes, primary schools and libraries throughout the local community implementing Early Numeracy and Literacy programmes. Cathy believes that developing an interest and a love of learning at an early age can advance your educational outcomes in later life.

ORLA WATSON is an Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Business and Financial Services, at Technological University of the Shannon (TUS).

CHELSEA WHITTAKER is an Assistant Professor in Further Education and Training and Inclusion within the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. She holds a deep commitment to social justice and community well-being and has a keen interest in research which examines issues of language, identity, multilingualism, language policy and practice, diversity and inclusion.

SECTION ONE

Perspectives on Community and Lifelong Learning

From Polarisation to Possibility: Reflections from the Development of the Community Education Against Disinformation (CEAD) Project Workbook

AISSLING MEYLER

Abstract

This reflective article examines the development and pilot delivery of the Community Education Against Disinformation (CEAD) workbook, an initiative of the community education sector that addresses online disinformation and socio-political polarisation in Irish adult and community education. Drawing on observations from practitioner consultations, workshops, learner feedback, and advisory and ethical review processes, the article is grounded in critical, transformative, relational, and trauma-informed pedagogy. It highlights emerging insights for designing and facilitating politically sensitive education, emphasising emotional reflexivity, safe and brave learning spaces, and values-based dialogue. The article demonstrates the potential capacity that adult and community education has to foster critical engagement, cohesion, and collective agency in communities most affected by disinformation.

Keywords: Disinformation Literacy, Socio-political Polarisation, Community Education, Transformative Learning, Emotional Reflexivity

Introduction

As I sat on the couch with a friend of mine I had not seen for quite some time, I listened to her, with growing anxiety, as she spoke with passionate rage mirroring the content on a YouTube video playing in the background on the TV in front of us. My friend had been through a lot in the previous few years, having been pushed out of a shared living space into homelessness while battling very serious mental and physical health issues. She was now in

permanent, secure, council housing and her health situation had improved. However, the challenges she had faced resulted in deepening isolation and spending a considerable amount of time alone, often watching online content to get her through her days. On the screen in front of us, a prominent, reactionary, online influencer was talking about what I knew to be a conspiracy theory that blamed a minoritised group for a particular social issue. There were several suggested videos of similar content listed beside the main video. This minoritised group, which were the subject of the video's conspiracy theory, happened to be representative of those housemates who had intimidated her, forcing her out of her previously shared accommodation. The content of my friend's argument triggered a very strong emotional reaction from within me, but I simultaneously wanted my friend to feel heard, given the knowledge I had of where her strong emotions were coming from. My aim was to challenge my friend using evidence I knew would refute the hateful claims being made. As the conversation went on, my friend was able to quash every reasoned argument I made about the claims she was making with more conspiratorial retorts. I noticed that both of us were becoming increasingly irate, and we both stood up to leave, the only way to prevent further escalation. Repeated encounters of this kind left me increasingly dismayed by my friend's hostility toward an entire group of people, and I eventually recognised that traditional debate, with its inclusion of facts and evidence, was not easing tensions but instead was deepening an already fraught situation.

Context

Structural causes of inequality, poverty, the cost of living, the housing crisis, the decimation of our communities, political alienation, and stress, have coalesced to lead to a growing mistrust in traditional institutions, including mainstream media (Cannon et al., 2022). The 2008 global economic crash precipitated Europe's austerity cuts, decimating local services supporting communities. Though the COVID-19 pandemic was a catalyst for creating the ecosystem of online disinformation we are experiencing today, the catastrophic and deliberate economic policy choices that followed the 2008 financial crash paved the way for the rise of far-right populism across Europe (Finnsdottir, 2019; Gallagher et al., 2023). Using online communities such as YouTube, reactionary influencers peddle populist disinformation to manipulate issues surrounding structural inequalities. They exploit the surge in post-pandemic isolation for their own political, monetary, and/or ideological agendas, diverting blame away from those who have the power to resolve social and economic issues and instead scapegoating a minoritised group (Melacarne and Slavutzky, 2023). People often join those online communities in good

faith to rediscover a sense of community, to reclaim their political voice, or to seek answers to social issues our governments are failing to address. While the administrators of these online communities promote these platforms as alternative media sources, they contribute to an environment where disinformation can spread rapidly. Moreover, there appears to be no political will to regulate social media platforms or these online communities to stem the tide of online disinformation (Irish Council for Civil Liberties, 2025).

Disinformation is often consumed on digital devices when we are alone. There is a lack of brave spaces, I argue, where individuals can come together to exchange experiences, question beliefs, and develop understanding of different groups. This lack of opportunity for dialogue and mutual understanding adds to feelings of isolation and division. Combined, these issues lead to the rising socio-political polarisation our society is struggling to come to terms with (Lakoff, 2004). While these kinds of interactions were unfolding in my personal life, I began to recognise a growing demand within the adult and community education sector at my workplace: there was a clear need for resources to address the hateful and divisive effects of online disinformation, now visible in classrooms and community centres across Ireland, and to support community cohesion (Farrell et al., 2025).

Community education centres are often located in communities where the worst effects of online disinformation, structural inequality, poverty, and political alienation are felt. The community education sector is also recognised as serving some of society's most marginalised people, with extensive and diverse experiences of trauma felt amongst its learners (Johnson, 2018; Ó Loingsigh and Foster, 2025). Community education presents a unique opportunity for participants to have meaningful, open and critical dialogue in a safe and supportive space where adult educators can validate different emotional responses, challenge assumptions, and support their learners in connecting with themselves and with one another. This kind of environment, therefore, is ideal for the delivery of a resource that supports learners to critique, explore, and challenge the role online disinformation plays in polarising our communities (Stephens et al., 2021). While political willingness to regulate social media, and real investment in communities, are both crucial to stem the tide of socio-political polarisation, community education can take a leadership role within the communities most affected by online disinformation.

AONTAS co-created the *Community Education Against Disinformation (CEAD) Workbook* with the community education sector to address issues of online disinformation by developing the competencies of both practitioners

and participants to engage with digital technologies in a critical, collaborative and creative way, while also promoting solidarity and inclusion for diverse communities who are learning side-by-side. The workbook aims to do this by: examining the deepening scepticism of mainstream media and the content it produces; enhancing communication and critical thinking skills; supporting workbook users to build on their understanding of media bias; and examining the role algorithms and Artificial Intelligence (AI) play in strengthening disinformation. The workbook aims to address how media and peddlers of disinformation frame messages that tap into, exploit and, often, reshape our collective values and how they use emotive storytelling tactics to stoke division. Inspired by Anat Shenker-Osorio's (2024) strategic 'Values, Villain, Vision' political communication framework, we, as workbook developers, wanted the workbook to tap into our collective values, develop our understanding of how disinformation has a profoundly negative effect on all of us, and support the creation of a shared vision for the future, one where all communities can stand together against those entities that benefit from our division. These goals and visions have the potential to reach far beyond those in the adult education space and into our communities, to support the reconnection and shared understanding between friends and family that have been fractured.

Aims of the Article and Reflective Positioning

I hope to demonstrate what considerations can be taken from the development of the CEAD project that lend themselves to the development of similar projects in the future, emphasising long-term consultation, the incorporation of emotional and relational pedagogy from the outset, and managing complexity in a politically sensitive education project. I also hope to demonstrate to practitioners which emerging practice insights can be taken from this project that lend themselves to delivering the workbook, emphasising self-reflection, holding space to allow polarised views within the classroom, and creating a good learning environment. The article is a reflective piece written from my own position in AONTAS as project lead for the CEAD workbook and project.

Scope of the Engagement

Rather than being robustly researched from an existing database, these reflections are based on initial discussions and observations, which were collected as field notes, as highlighted in *Table 1*.

Source of Reflection/Data	Activity Description	Participants	Notes
Consultations	Initial discussions with individuals working across relevant fields	11 consultees	Represented an array of related professional areas
CEAD Project Workshops	Delivery of project-related workshops	44 community education practitioners (across 5 workshops)	Provided practitioner perspectives and engagement
Advisory and Ethical Review	Observations arising from the CEAD project advisory committee and workbook ethical review	Advisory committee members	Contributed oversight and ethical guidance
Workbook Trial Feedback	Informal feedback following workbook trialling	3 community education practitioners and 3 learners from 2 community-based organisations	Reflections based on practical use of the workbook

Table 1. Scope of Engagement

Initial consultations for the project began in mid-2023. AONTAS received funding from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) to pilot a year-long project in September 2024, while dissemination and workshops mentioned in this article continued until November 2025. Rather than verbatim transcriptions, quotes used throughout the article are reconstructed from detailed field notes taken during the consultations and workshops, and from the feedback received during the workbook trial. I will draw from several theoretical frameworks to lay the foundation for my reflections, our vision for the project and our vision for practitioners delivering and learners engaging with the workbook.

Grounding the Project in a Critical (Adult Education) Theoretical Framework

This article is grounded in a critical, transformative, and relational pedagogical framework. The framework positions practitioners as both reflective project designers and as critical facilitators of dialogue with their learners. Freire's (1970) 'problem-posing' pedagogy informs the workbook's emphasis on critical questioning and a democratic facilitation process in politically sensitive contexts, supporting practitioners to create learning spaces where assumptions can be explored in a respectful and non-judgemental way. Freire's (1970) dialectical process of learning informs the iterative project design process which incorporates long-term consultation with multiple stakeholders, informing the co-creation of knowledge to enhance the workbook content. Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning provides a lens through which both learners and practitioners can critically examine 'common sense' beliefs and reimagine alternative realities through dialogue, reflection and relational engagement, while Formenti and Hoggan-Kloubert's (2023) work further emphasises the practitioner's role in fostering agency and co-creating meaning within community education settings. Brookfield's (2009) model of critical reflection underpins the workbook's sustained focus on practitioner and project designer reflexivity, encouraging the continual examination of our worldviews, emotions, and unexamined assumptions, and how these influence political education projects, shape classroom dynamics, and may inadvertently contribute to polarisation. Adopting Brookfield's (2009) identification of the promises and contradictions of critical reflection as project lead of the CEAD, I engaged in an on-going exploration of the risks I posed to workbook users by unintentionally moralising them, and I continually reflected on the possibility of reproducing power hierarchies while attempting to challenge them. As such, Brookfield's model of critical reflection played a significant role in the reflective writing adopted in this article. Affective and trauma-informed perspectives (Ahmed, 2004; Keegan, 2021; George and Hovey, 2024) are central to the project's theoretical framework, as these stress the importance of emotional safety, trust, open communication, and cohesion when facilitating difficult conversations in educational settings where polarised views and experiences of marginalisation are present. Additionally, trauma-informed pedagogy promotes a facilitation model in the workbook which balances emotional and psychological safety with the cultivation of brave, accountable, and critical spaces, depending on the needs of the learners and the contexts in which they are living and learning (Holley and Steiner, 2005; Arao and Clemens, 2013). Finally, Shenker-Osorio's (2024) values-based communication framework informs practical approaches to developing politically sensitive educational

projects by grounding discussions in shared values rather than fact-led, evidence-based debate. This approach supports practitioners to hold space for disagreement while promoting connection, deliberation, and collective understanding in the face of online disinformation.

Initial Consultations and Collaboration

I started consulting with those involved in community education, anti-racism, academia, community development, and political activism in 2023, when rapid escalation of online disinformation was starting to have real-world effects, particularly with the rise in anti-migration protests and the Dublin and Belfast riots which were leading to challenging discussions amongst learners in education centres across the country. Some of these groups shared innovative, community-led approaches to addressing these challenges, highlighting the capacity of community education to respond to forms of division created or exacerbated by disinformation.

An unexpected challenge emerged, however, during these consultations. I was informed by an adult education centre manager that some tutors and centre staff resisted the introduction of anti-racist training initiatives and that, while many were working daily with Ukrainian learners, a significant portion of these same tutors participated in protests outside International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS) centres. This information challenged and uncovered assumptions I had made about those working within community and adult education settings, the foundations of which lay in an assumed view that practitioners shared a particular (and progressive) worldview around migration and disinformation. This experience offered the first significant opportunity for reflection within the project, leading to an important realisation: that worldviews are shaped by multiple influences, including life experiences, belief systems, peer groups, the communities we inhabit, and the media we consume. To assume a shared worldview with someone based on their choice of profession disregards these complexities (Formenti and Hoggan-Kloubert, 2023). Those working in adult education settings might not only be living in communities where the worst effects of online disinformation are felt, they might also be working in an environment where participating in initiatives that are considered 'divisive' in a community setting could even pose a threat to them. Regardless of worldview or political leanings, I concluded, everyone working and learning within the community and adult education sector should be given an opportunity, through engagement with the workbook, to work together against online disinformation. In addition to uncovering my deep-held assumptions, this learning also laid the foundation for beginning to critically reflect, as Brookfield (2009) suggests, on the power relationships

benefitting from such assumptions. My own worldview was unconsciously shaping how I was envisioning the development of this project and how I believed users of the workbook would assume and deliver its activities. It was tempting to scapegoat tutors and practitioners who did not align with my socio-political perspective and to exclude them and their needs from the project design. Challenging myself on this, I concluded that these actions alienate both practitioners and learners and contribute to a polarised environment that absolves those in power, like perhaps our government and policy makers, of the responsibility to alter the landscape of our communities (Brookfield, 2009). I would begin from this place, again and again, to challenge any inclination I had to change workbook users' worldviews and instead, as Formenti and Hoggan-Kloubert (2023) suggest, sought to acknowledge human agency and believe in our shared capacity to imagine alternative realities, reflecting the true principles of transformative learning as outlined by Mezirow (1991).

In practical terms, this reflection inspired the use of creative alternatives to politically loaded terms like 'racist', 'anti-racist', 'far right' and 'fascist' that would be used throughout the workbook. Terms like discrimination were chosen as such a term lends itself to many other types of universal issues, such as class, age, disability, and gender. Inspired by Freire's (1970) 'problem posing' pedagogy, critical questions were placed throughout the workbook aimed at supporting all those engaging with it to come to their own conclusions about the structural causes of inequality leading to the rise of socio-polarisation. With funding that AONTAS received from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) to create a training initiative combatting online disinformation, a community education workbook developer with expertise in disinformation was hired. The developer and I carried out further consultations with adult and community education practitioners and learners, listening to the needs of these groups in relation to online disinformation. This feedback emphasised the importance of the language used in the workbook to be non-directional, approachable, and inclusive of all beliefs and values (Mezirow, 1991). The group called for the safety of all who engage with the workbook. This strengthened the argument for the incorporation of a wide range of subjects that nefarious actors usually exploit for their own political, monetary, and ideological agenda. This kind of critical pedagogy, involving collaborators and ensuring an ethical and iterative project design process from the outset of the project, is reflected in the teaching and learning approach promoted throughout the workbook. Here, practitioners consistently embed learner feedback and perspective on approaches used in the delivery of the workbook activities, thus opening potential for Freire's (1970) dialectical process of learning.

Learning from the Project Advisory Group Feedback and Ethical Review

AONTAS hired consultants specialising in psychology, mental health, and human rights to complete an ethical review of the workbook. We created an advisory group with representatives from minoritised communities, practitioners and academics working in anti-racism, and community representatives from affected groups. We also set up an internal working group in AONTAS composed of staff members from the organisation's research, advocacy, and communications teams. The purpose of the project advisory group was to offer support on the project's methodology, consultancy recruitment, and to provide valuable insights into developments in standards and practices of the project from each of the representative's fields of expertise. Acknowledging the need for the workbook to integrate both emotional and relational pedagogy from the outset signified a need for an ethical review. The aim of the review was to ensure the activities and reflective exercises promoted a safe and inclusive environment where participants felt supported to openly participate.

Certain adaptations, based on both the ethical review and project advisory feedback on the initial workbook drafts, were made to enhance practitioners' understanding of the different chapters and to facilitate the application of the shared knowledge and activities. These included: clearer instructions in the methodology section of the chapters; the provision of more context, and how the activities were linked to disinformation; a section on additional psychosocial supports in the introduction; a greater emphasis on the critical reflexivity of the practitioner; and adapting selected debriefing questions so that learners are further empowered to challenge and overcome different aspects of disinformation and further connect with their emotions. We adapted and added to the Communications section of the workbook to build on learners' active listening skills, preparing them to undertake more complex activities with their peers as they go deeper into the workbook, and to enhance their critical affective skills, vital in an age where emotionally charged narratives often dominate in news and social media (Keegan, 2021). A stronger political stance was made in the introduction which was carefully written to demonstrate Shenker-Osorio's (2024) concept of the 'common villain'—peddlers of disinformation, unregulated and profit-driven social media companies, and government policies that have reinforced structural causes of inequality—while minimising the risk of alienating any users of the workbook. Clearer guidance for practitioners on how to use the workbook was provided in the introduction and throughout the methods section of each activity.

Workbook Workshops

AONTAS facilitated a workshop with adult and community education practitioners on how to deliver different activities in the workbook. Practitioners had the opportunity to engage in several workbook activities and trouble-shoot issues they expected to arise with their learners when delivering them. Practitioners were asked to pilot these activities with their learners as part of the CEAD project evaluation. In doing so, these community education practitioners would have the opportunity to further inform the workbook, based on their experience of delivering its activities to their learners. The first iteration of the CEAD project workbook would be evaluated to determine its impact, effectiveness, and fitness for purpose in this pilot phase of the project. It would also provide a platform for contextual data to be drawn out of relevant stakeholders. This would be done through learner and practitioner feedback at different stages throughout the evaluation process. Short-term outcomes of the CEAD would be identified by analysing pre- and post-assessments of learners' knowledge of each activity they engaged with. The resulting knowledge, insights, and recommendations would then inform the project's future development.

Only a small number of practitioners from this group were able to deliver the activities to their learners over the period they were asked to do so. Reasons for this included staff shortages and a lack of learner numbers in centres over the summertime, and in one centre, a practitioner explained that the far right held influence over their group, which would have led to safety concerns had they attempted to deliver the workbook activities. This last point highlighted the urgent need for the workbook to be delivered in community education centres but also indicated that preventing the further spread of disinformation and increase in social polarisation requires a collective effort. To further support practitioners in delivering a workbook that centres on social change, a strong community of practice was established by AONTAS, drawing on Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning, utilising and enhancing shared learning, and particularly examining how we deal with conflict. Promoting the community of practice at workshops thereafter strengthened practitioner confidence in wanting to undertake workbook activities with their learners. At the time of writing this article, AONTAS was in the recruitment stage of this process, gathering interest from practitioners about joining the community of practice.

Those community education practitioners who did succeed in piloting the workbook activities contributed, alongside their learners, to vital changes

to the CEAD workbook. These changes included the incorporation of more accessible language throughout the workbook activities, adaptations to certain activities to increase learner interactivity, and changes to the facilitator guide to improve understanding and usability. Several more workshops were delivered to community education practitioners on how to use the workbook after its publication. These workshops aimed to support the workbook's dissemination, increase its usability, and contribute to the future development of the project. These workshops, alongside the practitioner and learner feedback received from those who trialled the workbook activities, have strengthened my understanding as to what a good learning environment looks like to deliver the workbook. These community education practitioners shared examples of methods and approaches they use in their own practice when teaching difficult or sensitive knowledge, many of which can support the creation of an effective learning environment for delivering the workbook. Key approaches highlighted included fostering peer support among learners; practising openness and reflexivity as educators; maintaining a non-judgemental, critical, and respectful learning space; and establishing trust within the group prior to introducing complex or challenging activities. Practitioners also emphasised the importance of understanding learners' social contexts and capacities in order to gauge their readiness to engage with the subject matter. Additional strategies included: sharing resources and examples of initiatives that promote community cohesion and counter the effects of disinformation; collaboratively developing an agreed learner contract; and creating opportunities for learners to engage with the material through questions grounded in their own lived experiences. Several of the approaches listed above were applied by community education practitioners who trialled the workbook in their respective learning environments and will be elaborated on below.

Many adult learners engaging in community education come from marginalised or disadvantaged backgrounds where trauma is more common, whether from childhood adversity, economic hardship, or ongoing social exclusion (Johnson, 2018; Ó Loingsigh and Foster, 2025). Practitioners at these workshops were often working in communities where the full effects of online disinformation were being felt, in terms of IPAS protests and far-right influence and infiltration, arguably further compounding learners' traumatic experiences. Trauma is a frequent undercurrent in adult education classrooms, and can lead to emotional dysregulation, which may present itself as defiance or other conduct issues in the classroom (Sayers and Anderson, 2025). The workbook includes a Trauma, Transformation and Resistance chapter which aims to support practitioners in facilitating the difficult knowledge contained in this workbook, provides related resources in the introduction, and delivers

Trauma Informed Practice throughout the facilitator notes sections within the activities: the need to be mindful of using this type of approach was emphasised throughout these workshops.

The following two sections present practice insights emerging from the project and considerations for future project development. These reflections draw on practitioner accounts from trialling the workbook activities with learners, observations generated during practitioner workshops where anticipated facilitation challenges were explored, and consideration of how the workbook may support engagement with these challenges in practice. Where relevant, we draw attention to how practitioner feedback and workshop observations shaped ongoing revisions to the workbook.

Creating An Effective Learning Environment

The workbook asks for the development of both safe and brave spaces where open dialogue can be fostered, diverse emotional responses validated, and assumptions challenged in a respectful way. While ‘safe spaces’ attempt to minimise the risk of harm, instead favouring emotional and psychological safety, ‘brave spaces’ are characterised by an emphasis on courage, accountability, and critical self-reflection (Holley and Steiner, 2005; Arao and Clemens, 2013). Some learners, especially those who have been minoritised or marginalised based on the groups they belong to, have to navigate brave spaces both inside and outside the classroom. They therefore may experience, as Ahmed (2004) theorises, greater levels of emotional discomfort working through some activities than other learners, a factor which needs to be considered by practitioners (Keegan, 2021). Two community education practitioners who trialled the workbook demonstrated how crucial it was for trust to be established within the group before engaging in some of the more advanced activities. This was achieved by incorporating their knowledge of their group’s needs and their existing facilitation styles into the learning space. Pre-assessments on the workbook activities allowed their group to voice uncertainty about their knowledge of disinformation. One practitioner, for example, began the session by informing the group of their own educational and professional background to emphasise a lack of expertise in disinformation. They also outlined their reasoning for delivering the workbook activities, emphasising their personal motivation to learn about this ever-evolving topic alongside their learners. Speaking further to this point, the practitioner shared:

I sat down with them. I did not lord over them. I was trying not to be the professional in the room. I’m on this journey with them. It’s not a get

out jail card to say I don't know something if I'm asked something I don't know. But it can turn into a research project to go on together. Some educators bring their own egos into it and that needs to be left at the door. (Practitioner who trialed the workbook, field notes, August 2025)

By modelling emotional reflexivity and situating themselves as a peer learner in this way, the practitioner contributed to a more impartial learning environment conducive to engaging with so-called politically 'sensitive' subjects (Freire, 1998).

One learner from a traditionally marginalised group, who engaged in a more advanced workbook activity, relayed their own personal experience of having false information spread about them. The practitioner shared two techniques that supported what George and Hovey (2024) determine as a trauma-informed learning environment. The first involved explicitly connecting learners' lived experiences to the topic under discussion. Reflecting on this approach, the practitioner explained that they consciously avoided shutting down the learner's sharing of a difficult personal anecdote:

Practitioners in these situations can turn into fixers, but often people just want to vent. While being conscious of past traumas within the group, the biggest thing I wanted to convey here was empathy within and outside of the group. (Practitioner who trialed the workbook, field notes, September 2025)

Demonstrating the dynamic interplay between 'safe' and 'brave' spaces, the practitioner explained how the group could offer peer support to this individual while simultaneously deepening their own empathy for groups targeted by disinformation, strengthening critical self-reflection and fostering greater accountability for the ways they engage with harmful online content (Holley and Steiner, 2005; Arao and Clemens, 2013). The second technique this practitioner used to support a trauma-informed learning environment involved establishing an agreed learner contract prior to starting the activity sessions. The practitioner shared how referring back to the learner contract, which the group had made together at the beginning of the process, supported the "grounding of the group" when debate intensified (Practitioner who trialed the workbook, field notes, September 2025). Moreover, collaborating on a contract in this way empowers the learner, instilling a sense of active agency in their own learning (Freire, 1998; Holley and Steiner, 2005; Arao and Clemens, 2013). Additionally, the practitioner relayed how important the sequencing of activities was for establishing a consistent and supportive learning environment.

Through this feedback, the workbook activities were colour coded, facilitating practitioners' decisions on how and when they would deliver an activity. The three colours denoted the level of conceptual comprehension expected of the learner when engaging with the activity and the literacy required of the learner. The colour coding of the activities is also indicative of the affective dimensions of learning, facilitating the development of learners' emotional, attitudinal, and behavioural growth as they progress through the workbook (Ahmed, 2004; Anwaruddin, 2015). Activities in green help to build trust among learners and are suited to groups that have a lower capacity for conflict, focusing instead on building their communication and critical thinking skills. Activities in orange promote building consensus through deliberation. Thus, rather than encouraging learners to fight to win a debate, these activities ask learners how we can learn to live together (Melacarne and Slavutzky, 2023). While activities in red can support compromise and consensus, they can also unify politically alienated learners by emotionally validating their strong viewpoints that might otherwise be dismissed or discouraged (Keegan, 2021). Red colour-coded activities require strong facilitation skills, and the practitioner's ability and comfort to hold a space for polarised views, without enabling hate speech. Trust building, deliberation, and careful management of conflict support the building of collective identities, which in turn can encourage learners to work together to find a unified cause, such as one against peddlers of disinformation, or the recognition that government policies, not minoritised groups of people, contribute towards inequality within society (Keegan, 2021; Melacarne and Slavutzky, 2023). In this way, the workbook adopts a facilitation model that aims to allow the practitioner to oscillate between 'safe' and 'brave' spaces, depending on the needs of their learners.

Emotional Reflexivity of the Practitioner

The workbook requires practitioners to reflect on how they personally engage with disinformation and, at times, has them question how they contribute to polarisation, both inside and outside the classroom. Adamantly believing we are on the right side of history because we feel our views are socially just and well informed, justified by the echo chambers we are immersed in, or the groups we associate with, can hinder our ability to act as critically reflective practitioners. Our own uncritical social media engagement can contribute to what Freire (1970) hypothesised (albeit at a time before the advent of social media) as oppressive power relations between practitioner and learner.

I delivered a workbook activity to a group of practitioners who held strong social justice worldviews, particularly on a topical geopolitical subject

matter. I delivered the workbook activity, 'Empathy Mapping', to this group, adapted so this group of community education practitioners were asked to put themselves in the shoes of those who were sharing disinformation antagonistic to their worldview on this particular geopolitical subject matter. One practitioner shared how difficult it was to empathise with those, be it a learner or someone from the general public, who shared such content, expressing a sense of distrust of these people, making assumptions about their motivations, their worldview, and their character. A discussion ensued about the potential for practitioners with staunchly held worldviews to exacerbate polarisation within the classrooms, imposing their beliefs onto learners when delivering workbook activities, stifling any chances of co-shaping alternative realities, leading to our current socio-political situation where bad actors pushing online disinformation are thriving from this kind of division (Brookfield, 2009; Formenti and Hoggan-Kloubert, 2023). There was an acknowledgement by this group of community education practitioners that exercising their power within the classroom without incorporating critical emotional reflexivity ran the risk of shaming and alienating learners (Brookfield, 2009). As one practitioner commented:

Curiosity not judgement is really important. You have to leave your own prejudices. You will hear stories in these sessions but I can't turn around and become the parent of the group and finger wag. People's opinions arise from a whole range of things, their up-bringing, etc. (Practitioner who trialled the workbook, field notes, August 2025)

The workbook asks practitioners to practise instead constant critical reflection that analyses "commonly held ideas and practices for the extent to which they perpetuate economic inequity, deny compassion, foster a culture of silence and prevent people from realizing a sense of common connectedness" (Brookfield, 2009, p.6). Activities in the workbook support this reflection and reconnection, which is particularly relevant in times of extreme polarisation and division, where, as practitioners have shared, they themselves are "targets of disinformation", and sometimes subject to harassment, and "targeted and threatened" in their own communities due to working with cohorts of learners viewed by some in those communities as outsiders (Workshop participant, field notes, October 2025).

'Values and Frames' is an activity that emphasises the need to lead out on so-called 'sensitive' topics like gender or migration from a place of shared values, rather than facts or evidence. The approach used in this activity recognises that learners' views are often shaped within strong social environments where

dominant perspectives can feel difficult to question publicly. As one workshop practitioner observed, in some communities there is a “sense that this is what everyone thinks; it is hard to stand out from the crowd” (Workshop participant, field notes, October 2025). Understanding that most people, regardless of their views on these topics, share values such as dignity, respect, and safety, lays the foundation for open and respectful dialogue, as supported by Shenker-Osorio (2024). While the workbook is adapted to support practitioners engaging in sometimes difficult conversations, community education practitioners who have trialled the workbook with their learners emphasised the importance of working within supportive community education centres that endorsed and resourced the delivery of the activities challenging online disinformation. As this practitioner shared:

As facilitators of the workshops, we had supervision, and check ins, and check outs. We had the freedom to bring in our own experience and expertise, there was a lot of trust from the centre, trust between facilitators. We felt free up to a point but it was still structured within the support of the centre. (Practitioner who trialled the workbook, field notes, September 2025)

Trauma-informed care practices, including collegial support and a positive and understanding working environment, help to maintain the mental wellbeing of practitioners working with trauma-impacted learners (Sayers and Anderson, 2025).

Considerations for Future Projects

Several considerations emerged from the two-and-a-half-year development phase of the CEAD project. The experience of working on this project highlights principles that practitioners embarking on so-called politically ‘sensitive’ educational initiatives could incorporate from the outset of project design.

1. Iterative and Co-Created Approaches to Project Design

Leading with an iterative project design process, underpinned by long-term consultation with multiple stakeholders, supported a genuinely co-created approach. This ensured that the project reflected the rich and diverse needs and perspectives of the community and adult education sector, rather than imposing assumed worldviews into the development of this project.

2. Integrated Practitioner and Community Knowledge

Learning directly from those working on the ground with different groups of learners was crucial. This provided nuanced insight into the real-life impacts of disinformation on communities most affected, particularly those who encounter IPAS protests, and far-right influence and infiltration. This strengthened the project's relevance and responsiveness to the 'lived experiences' of communities.

3. The Role of Theoretical Frameworks in Project Development

Consultation with academics and the workbook developer complemented practitioner insights by grounding the project's development within a suitable and supportive theoretical framework. This helped to ensure both intellectual rigour and coherence across the project design.

4. Diversity of Perspectives within Advisory Structures

Prioritising diversity through advisory group representation ensured that the project benefited from a wide range of relevant perspectives and areas of expertise. This enriched decision-making and strengthened the project's capacity to engage with complex and contested issues.

5. Early Integration of Ethical and Trauma-Informed Safeguarding

Conducting an independent ethical review with consultants specialising in mental health, psychology, and human rights at an early stage ensured that adequate time was available to incorporate nuanced, trauma-informed feedback. This aimed to strengthen safeguarding practices and support the emotional wellbeing of workbook users.

6. Emotional and Relational Dimensions of Pedagogical Design

Recognising that efforts to enhance empathy and connection require intentional design, the integration of emotional and relational pedagogy from the outset was essential. The workbook evolved through iterative adaptations that strengthened practitioner guidance notes in each activity and embedded psychosocial supports. Attention to relational dynamics also informed the sequencing of activities, ensuring that learners gradually progressed from trust-building and communication-focused exercises toward deliberative and more politically complex engagements. Additionally, the Communications

section was adapted to strengthen learners' active listening capacities and prepare them to engage respectfully with increasingly complex and potentially polarising discussions as they progressed through the workbook. These adaptations acknowledged that engagement with disinformation is not solely an intellectual task, but an affective and relational process shaped by emotion, identity, and interpersonal dynamics.

7. Communities of Practice as Sites of Peer Learning and Support

Establishing a community of practice during the pilot phase promoted a strong sense of solidarity among workbook users. This was done in response to a need highlighted from practitioners at the project's workshops. Promoting the community of practice at workshops thereafter strengthened practitioner confidence in wanting to undertake workbook activities with their learners.

8. Critical Reflexivity within Project Development

Incorporating critical reflexivity from the outset reduced the risk of unconsciously embedding assumed worldviews into the project design. This created uncomfortable moments where pre-existing socio-political positions were not always validated, particularly with regard to an early consultation with an adult education centre manager who highlighted resistance among some tutors to anti-racist training initiatives. In line with Brookfield's (2009) emphasis on confronting the contradictions of critical reflection, this process involved recognising the temptation to moralise or marginalise practitioners. Instead, reflexive practice required repositioning the workbook as an inclusive pedagogical space, ensuring that diverse ideological perspectives could be included, reflecting the real-world complexity of the adult and community education sector.

9. Negotiating 'Safe' and 'Brave' Spaces within a Trauma-Informed Framework

Grounding the project in an affective and trauma-informed framework supported the navigation of inherent tensions that arose for some of the community education organisations that trialled the workbook activities, and within some of the project's workshops. This included balancing the need to engage learners and practitioners with polarised worldviews, increasing learner empathy for certain groups, and negotiating the boundaries between safe and brave spaces.

10. Critical Evaluation as an Ongoing Dimension of Project Development

Determining the impact, effectiveness, and overall fitness for purpose of the CEAD project extended beyond the timeframe available for the pilot phase. This limitation was largely shaped by staffing constraints within the community education centres of practitioners who participated in workshops designed to trial the workbook activities. While a full evaluation was not feasible at this stage, future evaluative work has the potential to generate new knowledge for the field by identifying challenges experienced by learners and practitioners and by further examining the role of community education in responding to disinformation.

Emerging Practice Insights that are 'Still in the Making'

Feedback from community education practitioners who have trialled the workbook activities highlights several emerging insights for practice in delivering the workbook. Observations taken during workshops on how to use the workbook with a different cohort of community education practitioners noted several additional suggestions for practice.

1. Conditions Supporting a Positive Learning Environment

Creating a positive learning environment and developing core facilitation capacities are essential. Understanding learner needs and maintaining strong awareness of the social, cultural, and political contexts in which learners are living and learning are crucial for making informed decisions about the choice and sequencing of activities. This understanding was particularly important for practitioners who were working with learners from minoritised backgrounds.

Community education practitioners highlighted several approaches that support engagement with sensitive or complex topics. These included maintaining respectful and non-judgemental learning spaces and establishing trust before introducing challenging material. Assessing learners' readiness to engage, sharing resources that promote community cohesion and counter disinformation, and encouraging learners to connect content to their lived experiences were also identified as key strategies

2. Building Trust, Peer Support, and 'Safe-to-Brave' Learning Spaces

Establishing trust, integrating opportunities for peer support, and creating safe spaces strengthen learners' and practitioners' capacity to engage in more

complex and challenging activities in brave spaces as they progress through the workbook. This gradual progression supports workbook users' confidence and psychological safety while giving space to those with strong viewpoints that might otherwise be dismissed or discouraged.

3. Co-Created Learner Agreements as Supports for Dialogue

Investing time in developing an agreed learner contract at the outset provides a shared reference point when debate intensifies. As evidenced by the learners and practitioners who trialled the workbook, a co-created contract instils a sense of active agency in the learner and offers a practical tool for managing conflict and maintaining agreed boundaries within the learning space.

4. Critical Reflexivity in Facilitation Practice

The workbook does not require educators to be experts in the complex field of disinformation. However, it does require facilitators to reflect on how they personally engage with disinformation and, at times, to question their own assumptions. Critical reflection, though oftentimes uncomfortable, is therefore a core facilitation practice. This was demonstrated by the workshop participant who acknowledged both the power they hold in the classroom and the importance of challenging their own assumptions when working with those who may share online content antagonistic to their own socio-political perspectives.

5. Emotional Regulation and Reflective Modelling in Facilitation

Emotional regulation on the part of the practitioner is essential when supporting learners who may challenge personal or professional worldviews. Modelling reflective behaviour and acknowledging one's own evolving understanding of disinformation with learners contributes to a more balanced learning environment, where control of the educational process is more evenly shared between learner and tutor.

6. Negotiating Practitioner Identity and Facilitation Roles

Managing the tension between practitioner identity and the facilitator role requires substantive emotional and reflective labour and should not be underestimated. This is particularly important when addressing polarisation, which is often intensified by inflexible and heated debate, and can be exacerbated by the practitioner rigidly holding onto their own worldview when engaging with the workbook. Workshop practitioners recognised the

benefits of incorporating critical emotional reflexivity into their practice to enhance cohesion within the classroom.

7. Peer Support through Emerging Communities of Practice

Practitioners delivering workbook activities are encouraged to join the AONTAS community of practice for ongoing peer support. Though AONTAS was in the recruitment stage of development of the community of practice at the time of writing this article, there is a shared understanding among practitioners that it will provide a valuable space for shared learning, reflection, and support in navigating the emotional and political complexities of this work.

Conclusion

This article is based on observations arising from practitioner consultations, workshops, learner feedback, and advisory and ethical review processes. Further research, including an evaluation of the CEAD project, is needed to determine its impact, effectiveness, and fitness for purpose, and to highlight more general lessons for future project design and on implications for practice. However, based on these observations and on my experience of developing the workbook, the article has highlighted several key project design principles and emerging insights for practitioners in the community and adult education sector planning on delivering a politically sensitive educational initiative to their learners.

Online disinformation has not only eroded trust in democratic politics and institutions, it also plays a significant role in dismantling our connection with ourselves, each other, and the communities we live, work, and learn in. Over the past two-and-a-half years, while I have been working on this project, I have experienced an unexpected identity shift; I have uncovered long-held, personal assumptions; I have seen my approaches to debate upended; and my efforts to emotionally regulate myself in the face of online disinformation have been challenged. I have learned that none of us, regardless of which side of the political spectrum we are on, is immune to the pulling force of polarisation. Though we are all susceptible to engaging with online disinformation, other contexts such as trauma, the level of marginalisation we experience, and the types of communities we live in, all have an impact on how we navigate our way through online content, and how we express our emotional reactions to it. The community education practitioners and learners who shared their experience in the pilot project demonstrated how tackling disinformation in a good learning environment is not only possible but has a very meaningful impact on communities.

These community education environments were described as places where participants can have meaningful dialogue in a safe and supportive space, different emotional responses are validated, assumptions are challenged, and reconnection with themselves and with one another is facilitated. The practitioners shared the short-term impact of delivering activities to their learners. They described changes in how their group engaged with disinformation, now approaching it with curiosity and critical reflection in a supportive, and often humorous, way, rather than through conflict, as was previously experienced. The potential reach and impact of the workbook is significant, and, if adequately supported, the community education sector has the potential to drive this work. On a personal level, I am grateful for all that I have learned throughout the development of this project, as I am certain it has supported me in maintaining connection with those in my life who have delved deeply into online communities where disinformation, and division, is rife. Although my friend and I can still fall into old patterns where we argue about socio-political issues that are manipulated by nefarious online influencers, we have considered how to build a stronger foundation of trust, where emotional triggers are minimised, discussions are led with shared values, and very often we can end up with common visions for the future.

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Understanding Changemakers and How to Make Change Happen: Bringing Freirean and Social Identity Perspectives into Dialogue through a GCE Programme in Ireland

LISA OELSCHLEGEL AND SARAH JAY

Abstract

In the context of an unfolding “global polycrisis”, Global Citizenship Education (GCE) is increasingly positioned as a means of fostering the awareness and skills required to drive social change. This study examines a real-world GCE programme in Ireland, the STAND Changemakers Academy, through in-depth interviews with seven participants. We qualitatively explore how participants made sense of their learning experiences and how these experiences shaped their understandings of, and orientations towards, collective action. Our analysis shows that participation in the programme fostered the formation of a dual collective identity, which shaped the forms of action participants came to view as meaningful and desirable. This study advances dialogue between Freirean traditions and social psychological approaches by showing how educational design, identity formation, and imagined forms of collective action interact. Our analysis encourages educators to cultivate brave spaces that harness the transformative potential of Freire’s conscientização.

Keywords: Changemaker, Collective Action, Global Citizenship Education, Social Identity

Introduction

The “global polycrisis” we are currently experiencing refers to a set of multiple, causally entangled crises unfolding within an interconnected global context, including armed conflicts and genocide, ecological breakdown, widening economic inequality, the rise of far-right movements, democratic backsliding

and the erosion of human rights, the consolidation of economic and political power, and growing uncertainty related to artificial intelligence (Lawrence et al., 2022; 2025; Oxfam International, 2026). As this polycrisis generates new and intensifying forms of harm to humanity, the need for a critically engaged civil society becomes paramount.

The Potential of Global Citizenship Education for Social Change

In this bleak context, Global Citizenship Education (GCE) is envisioned not only as a means of understanding the complexities of the interacting systems that produce violence, inequality, and exclusion, but also as a hopeful process that empowers learners to act upon them (De Vries, 2023; Dolan, 2025; Golden, 2025). While the terminology of GCE (alongside related terms such as global learning, education for sustainability, global education, and development education) is often associated with policy frameworks developed in the Global North, its pedagogical foundations are strongly influenced by the tradition of popular education developed in Latin America, drawing in particular on the extensive work of Paulo Freire. For Freire (1974; 2018), education is a fundamentally political act of *conscientização*, i.e. the process of developing a critical understanding of the conditions of oppression through dialogue and engaging in collective action to transform them. Central to this process is praxis, understood as the ongoing interplay of critical reflection and action directed towards transforming the conditions in which people live.

In this tradition, education is decidedly not a purely intellectual endeavour. Compared to adult and community education, which draws on the same Freirean tradition and has more consistently sustained praxis-oriented approaches including learner-centred and experiential learning, recent mapping exercises suggest that not all forms of GCE meaningfully integrate this foundational element. While critical GCE promotes student-led learning, reflexivity, global awareness, and bottom-up collective action that challenges colonial power relations, neoliberal or “soft” forms tend to emphasise skills and competencies in ways that reproduce these power relations (Andreotti, 2006; 2011; Pashby et al., 2020). Subsequent critiques of critical GCE have begun to explore decolonial GCE approaches or “GCE otherwise” (Andreotti, 2011; 2021; Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures, no date).

Prompted by the inclusion of GCE in the United Nations 2030 Agenda, GCE is most consistently taught and assessed within formal school contexts. In Ireland, GCE initiatives are primarily funded by Irish Aid, the Government of Ireland’s development cooperation programme, and implemented in collaboration

with schools and adult and community education networks. Here, school-based approaches to GCE have been found to reproduce neoliberal logics by prioritising individualised skills and hero-centred narratives of social change, thereby limiting learners' belief in their capacity to engage in collective action (Bryan, 2019; 2024; Meade, 2025). To strengthen GCE beyond school education, Irish Aid has developed strategic partnerships across sectors, such as with STAND in higher education and Saolta in adult and community education (Irish Aid, 2021). However, outside teacher education, GCE remains unevenly embedded and evidence of its impact among adult learners in Ireland is limited, partly due to the diversity of programmes and the resulting lack of systematic assessment (Saolta, 2023). Unlike schoolchildren, adults exercise greater choice over which programmes to join, so their learning goals, participation, and outcomes likely differ, which highlights the importance of studying adult engagement with GCE.

Bridging the Gaps: Freirean and Social Identity Approaches to Collective Action

While both GCE and adult and community education are theoretically linked to collective action, empirical evidence on how these forms of education translate into sustained collective action remains limited and uneven. On the other hand, social psychological scholarship has largely studied collective action independently of educational contexts. Social psychology has focused on predicting individuals' propensity to engage in collective action, model small group interactions around opinion based issues, or derive explanatory frameworks from social movements and crowd behaviour (e.g., Simon and Klandermans, 2001; van Zomeren et al., 2008; Drury and Reicher, 2009; Thomas et al., 2012; Drury, 2025).

Drawing on this literature, widely cited models propose that three elements converge and normatively align for a group to engage in collective action: collective identity, collective emotion, and collective efficacy beliefs. Politicised identities (Kelly and Breinlinger, 1995; Simon and Klandermans, 2001) and identification with opinion-based groups (Bliuc et al., 2007) have been shown to predict participation in social movements, activist groups, and spontaneous protest. Collective emotion, particularly moral outrage stemming from a sense of injustice directed towards a third party, facilitates mobilisation by allowing disadvantaged and advantaged groups to coalesce (Leach et al., 2002; Thomas et al., 2009). Finally, the belief in the group's ability to effect change constitutes a third key element enabling participation in collective action (Bandura, 1997; 2000; van Zomeren et al., 2008).

These approaches have generated important insights into the motivational and structural antecedents of mobilisation, their focus on mass protest directed at state actors, emphasis on individualised models of engagement, and reliance on predictive frameworks, severely limits our understanding of the multiple, everyday, and relational ways in which people act collectively, as well as the conditions under which such action becomes possible or constrained (Bou Zeineddine and Leach, 2021). Moreover, the postpositivist foundations of these models provide a limited understanding of how participants in real-world educational interventions interpret and negotiate their engagement within lived sociopolitical and institutional contexts.

In contrast, Freirean traditions of adult and community education offer a more political and relational account of collective action, foregrounding how systems of oppression are lived and reproduced across individual and collective levels. From this perspective, collective action is understood as an ongoing, situated, and relational practice linked to organising, community-building, and sustained engagement, developed through processes of *conscientização*. This understanding resonates with the tradition of liberation psychology, developed by social psychologist and Jesuit priest Ignacio Martín-Baró (1990; 1998; 2006), who, drawing on Freire, theorised that sentiments of fatalism and apathy are socially produced and function to naturalise, legitimise, and thereby reproduce oppressive social arrangements.

Through this paper, we bring Freirean traditions of *conscientização* into dialogue with social identity theory as complementary ways of understanding how agency, identity, and the capacity for collective action are formed and negotiated within the context of a specific GCE programme. In doing so, these insights contribute to understanding how educational interventions in Ireland and beyond can support the formation of critically engaged civil society actors capable of navigating and responding to the interconnected crises of our time.

The Present Study

This study examines the STAND Changemakers Academy, a Global Citizenship Education programme developed by the Irish charity STAND, Irish Aid's strategic partner for delivering GCE in the higher education sector. In 2023-2024, STAND piloted a five-month programme for postgraduate students based in Ireland to develop critical thinking skills in relation to complex global challenges, deepen participants' understanding of their own values and

leadership potential, equip them with skills and tools to build collaborative communities, and engage in effective collective action, as well as support them in developing individual and collective strategies for sustained wellbeing (STAND, n.d.).

The Changemakers Academy delivered a mix of online and in-person sessions and workshops, including a one-week residential (Winter School). Its methodology combined experiential exercises, group and individual projects with complementary activities such as conversations with activists, book and podcast clubs, and individual coaching sessions. Some sessions focused on the complexity and interconnectedness of global issues and encouraged participants to reflect on their assumptions about the world and how they come to know and understand it, while others emphasised practical skills such as storytelling and design thinking. The programme incorporated a range of GCE approaches, combining critical and decolonially informed approaches to GCE as well as elements such as design thinking that carried the risk of inadvertently reinforcing unequal systems (Andreotti, 2011; Stern and Siegelbaum, 2019; Williams, 2019). A total of 23 students participated, selected through a voluntary application process, the majority of whom were international students from Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe. Since then, STAND has run annual cohorts, iteratively adapting the programme and further strengthening facilitators' capacities in response to evaluation feedback.

Method

Ethical approval was received from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences at University of Limerick on 7th November 2023 (ethical approval number 2023_09_15_EHS ER). At the online welcome session as well as in an email after the Changemakers Academy ended, the researchers explained the aims of the study to student participants, emphasising that participation was voluntary, confidential, and that the research was not an evaluation of their participation in the programme. Those who expressed interest in participating in an interview were sent an information sheet, Research Privacy Notice, and consent form, and subsequently the link to the online interview. As the study was complemented by a practitioner evaluation based on OECD criteria, the first author (Lisa) attended selected online events and the Winter School, and engaged in informal conversations with facilitators and participants, enabling contextual familiarisation and relationship-building.

Between April and June 2024, following the conclusion of the Changemakers Academy, the first author (Lisa) conducted semi-structured interviews online with seven participants, representing approximately one-third of the group. The group was diverse in nationality (all holding different nationalities across four continents), gender (four women and three men), sexuality (three identifying as LGBTIQ+), age (four in their twenties and three in their thirties), and socioeconomic background (ranging from working class to upper middle class). Interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, with an average duration of 48 minutes. Interviewees were asked about their motivations for joining the Changemakers Academy, their experiences during the programme, group dynamics, and their views on changemakers and making change.

The analytic approach adopted for this study was reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021), grounded in a constructivist epistemology that understands meaning as co-constructed through the researcher's engagement with the data. From this perspective, analytic adequacy is not evaluated through saturation but through the richness, reflexivity, and relevance of the accounts generated (Braun and Clarke, 2021). While undoubtedly more interviews would have generated more insight (Low, 2019), considering that approximately one-third of the programme cohort was interviewed, and given the participants' high degree of reflexivity, the resulting richness of their accounts, and the diversity of their backgrounds and social identities, these interviews offered a high degree of information power (Malterud et al., 2016).

The first author (Lisa) conducted the reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006; 2020; 2024) using the qualitative data analysis computer software package NVivo. First, she familiarised herself with the interview data through repeated listening during transcription. Then, she created codes inductively and refined them iteratively, involving the creation of new codes as well as merging them with existing ones. Finally, she clustered the codes on a digital board using colour-coding and arrows to visualise relationships, based on which she defined four themes. For clarity and readability, quotations reproduced in this article were lightly edited (e.g., removal of filler words and false starts) without altering participants' intended meaning. Interviewees' names were pseudonymised, except where participants requested to be identified; all other identifying names or details were also anonymised.

Following the principles of reflexive thematic analysis, our analysis is not an evaluation or description of the programme, but an inductive process of making sense of participants' accounts. While not driven by predefined theoretical categories, the analysis is framed by a Freirean perspective and a

social-identity-informed, social psychological lens. The interview process and subsequent interpretation were shaped by the first author's positionality as a white German postgraduate student in her thirties in Ireland, who experienced the challenge of building a network and community due to age-related differences in life stage and priorities, while not being subject to the legal and social constraints faced by many racialised non-EU students from the Global South. Her academic background in psychology and peace and conflict studies, along with her professional experience across Europe and Latin America, shaped the interpretive lens through which she engaged with participants' accounts.

Analysis

Theme 1: Building Community and Managing Division, Conflict, and Tension

A central element of the STAND Changers Academy is the deep sense of community and the strong bonds that developed among participants, manifesting for instance through collective joy and fun in structured learning spaces and informal moments, such as during breaks as well as meeting up independently. As one of the interviewees summed it up:

So, it kind of became this larger network and even though it's hard to explain, even though I don't know everything about everyone, I still feel a very strong kinship and care for everyone in that room and in that group, and that I think is really precious. (Bea)

This interplay of collective joy across formal and informal spaces resonates with findings from other volunteer contexts, where shared affect and relational care similarly contributed to the formation of collectivity (e.g., Brunßen et al., 2026). Although self-selection into the programme of, as Alex described it, likeminded people with shared interests, "Like we were all yoga loving, tea drinking, respecting people", accounts for some degree of proclivity towards community, as Bea indicated, "just the profile of people made it such that it was easier to connect", this sense of community did not develop entirely organically, but emerged through the efforts of STAND staff, facilitators, and participants:

I was really fascinated about the design of the programme itself. I thought it was really intentional. Every participant felt special because the organisers made us feel that way. So, if we said something randomly

in a session, we were going to probably see it enlarged in the next session in a larger platform and you just say, “Oh my God, I said that in the last session”. So that itself was really, really great and powerful. And lastly, it created a safe space where we all at some point felt empowered enough to be vulnerable about our thoughts, our experiences, our fears. And I don’t think there’re a lot of spaces like that where people feel like I can talk about this with no judgement. (Wara)

I would recommend it to anybody in a new group, even if you had a nice group, do change. I had my eye on people throughout the groups. I said I’ve never been in a group with them. And then I tried to. (Alex)

While STAND intentionally created a safe learning space that promoted mutual support, respect, and self-care, as Wara describes above, Alex explains the way participants implemented strategies to uphold the sense of one big community of changemakers. Beyond intentionally preventing subgroups from solidifying, participants also employed specific strategies to keep the group harmonious, for instance, adjusting how or if they spoke about a topic, such as racism, depending on their own racial identity and that of their interlocutors:

But we didn’t, for example, talk about like the LGBTIQ+ community at all. And I was like, I’m queer, I was uncertain whether to come out in the room or what that would look like, and I think I made assumptions culturally based on the fact that not everyone was European and I don’t even think that that’s a fair assumption to make because there are lots of people who are (*chuckles*) non-European who are very celebratory of, like, the LGBTIQ+ community but I held that back and I noticed myself holding that back. But at the same time, that was also just an assumption that I was making. For all I know that could have also been a shared value amongst everyone else. And I think those things we never really found them out. So, there wasn’t really grounds to discuss them or have even an act of conflict or act of tensions around that type of topic basically. (Bea)

Participants chose to withhold raising issues that might disrupt perceived group harmony and shared norms, ranging from logistical matters that could evoke minor tensions, such as washing dishes, to more sensitive identity-management decisions, such as for Bea when and to whom to disclose their queer identity to avoid conflict and disharmony. Nico further elaborates:

And then people are really trying hard to not really like say even harsh words. I just felt it was a bit unnatural as well in that sense that some people may be very angry, but you just don't know because that's just how the environment is, they're forcing you to be kind. (Nico)

While small-group experiments highlight the role of discussion and conversation in promoting norm convergence (e.g., Thomas et al., 2012), Nico's reflections above suggest that the deliberate constraint or withholding of certain opinions can also serve to maintain group norms, fostering group cohesion, community and shared expectations of behaviour. These strategies to uphold harmonious relationships were also reinforced by facilitators who promoted spaces free of conflict, for instance, by dealing rather passively when disagreements arose, as Bea remembers:

So that activity was good because I think it brought some stuff out and we, again, I think in this context, kind of like observed the difference, but didn't really touch on it or discuss it too much further. The facilitators were like, "Ok, very interesting", and then we moved on basically. (Bea)

In particular, discussing issues related to oppressive structures that are linked to personal identities, such as racism or ableism, were associated with ambivalent feelings among participants. While these topics were not central to the learning programme, participants chose to raise them in plenary discussions:

I think it's also really, really helpful to discuss these things with other people because it's so hard to find language on it sometimes, at least for me, especially when I'm confronted by people who, for example, think that sexism is over now, like you don't hate women anymore. (*chuckles*) It can be very challenging to put into words what is still happening [...] and kind of counterargue all their arguments. (*chuckles*) I think especially because of all of our backgrounds, I think it would have been a really interesting conversation and very personal. (Sam)

But I think a lot of the initiative came individually from the changemakers to open up about their personal experiences, which in some ways is a good thing because you don't necessarily want someone to talk about a system of oppression unless they feel ready and comfortable to do so, but at the same time, maybe it's worth directly discussing system issues 'cause I felt like there was a lot of skill-building, but maybe not so much like grappling with those types of issues. (Bea)

As Sam and Bea noted, participants recognise the value of engaging with these issues to develop skills relevant to changemaking; however, raising them also risked generating discomfort or division:

For example, if there is systematic racism in Ireland, it happens in the sense as if there is a class and then there is a book about slavery that there will be eyes towards a person of colour in the class. That's happening. And that is like an unspoken division is created. And though I am still wanting to put myself out there in these conversations, if that would have happened, say, one of the topics would have been about inequalities, then I think there would have been a division. I don't know whether I would have been able to manoeuvre that. So, I think maybe that was a conscious decision made. (Alex)

There were also other instances where we would be kind of casually chatting but not as part of an exercise, and I remember one person saying something and I really didn't know what to say to it 'cause it was just so, I don't know, there was no solution to it. It was just a situation of real inequality and I had nothing to give to the situation, I had nothing to say. I had no idea what I could say at that moment. (Sam)

Based on Alex's and Sam's descriptions of the uncertainties they experienced in navigating these conversations, they could have constituted a valuable learning opportunity for participants to analyse the intricate dynamics of oppression; for instance, learning to intentionally decentre one's own voice when in a position of relative privilege as an important skill in fostering dialogue and collective learning (DiAngelo, 2018).

We suggest that this ambivalence reflects GCE practitioners' own ambivalence between creating psychological safety and harmony in their learning environments and addressing societal issues that affect learners personally. In attempting to protect participants from being triggered or offended, while managing their own insecurities about facilitating these conversations, facilitators increasingly tend to avoid such topics altogether, rather than use them as opportunities to practice navigating sensitive discussions, jointly learning from mistakes, and strengthening conflict transformation skills, i.e. creating "brave spaces" (Arao and Clemens, 2023). The reduced capacity to have these conversations and rushing to settle conflictual conversations or debates by "agreeing to disagree", is further exacerbated by shrinking civic spaces and increasing engagement through social media, where confrontation prevails over dialogue. Thereby, a critical component of building resilient communities

that are capable of grappling with and growing through conflicts, tensions, and disagreements is being lost. From a Freirean perspective, “brave spaces” are constitutive of processes of *conscientização*, as they offer opportunities to critically analyse individual and collective lived experiences of inequality and power. Because trust is essential for difficult conversations, spaces like the Changemakers Academy could provide fertile conditions for such dialogue.

At the same time, given that experiences of community and belonging are more challenging for immigrants, including international students, it is unsurprising that participants may have wished to protect this sense of belonging and peace, especially in a period marked by heightened social tension, including on a local level the anti-immigrant riots in Dublin in November 2023 and on a global scale Israel’s genocide in Gaza.

In conclusion, participants and staff actively cultivated a learning environment characterised by connection and community, consciously managing the potential for conflict or division. While this emphasis on harmony sometimes limited deeper engagement with challenging GCE-related topics, the resulting sense of community was pivotal in fostering the dual collective identity examined in Theme 2.

Theme 2: Everyone Can Be a Changemaker, but I Can’t Be a Changemaker on My Own

Building on the community norms identified in Theme 1, collective identity unfolded in two interrelated ways. Over the course of the programme, participants developed a strong sense of belonging and increasingly identified as members of the Changemakers Academy community, as illustrated in the accounts of Chris and Nico:

So, this is all an admiration that you’re a part of this community that’s constantly evolving and growing. You can’t wait to see what they grow into, because these are such cool people. (Chris)

I think through Changemakers, it was really within winter school we were like a real community and then we had the sense of belonging. So that really developed the sense of community or togetherness inside the Changemakers Academy. (Nico)

Participants came to share an identity as members of the Changemakers Academy that extended even beyond the programme itself, alongside a clear desire to sustain the community, as Wara emphasises:

Another thing I also thought about [...] is getting the changemakers to be involved in the Changemakers Academy itself. [...] It's a way we can also give back to STAND in any capacity that we can [...] knowing the group that we had, I cannot think of anyone who would not want to get involved in something like that. And that way we can sustain that space going forward. I thought about different things honestly to keep this, because I know that it's difficult to have a group like this (*chuckles*) again. (Wara)

Beyond the emergence of a collective identity as members of this learner group, participants also developed a shared understanding of what it means to be a changemaker or global citizen over the course of the programme:

For me, everyone can be a changemaker, but the good thing is to know the issue and to find some people, to hear their voice, and add our voice to that, and respond to the problem [...] and it doesn't mean like we should be always at the frontline, we can be anywhere, we can do any type of support and that's a changemaker, even if you are posting an issue and asking people for help or turning [...] people's attention to that problem, you're a changemaker. (Vic)

I also have realised that caring is enough to engage in social change. And that you don't need to be the expert or the person who has been training for their entire life. There's no such thing as being the perfect changemaker, so, those are all, I think, key lessons, whatever skills you have probably will contribute to something and then also you can always start, you can just do something basically. (Bea)

Bea's and Vic's accounts reflect the Academy's framing of changemaking as small-scale and inherently collective. Across participants' accounts, additional characteristics aligned with critical GCE principles also emerged, including self-reflexivity and ethically grounded engagement. Beyond these aspects, participants' ideas of changemaking were also shaped by their experience with the specific group of peers and the sense of community that emerged during the programme:

Well, I think my definition is gonna hinge on the type of people that were there, which is (*laughs*) for me, the one common consistency about everyone there is that they cared and they wanted to make the world a better place and that they were willing to have tough, long conversations about what it took to do that and question the way that they saw things. (Bea)

I think I one of the main things I learned was the value of the setup of a group. So, if you have a group for social change, how important it really is to have that be diverse. (Alex)

I don't think I can be a changemaker on my own. [...] If I were to go to a community garden, then I'm part of that community of changemaking. [...] but on my own, I don't think I can be Chris the changemaker. No, I don't think so. (Chris)

As Bea and Alex indicate, participants' definitions of changemakers and changemaking are closely shaped by their experiences with this particular learner group. Chris' emphasis on community and collective action is reminiscent of Theme 1 and the experience of community during the programme. Participants' understanding of changemakers shifted over the course of the programme and afterwards:

I have done really small things and they might not have contributed to anything big, but they can still be described as change. And yeah, that's kind of enough. So, I feel like scared of the term [changemaker]. Maybe hopefully it's something that I can grow into more, but without making it a secluded group of people who qualify as changemakers, but rather just to lean into making change more and hopefully drawing people in with me [...] it's definitely the message that was constantly by the facilitators at least conveyed to us, that changemaking is so diverse and that none of us should feel like we're not a changemaker because of this and that, and because we don't have experience [...] But I think I needed some time to think about it myself without outside input and I guess letting it sink into myself, I think that's the best way I can describe it, like believing it myself, not just being told it. I think that happened after the programme. (Sam)

Sam describes the challenges they experienced in identifying as a changemaker, which shifted through the programme, not least due to an inclusive definition of what counts as changemaking and, consequently, who qualifies as a changemaker. While this inclusive framing encourages participants' sense of efficacy and agency to take action, Sam's as well as Vic's and Bea's earlier comments also hint at a slippery slope between the idea that "everyone can be a changemaker" and the notion that "everyone already is a changemaker", which may risk normalising minimal engagement or limiting aspirations for more transformative action.

So, through the co-construction of community and the development of community norms, a dual collective identity emerged. On one level, participants identified as a community of learners, which aligns with the social identity approach to learning and education (Haslam, 2017; Platow et al., 2017). On another level, participants articulated or transformed their identity as global citizens (or changemakers), with the content of this identity closely linked to both their experience in and the pedagogical framing of the Changemakers Academy programme. As participants' accounts demonstrate, these collective identities mutually reinforced one another: experiences of community shaped participants' visions of what it means to be a changemaker, while the characteristics and values associated with changemakers influenced the community norms that developed.

Bringing together Themes 1 and 2, this dual identity formation unfolded through a twinned process: top-down, through STAND's programme design, facilitation practices, and normative framing of changemaking, and bottom-up, through participants' interactions, relationships, and collective sense-making. This dynamic mirrors the interactive model of social identity formation developed in small-group research, which conceptualises identity as emerging through the interplay of deductive and inductive processes (Postmes et al., 2005). From a Freirean perspective, these interactional processes can be understood as dialogical, in which sustained dialogue among participants and between facilitators and participants constitutes a central mechanism through which collective understandings are negotiated and shared orientations towards action take shape (Suzina and Tufte, 2020). Notably, despite opportunities to develop shared identities around issue-specific positions, for example through group project work, these did not become more salient than the overarching changemaker identity. This may be due to the participants' domain-specific activist identities, such as identifying as feminist or climate change activist, already being well established, or to the extent to which community norms overrode identity formation in smaller groups. Based on interviewees' accounts, we suggest that for participants taking part in the Changemakers Academy, the "why" of social change was largely taken for granted, while the primary site of identity negotiation centred on the "how" of making change. Through ongoing communication, discussion, and mutual validation around preferred modes of engagement, such as emphasising community, connection, and small-scale, relational forms of action, participants co-constructed a shared norm of what constitutes legitimate and desirable changemaking. In this sense, Themes 1 and 2 reflect the dialogical dimension of Freirean praxis and, from a social identity perspective, the formation of an identity-norm nexus (Smith

et al., 2015), as participants come to define themselves as group members based on shared perceptions, cognitions, and emotions about a norm. Here, however, this process extends beyond opinion-based positions to social change practice itself.

Theme 3: Optimal Conditions for Transformative Learning

The community experience and collective identity formation were shaped by conditions that facilitated connection, collaboration, and transformative learning. STAND played a central role in establishing these conditions through programme design, the articulation of values such as respect and epistemic openness, as well as logistical arrangements that fostered sustained interaction. Moreover, STAND was perceived to “walk the talk” of GCE principles, both in its organisational structure and the ways staff engaged with participants and each other. This modelling of relational and inclusive community practices reflects the broader argument in critical GCE that learners internalise principles not only through content but through witnessing and participating in communities of practice (Freire, 2018). How STAND modelled popular education principles is demonstrated by Bea’s and Vic’s comments:

If you’re gonna create a programme where people want to engage in making the world a better place, you can’t, you can’t do that alone. You need support in that process. And that was an intrinsic part of the programme and that was encouraged amongst the STAND staff as well. They were also such a nice, tightly knit community that there was kind of an example there of what it looked like for community to form. (Bea)

The director was not like the director, [...] the interesting thing at the first day, [...] she stood beside me and we were talking, I was thinking she’s one of the participants [...] that was amazing. I really learned some leadership tricks from that, like the cooperation and the coordination. (Vic)

A particularly salient example of transformational learning was the Winter School:

I mean, the winter school seemed so magical. (*laughs*) I was just in disbelief that I got to go to this beautiful place and just immerse myself in how I think about change and how others think about change, it seems like such an incredible opportunity. (Sam)

Again, it's like a dream 'cause when I was there, it was very real. But after that like just one day, two days after, I was like, "Is that a dream?" Because [...] when I got home, normal life just started. I wanted to replicate it. So I started morning yoga and everything. I tried it, but it's different, I was like "Whoa, was that a real thing?" (Nico)

As Sam and Nico illustrate, the Winter School offered participants the opportunity to temporarily experience alternative ways of relating, consistent with experiential and transformative learning approaches. Another element that contributed to deep learning was the diversity of the group:

And interestingly, each changemaker member has their own experience in various areas of let's say in different areas of the inequalities or equalities or in what they work in or in how they support people. And when any topic was discussed, there were plenty of examples for that [...] and in some cases there was more discussion and people were asking questions and some experienced difficulties and they didn't know that there is a solution for that, or other people were interested to help. It was amazing. (Vic)

While visible demographic categories can, through processes of social categorisation, generate dynamics that both support and challenge group cohesion (Carter and Philipps, 2017), the Changemakers Academy shows how intentional design and facilitation such as fostering trust, horizontality and promoting epistemic openness, can manage these dynamics effectively. As illustrated by Vic's comments, the group's diversity became a resource that was harnessed through the programme's experiential methodology, enabling relational learning from multiple perspectives:

It seemed like it was part of an education, like I had to seek out this experience. I had only been talking for three years, I was maybe active in high school and then my degree made such that for three years I only talked. And I needed the experience. So whatever collective action people want to do, it needs to be an experience rather than a reading. We have so much action that lacks depth or actually substance. (Alex)

Well, the winter school was really, really, really, really, really good because I really experienced those new concepts. I experienced a new concept, not just knowing or learning, I physically experienced it, which changed a lot of beliefs about myself, about community and stuff. (Nico)

Alex's and Nico's emphasis on experiential learning suggests that these impacts may have been less pronounced under other pedagogical approaches. At the same time, more explicitly foregrounding participants' experiences of impact during the programme may have further strengthened their sense of efficacy, as reflected in Bea's account of the group project:

I left not understanding exactly whether the group challenge and the outcome of the group challenge was going to be implemented and put in place. And I think that was the case for all of the groups, where the challenge itself was pitched to the organisation, the organisation said, "Oh, okay, cool, thank you so much for pitching it." And then there was no resolution past that. [...] But I came into the programme wanting to leave with having made a tangible impact on something within Ireland. (Bea)

These conditions for transformative learning supported the development of a learner community (Theme 1) and the emergence of a dual collective identity (Theme 2), fostering participants' collective efficacy and hope in their capacity to effect meaningful change (Theme 4).

Theme 4: The STAND Changemakers Academy – A Catalyst of and for Changemakers

While the participants described themselves as already interested in social justice before entering the programme, the Changemakers Academy was a transformative experience that created a strong sense of empowerment related to taking (collective) action, as several participants acknowledged:

I think the Changemakers Academy brought together people who were able to put out their thoughts into actions. For instance, the programme designs that people came up with are amazing and I think it was a product of the thoughts that many of us already had even before we came there. So given that opportunity for people to think deeply about issues, reflect, and then create an action that will either be implemented by themselves or by other people. (Wara)

It was really great because now I can utilise that to make change into reality, make my ideas into reality. And that's just what I wanted from the start. (Nico)

Participants' increased sense of efficacy associated with putting their ideas into action, was closely linked to a renewed feeling of hope and optimism that people can collaborate constructively and effectively make change together:

For me, I think I calibrated my standards more. So, my standards before were one way, I'd be like, "Oh, if a few people come together, a lot of that fire is gonna burn out in an organisation." And here I was so often surprised by how much momentum could be gained. So, it was the willingness to try again and to understand the group might not be perfect, but you might not understand what will come of it. So, for me it was a great, almost like a re-entry into how I could envision being part of a group where I do feel like it's very impactful and how I could select that. So, I actually think I'm much more positive. (Alex)

As Alex suggests, rather than developing collective efficacy beliefs tied to a specific group or a narrowly defined type of action, participants' sense of collective efficacy increased in a more general and transferable way. Positioning participants as agents from the outset, the Changemakers Academy aligned with adult and community education principles viewing learners as co-creators of knowledge rather than passive recipients, which fostered a sense of empowerment and agency. Thereby, the Changemakers Academy operated as a catalyst of and for changemakers, enabling participants to critically engage with and build upon their lived experiences through collective, dialogical processes as well as additional skills, and to translate these into shared understandings of collective action.

While traditional social identity approaches tend to emphasise anger-based emotions as drivers of collective efficacy and collective action, Alex and Chris highlight that, after their experience in the Changemakers Academy, such emotions were neither the most appropriate nor the most effective motivators for action:

It's a bit like what [...] said in the beginning, her driver was rage and my driver was also frustration for people from people. And now I'm starting to look for better drivers, like I can have something optimistic drive me, not always be surprised that people actually care [...] now I can say, "Okay, if they don't care about this, but I know that they care about something else." (Alex)

I wouldn't be the one to go out and protest if I'm operating in anger mode. If I see that we need to get my university to divest from any investments that they made in relation to Gaza, yes, I would go, but not out of anger. I don't think I should be burning myself to stop something so that I want peace. Peace needs to be cultivated individually before it will spread outward. (Chris)

This aligns with more recent research on the importance of creating collective and critical hope in GCE and for sustained collective action, which frames hope not as an individual disposition or naïve optimism, but as a collectively produced orientation that arises from and is sustained through shared practice and struggle, collective efficacy, and belonging (e.g., Cohen-Chen and van Zomeren, 2018; Fife, 2024; McCloskey, 2025; Meade, 2025), and reconnects with the foundations of popular education, a pedagogy and philosophy of hope (Freire, 2013; McCann, 2025).

Discussion

Bringing Freirean traditions of *conscientização* into dialogue with social identity theory offers a nuanced account of how critical educational processes shape identity, agency, and the capacity for collective action. Our analysis of participants' accounts identified key elements highlighted in social identity models of collective action, including the emergence of a shared identity, collective emotions, and increased efficacy beliefs. Situated within the context of a GCE programme, however, these elements are not merely reproduced but are reconfigured through the pedagogical and relational conditions of the learning environment.

In particular, the development of a strong sense of community was central to the formation of a dual collective identity that encompassed both membership in the learners' community and identification as a changemaker, a role associated with a constellation of values and intentions aligned with global citizenship. Participants' inclusive understanding of changemakers as what "anyone can be and do", and of collective action as relational, sustained, and collaborative practice, rather than individual, heroic efforts or episodic mobilisation, aligns with Freirean conceptions of social change. While constant exposure to a social media environment saturated with outrage-driven content can foster emotional fatigue (Chaffin, 2021), our findings suggest that critical education may offer alternative affective pathways, grounded in hope, joy, and belonging, to coalesce and motivate people to engage in sustained collective action, echoing Freire's and Martín-Baró's writings on *conscientização* as a means to overcome societal apathy and paralysis, or the "culture of silence". We encourage educators and facilitators to critically reflect on the balance between prioritising small actions and helping participants to reclaim a sense of agency and efficacy in contributing to social change, and the risk that incremental actions may be perceived as sufficient, limiting engagement with more ambitious or transformative forms of change.

Moreover, cultivating such relational spaces and a sense of critical hope need not result in conflict-free zones. Understanding “brave spaces” as central sites for the analysis of oppression and its impact on individual and collective levels, and therefore *conscientização*, as well as for strengthening individuals’ capacity to connect across lines of difference and enable sustained engagement in disagreement (Putnam, 2000), we suggest that adult and community education as well as GCE play a critical role in strengthening the relational and dialogical capacities required for communities’ resilience and capacity for collective organising.

United in their commitment to cultivating critically engaged civil societies and a common orientation towards grassroots engagement and social change, we argue that both GCE and community education are potential sites for fostering collective action on “glocal” scales. As the Changemakers Academy illustrates, it is pivotal that GCE programmes reconnect with the foundations of *conscientização*, by incorporating elements grounded in traditions of adult and community education in order to support participants’ capacities for action rather than overly focusing on their intellectual understanding of global issues. Equally, with its emphasis on dialogical, learner-centred and experiential pedagogies, community education provides a fertile ground for learners to engage in praxis that connects locally situated experiences and issues with global perspectives. However, as community education increasingly grapples with neoliberal pressures, including a growing emphasis on employability, measurable outcomes, and funding constraints, our findings suggest that the engagement with these Freirean foundations is equally important in this field.

Both fields can benefit from a social identity lens that attends to how learning processes are shaped through the interplay of programme design, facilitation, interactions, relations, and embodied experiences. These dynamics contribute to the formation of shared identities not only within learner groups, but also beyond the classroom, shaping how participants relate to the wider world and informing their sense of agency and capacity to drive social change.

Reflection on Limitations

As all participants were postgraduate students, they may not reflect the typical profile or diversity found among adult learners in Ireland. Their status as international students may also have made them particularly receptive to community-building and less focused on collective action, whereas Irish learners might have stronger and more established local networks and a

stronger focus on engaging in local mobilisation. Nevertheless, despite being students, several of the interviewees had significant work experience, similar to the first author (Lisa), who would similarly identify less as a university student, but rather a professional who chose to re-enrol and acquire additional knowledge and skills.

While the seven interviews provided rich and nuanced accounts, a larger number combined with participatory methods, such as group discussions or collective reflection, would have captured additional perspectives and facilitated more complex insights into the dynamics of community-building, identity negotiation, and collective action in this context. On the other hand, conducting individual interviews allowed participants to share sensitive issues, such as decisions to withhold information about aspects of their identity, which may not have emerged in a more public or collective setting. Furthermore, while the interviews provided rich accounts of participants' meaning-making regarding their experiences in the Changemakers Academy, longitudinal designs could help clarify if and how GCE translates into concrete action in both the middle- and long-term.

Conclusion

Returning to our initial question of if and how GCE and other forms of critical education contribute to social change in light of the current polycrisis, it is undeniable that both GCE and adult and community education engage with issues central to democratic life, including active citizenship, participation, community development, belonging, and wellbeing.

By bringing Freirean traditions into dialogue with social identity scholarship, this study offers new insights into how critical education can foster collective action. Through the embodied experience of community, participants developed a dual collective identity as members of a learning community and as global citizens or changemakers. This identity formation was associated with increased collective efficacy, hope, and a strengthened sense of agency in their capacity to effect change. These findings highlight the potential of both GCE and adult and community education to build capacities for sustained collective action. They also demonstrate how processes of *conscientização* can be understood as a transformation in how individuals perceive themselves as part of a collective. In this regard, a social identity perspective usefully complements Freirean approaches by illuminating how identities, norms, and efficacy beliefs are co-constructed through educational processes, and how these extend beyond the classroom to shape engagement in wider social and political life.

At the level of practice, our study underscores the importance of facilitators developing the skills and confidence to cultivate “brave spaces” in which participants can critically engage with systems of oppression, learn through dialogue and disagreement, and sustain relationships across differences. In this context, facilitators act as key role models: how they enact dialogue, navigate conflict, and embody the values of GCE and community education, becomes central to how norms of changemaking and community are learned.

While future research could explore longitudinal impacts, comparative programme designs, and diverse adult learner cohorts, this study points to the importance of intentionally aligning processes of identity formation with learning goals in the design and implementation of educational programmes. Beyond educators and facilitators moving away from deficit framings of adult learners towards identities centred on agency, relationality, and collective engagement, our findings suggest that strengthening capacities for collective action requires a renewed engagement with Freirean traditions of education, including *conscientização*, dialogue, and praxis. This, in turn, implies a shift in emphasis away from narrowly instrumental or employability-oriented framings of adult and community education and GCE, towards educational approaches that foreground collective meaning-making, relationality, and sustained engagement with social transformation. The transformative experiences of these participants in the Changemakers Academy underscore the potential of critical education to strengthen communities, inspire hope, and support sustained collective engagement with the complex challenges of our time.

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Power, Participation and Spiritual Development: Freirean Autoethnography in Post Catholic Ireland

PATRICIA HIGGINS

Abstract

This article presents a Freirean autoethnography of spiritual development in post-Catholic Ireland, tracing how questions of power and participation have shaped one Catholic woman's journey from deposited, institution-centred faith towards more critically aware, dialogical spiritual practice. Generative images such as stones, seeds, and gorse serve as codifications of a spiritual development and conscientisation arc, marking shifts from deposited, institution-centred spirituality towards more empowered, critically aware, participative praxis. The analysis suggests that spiritual development and critical consciousness around institutional religion merit further exploration as explicit strands within adult and community education, particularly where adults seek meaning beyond church yet remain marked by its legacy.

Keywords: Spiritual Development, Adult Education, Freirean Pedagogy, Autoethnography, Post-Catholic Ireland

Introduction

Cultural Context

Ireland has undergone rapid secularisation in recent decades. Catholic identification now stands at 69% (down from 78% in 2016), while those claiming “no religion” have risen to 14% (Central Statistics Office [CSO], 2023). Weekly Mass attendance has fallen from around 90% in 1979 to roughly one third by the late 2010s, and abuse scandals have further eroded trust in communal ritual (Ganiel, 2019). Where parish life once nurtured values of justice through Catholic social teaching, today's post Catholic landscape offers fewer shared spaces for collective moral formation (Inglis, 1998; Ganiel, 2019).

Following Ganiel, “post Catholic Ireland” here refers not to the disappearance of Catholicism, but to the erosion of its former monopoly in a context where identification, practice, and school patronage remain relatively high yet are no longer taken for granted (Ganiel, 2016; 2019).

Despite the fall off in weekly observance, Catholic socialisation remains pervasive. McKillican’s description of Ireland as “living downstream from Christianity” captures how even the de churched are shaped by Christian symbols, stories and institutions (McKillican, 2020, p.142). This is particularly evident in schooling: in 2023, 95% of primary schools in the Republic were under the patronage of a Christian church body, 88% under the Catholic Church (Department of Education, 2023). One result is that while some parents may formally opt children out of religious instruction, Catholic sacramental preparation through school often remains the main shared spiritual experience on offer to families. In recent years, the Irish Church’s Synodal Pathway has attempted more structured listening across parishes and dioceses, with national consultations indicating both strong appetite among participating Catholics for dialogical processes and anxiety that the process may not lead to meaningful change (Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, 2022).

Religious practice is also changing around life cycle rituals. Civil ceremonies now exceed Roman Catholic ceremonies as the most common form of marriage in the Republic, and official data indicate that Catholic weddings have fallen to second place behind civil registrations over the last decade (CSO, 2024). At the same time, international and Irish studies report rising numbers of people who describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious”, or who distance themselves from formal religion while still drawing on spiritual language and practices in making meaning (Tisdell, 2010; CSO, 2023). The renewed popularity of pilgrim paths in Ireland and the emergence of “spiritual tourism” in regional development plans further underline that spiritual seeking continues to surface in non parish settings (O’Keeffe, 2017; Fáilte Ireland, 2018). In this context, the intersection of spirituality, spiritual development, and adult/community education in Ireland has received relatively little direct attention (Tisdell, 2010).

Aim

This article explores how Freirean pedagogies of power and participation can illuminate a journey from disempowered, institution centred faith to more critically aware, dialogical spiritual practice beyond church walls. It also asks what this journey might suggest, in modest ways, for adult and community educators concerned with adults’ spiritual development, critical reflection on

inherited religious traditions, and how small, lay led initiatives can function as sites of spiritual innovation in post Catholic Ireland. Grounded in an autoethnographic account of my own experience—an approach that draws on ethnographic methods of seeking meaning and understanding in lived experience but turns that lens inward onto the researcher’s own life—the discussion uses Freirean concepts as lenses for interpreting a lived journey of spiritual change.

Alongside this wider context, my own journey has been marked by a series of images that have helped me make sense of spiritual development beyond church walls. On a pilgrimage walk in Glendalough in 1999, a guide invited us to walk around the ruins of Trinity Church with our right hand on the stone, recalling a Celtic tradition used to invoke light. When all our hands were on a stone, he said, “Warm hands once touched these stones... remember, you are the stones of a new Church.” That image stayed with me. Twenty five years on, I think of myself less as a stone and more as a seed, or a sower. This autoethnography traces my journey from “inside the stone walls” of Irish Catholicism to “outside,” creating lay led spaces for those “over Church,” partially or completely, but not over God. Along that journey, a set of image codes—stones, seeds, gorse—trace a conscientisation arc: Freire’s (1970) term for the growth of critical awareness through which people move from passively accepting their social and spiritual conditions to actively questioning and reshaping them. In this account, that arc runs from deposited spirituality to more generative praxis in which power and participation are shared rather than handed down.

The Theoretical and Methodological Framework section outlines my positionality as both researcher and research subject, and defines spirituality and spiritual development within the context of adult education. It considers the place of spirituality in Irish adult and community education and its relationship to the pedagogical work of Paulo Freire. The section also explains why autoethnography was chosen as the methodological approach, the sources of data drawn upon, and the Freirean analytical tools used, including images as codes and a four step process for working with the autoethnographic material.

The Autoethnographic Narratives of Power and Participation section presents a series of autoethnographic episodes, each narrated and analysed through a Freirean lens, highlighting how particular dialogical, image rich and participatory approaches contributed to shifts in power, participation, and spiritual development over time.

The final section, *Spiritual Development, Power and Practice Beyond Church Wall* revisits this spiritual development arc, identifies potential implications for adult and community education practice in post Catholic Ireland, and raises questions about how small, dialogical spiritual spaces—and those who facilitate them—might be recognised and supported.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Positionality

I write as someone who grew up Catholic in the North of Ireland, later worked in community education and young adult faith programmes such as Jesuit Volunteer Communities (JVC) and Slí Eile in Dublin, and now combines part time community integration work in Donegal with ministry as an interfaith celebrant. Over almost three decades I have helped to co create spaces to explore and express faith and spirituality, including small faith sharing gatherings, wedding and funeral ceremonies, and community-based integration activities.

With degrees in economics, management, and pastoral theology, and over 25 years' work linked to spirituality—including as a Jesuit Volunteer, interfaith minister, Ignatian spiritual accompanier, and Connecting Communities worker—I bring together reflexive praxis, economically informed social-justice analysis, and experience of combining Freirean approaches with Ignatian spirituality in creating spaces to explore spirituality in an Irish context. Ignatian spirituality, rooted in the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola, who founded the Jesuits, emphasises prayerful reflection on experience, imaginative engagement with scripture, and discerning how to act considering what one most deeply values.

For the purposes of this article, key formative experiences include volunteering with JVC, which I took part in from 1998-1999. It was a 10-month faith based residential volunteer programme that combines four days a week in community or social justice placements with one day of spiritual and personal development, and it gave me my first sustained experience of dialogical faith education and social analysis. Later, in the early 2000s, as one of two lay staff working alongside Jesuits in Slí Eile (meaning “Another Way” in Irish), a young adult faith and justice initiative offering retreats, volunteer programmes and reflection groups, I was involved in developing participatory retreats and reflection spaces that blended Ignatian spirituality, social analysis, and Freirean tools. More recently, I have been part of Still Point, a small lay led faith sharing group that grew out of former Slí Eile participants and their families and now

meets regularly, in person and online, to reflect on scripture and experience and to host occasional open gatherings and outdoor rituals.

All memoir data, autoethnographic analysis and conceptual synthesis are original and come from my own reflections as practitioner-researcher. I used an AI-assisted tool, Perplexity, to support literature searching, Leeds Harvard formatting, clarification of Freirean references, and structural organisation.

While my general education reflects privilege, it was not untypical among my peers who accessed college and postgraduate study; what was unusual was my access to spiritual formation post school—historically restricted to celibate religious vocations serving ecclesial power structures (Inglis, 2007).

Spirituality, Spiritual Development, and Spiritual Literacy in Adult Education

This article is a Freirean autoethnography of spiritual development in post Catholic Ireland. To support clarity for readers, three terms relating to spirituality need brief explanation: spirituality itself, spiritual development, and spiritual literacy.

In the adult education literature, spirituality is commonly understood as broader than organised religion, even when it includes religious belief and practice (English and Gillen, 2000; English and Mayo, 2016). English and Gillen (2000, p.1) describe it as an awareness of “something greater than ourselves that moves us outward toward others”. Tisdell (1999, cited in Fenwick and English, 2001) highlights its dual dimension of inner meaning making alongside connection with community and purpose. Fenwick and English (2001) call for clear analytical frames, while English and Mayo (2016) identify three core strands particularly relevant to adult education: relationship with a higher power (however understood), search for meaning, and justice oriented transformation.

In this article, spirituality is understood in line with these writers as an experiential awareness of “something more” that shapes meaning making, relationships, and commitments to justice, rather than adherence to a particular institution (English and Gillen, 2000; Lauzon, 2007; English and Mayo, 2016). Such clarity matters in Ireland, where spirituality can evoke suspicion—either as covert proselytising or as vague “new age” sentiment. Framing spirituality as dialogical meaning making linked to justice provides a grounded alternative compatible with mainstream adult and community education.

Spiritual development, on this understanding, refers to the process of growth within such spirituality across the life course. In childhood, particularly in contexts like Ireland where religious socialisation has been strong, spiritual development often centres on forming images of God or “the higher” and learning practices of belonging to a faith community, largely through internalising or resisting what authority figures teach. By contrast, the tasks of spiritual development in adulthood include critical meaning making: revisiting childhood images and doctrines, assessing whether inherited frames still hold, and deepening awareness of one’s own spiritual voice and its authentic expression in creativity, ritual, and justice oriented practice (Dirkx, 2006; Tisdell, 2010). This ongoing work of interpreting experience, questioning inherited religious frames, and discerning how to live in light of what one values most takes place both individually and in community, with increasing emphasis on voice, participation, and renegotiating power within those communities.

In my own practice, much of this work has taken the form of co-creating small, lay-led spaces to explore and express faith and spirituality together, but for clarity and to connect with existing adult education literature, spiritual development functions here as an umbrella term. Within adult and community education, spirituality is most often discussed in terms of spiritual development or spirituality and human development, with some authors also using the language of spiritual literacy to signal a more explicitly educative dimension (Tisdell, 2003; English and Mayo, 2016). The literacy metaphor has particular appeal in a Freirean frame, given that Freire first developed his pedagogy of the oppressed in the context of literacy campaigns with Brazilian adults, insisting that learning to “read the word” is inseparable from learning to “read the world” (Freire, 1970).

At the same time, the metaphor risks suggesting a fixed bank of content to be mastered, which sits uneasily with contemporary emphases on authenticity, subjectivity, and plural spiritual pathways (Lauzon 2007, English and Mayo 2016).

In this article, spiritual development is therefore treated as an umbrella term, encompassing meaning making, expression and belonging, while spiritual literacy names one strand within that broader process. Spiritual literacy refers here to adults’ capacity to articulate their own spirituality and to engage with, understand, and contextualise others’ spiritualities—to read, interpret, and critically respond to spiritual stories, images, and practices in ways that foster inner integrity, ethical responsibility, and more equal participation in spiritual communities (Tisdell, 2003).

Spirituality and Spiritual Development in Irish Adult Education

Traditionally in Ireland, structured adult spiritual development within the Catholic Church—commonly termed “formation”—was reserved largely for those preparing for priesthood or religious life, reinforcing both the theological prioritising of clerical vocations and hierarchical restrictions on lay adults’ participation and power (Inglis, 1998; 2007). Since Vatican II, theology, ministry, and formation courses for lay people have expanded, both in diocesan and university based settings, reflecting the Council’s emphasis on the role of the laity. JVC was one such programme, and distinctive in the fact that unlike many others, it was residential and involved living in community with other lay Jesuit volunteers for a year. The closure of JVC in Ireland, and the subsequent closure of Slí Eile, were in step with other developments in the Irish context since the early 2000s. Many centres that hosted formation and study programmes open to lay people have declined alongside wider institutional contraction, a trend Inglis links to the erosion of the Church’s social and cultural power in Ireland (Inglis, 1998; 2007). Newer initiatives, such as the Centre for Mission and Ministries at St Patrick’s Pontifical University, focus primarily on preparing lay people for pastoral and catechetical roles within church structures rather than on wider community based spiritual development (St Patrick’s Pontifical University, 2025).

In the broader adult education literature on Ireland, spirituality, religion, and culture are recognised as significant influences on adult learning yet are discussed less explicitly than in some North American and UK work (Tisdell, 2003). Questions of meaning and purpose are more often addressed in Irish adult and community education under headings such as personal development, community education or intercultural work rather than in courses explicitly named as spiritual (Tisdell, 2003; see also *Spirituality and Adult Education* studies summarised in Fenwick and English, 2001). Freire’s pedagogy has been taken up by Irish adult literacy and community education practitioners to support critical consciousness and social justice, for example through Training for Transformation and related programmes, and Freirean tools have been used selectively in parish based adult faith development initiatives such as Partners in Faith. However, there has been relatively little explicit attention to spiritual development or spiritual literacy as dimensions of adult and community education in their own right, particularly in settings beyond church institutions, with spirituality more often surfacing implicitly within other agendas than as a named focus (Fenwick and English, 2001; Tisdell, 2003; English and Mayo, 2016).

Against this backdrop, the Freirean autoethnography that follows treats spiritual development, including spiritual literacy, as adult education concerns in an increasingly post Catholic Ireland, exploring how dialogical, image rich approaches can support lay people to claim their spiritual agency and participate more fully in co-creating alternative spaces of faith and meaning beyond church walls.

Freire

Freire's seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, grew out of adult literacy campaigns in Brazil but was always intended as a more widely applicable political educational philosophy about how oppressed people become subjects of their own history in any context where domination operates (Freire, 1970; 1998; 2000). Subsequent theological and religious education work shows that his pedagogy can function as a way of doing Christian education and theology. Liberation theologians Boyd and Kirylo's study of Freire's faith, and Leopando's account of a "pedagogy of faith" all read Freire as a resource for dialogical, justice oriented spiritual formation rather than only for secular curricula (Boyd and Kirylo, 2017; Leopando, 2017; Dussel, 2018).

In this article, a Freirean lens is used to analyse selected memoir episodes, focusing on four interrelated concepts: generative themes, codifications, limit situations, conscientisation and praxis (Freire, 1970).

Generative themes are issues rooted in people's lived experience that reveal the structures of oppression and possibility—for Freire's literacy students, themes such as work, eviction, land, and hunger.

Codifications are condensed representations of these themes—photographs, drawings, words or scenes—that function as "challenges" to be described, questioned, and reimagined in dialogue; they are pedagogical tools, not mere illustrations, intended "to help learning the word and learning the world" (Freire, 1970, p.96). In this study, images such as stones, seeds, and gorse operate as such codifications of spiritual power and participation.

Limit situations are those structural or institutional boundaries beyond which, at a given moment, it seems nothing further is possible—yet Freire insists they are also "limits of possibility", horizons from which new historical projects can emerge (Freire, 1970).

Conscientisation names the process by which people develop critical awareness of how such situations are shaped by wider social and political forces, whether as the oppressed or as beneficiaries, and their capacity to act to transform them. Praxis is the inseparable cycle of reflection and action through which this critical consciousness is enacted in the world, “the reflection and action of men and women upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1970, p.79). These concepts guide the analysis that follows, highlighting how Freirean approaches supported shifts in spiritual development, power, and participation in my own journey.

Freire’s understanding of utopia is also referenced, though less so than the other concepts. He uses the term not to mean wishful thinking, but a hopeful, critical imagination of possibilities within real constraints, orienting praxis towards a more humanising future.

Method Choice - Autoethnography

Ethnography is a form of social and educational research that studies what people do and say in particular settings over time, in order to understand their meanings and practices in context (Hammersley, 2006). It usually involves a researcher spending extended time with a group or community, observing, listening, and gathering stories to build a rich picture of a shared culture.

Autoethnography extends this tradition by turning the ethnographic lens inward, connecting the researcher’s own experience to wider cultural, political and social meanings (Ellis et al., 2011). It blends autobiography and ethnography: the researcher’s life becomes the primary field site, personal memories and artefacts are treated as data, and first person narrative is interpreted through theoretical frameworks. In faith and adult education contexts, autoethnography is particularly valuable because it allows lay people to speak from their own experience in settings where institutional hierarchies have often marginalised their voices, and because it can access interior and embodied dimensions of spirituality that are difficult to disclose in conventional research encounters (Coyle, 2023).

In this study, those essential characteristics of autoethnography are enacted through a four stage analytic process: evoking and narrating memoir episodes foregrounds subjective experience; analysing each episode in Freirean terms provides systematic cultural and theoretical interpretation; identifying the role of Freirean approaches in shifts towards spiritual agency links personal narrative to wider practices of power and participation; and highlighting themes most relevant to *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner* frames the work as a contribution to shared discourse on the issue.

Autoethnographic work attracts critiques of first person writing, so it demands careful attention to research design, ethical safeguards, vulnerability, and analysis (Anderson, 2006; Ellis et al., 2011). This study recognises several inherent limitations. The aim is not to claim universal patterns, but to share one account that may resonate with others and illuminate wider cultural dynamics. This approach is open about my subjectivity and standpoint instead of claiming neutrality, which makes it possible to describe spiritual development and spiritual agency more than positivist methods usually allow. Drawing on personal memory and retrospective journals also brings limits and possible gaps in what can be recalled or selected. To address ethical concerns about others appearing in narratives, particularly given this risk of gaps in what has been recalled or selected, I use pseudonyms and composite characterisations to protect confidentiality while maintaining narrative authenticity.

Data

This autoethnography draws primarily on a retrospective memoir written in 2022, capturing 28 years' experience of working with others to create innovative spaces for spiritual exploration from the late 1990s to the mid 2020s, alongside contemporaneous journals, poems, and published reflections. Together, these sources form a living archive of vocational choices, tensions with institutional Church structures, and experiments in lay led spiritual practice.

Process

I followed four reflexive stages in analysing the data:

1. Evoke memoir episodes.
2. Analyse each episode in Freirean terms, attending in particular to dynamics of power and participation.
3. Identify the role of Freirean approaches in supporting shifts towards greater spiritual agency and co created practice.
4. Highlight those dynamics most relevant to *The Adult Learner* journal theme of power and participation.

Tolich (2010) defines vulnerability in autoethnography as a sense of heightened risk to self and relational others. To minimise this risk, I ensured no named individuals were harmed; couples and other identifiable participants were anonymised; and the Church was represented as a structure rather than as particular persons. As practitioner researcher, I maintain double reflexivity, simultaneously living the praxis analysed and interrogating my interpretations.

Autoethnographic Narratives of Power and Participation

Within the Walls: Banking Spiritual Education and First Dialogical Openings

I grew up in a Catholic family in Co Tyrone in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s. Religion and its practice were central to our identity, and parish support during my brother's illness and death aged six reinforced its importance. Heaven had loomed large for me as a child, and his death reinforced that. A nun told us, when I myself was six, that whether we got there would depend on how well God judged we had followed his plan, without offering any clear way to discern that plan. In that same year, before Pope John Paul II's 1979 visit, we were given vocations prayer cards: "Dear Lord Jesus, please help so many boys and girls love you so much that they will want to give their lives to you by becoming priests and nuns."

Looking back, this was banking spiritual education in Freire's sense. Authority figures deposited images of a male God as judge, embedded in a patriarchal hierarchy where power lay with celibate men, and lay participation meant accepting subservient roles. The messaging around vocations was arguably dehumanising in its unequal expectations: celibate commitment was elevated without space to examine fully why, and girls internalised a second class structure while boys absorbed unexamined privilege. These early experiences formed a limit situation, shaping how I understood God, authority, and my place as a girl within Church structures.

At 16, I attended what was intended as a cross community weekend at Corrymeela, a peace and reconciliation centre in Ballycastle, Co. Antrim. On the second day, the chaplain who was leading the group asked what we thought heaven was like. The Protestant school had pulled out, so all of us there knew each other well, yet it was the first time we had spoken about this kind of topic. After we had each shared our images, he asked, "What if heaven was a place on earth?"

In Freirean terms, this question was a simple but powerful dialogical move: he began from our own images and then opened up a new horizon. It prompted a small act of conscientisation, a shift from a purely other worldly understanding of heaven towards a new sense of God, prayer, and purpose as something that might be realised, at least in part, in this world. Theologically and in Freire's utopian sense, it hinted at heaven as "already and not yet"—a hoped for reality that could begin to be embodied in history through human action, not just awaited after death. This moment did not dismantle the banking formation I

had received, but it fissured it, introducing the possibility that faith could relate to justice, community, and everyday life in new ways.

During my time in college I joined an Ignatian young people's reflection group, drawing on the Jesuit tradition of imaginative contemplation and reflective discernment. In my mid twenties, having worked in IT for a few years, I joined the JVC programme. It involved four days a week in a social justice placement—in a community education centre in Ballymun, in north Dublin—and one day a week in a spiritual and personal development programme. Here I encountered a dialogical approach again, as Freirean tools were used, along with Ignatian approaches to reflection, to engage us with spiritual questions: our images of God, what being prophetic might mean today, and what we sensed we were “meant to do” with our lives. We did social analysis, reflected on our placements, and explored how we might act with those we worked with to make the world fairer. After JVC, I took part in both Training for Transformation and Partners in Faith training, which used similar Freirean tools in faith contexts to help people explore and deepen their faith and take action from it. Both these trainings, and other facilitation training, equipped me to move from participant to facilitator in such spaces.

These experiences marked a move from isolated dialogical moments to more sustained Freirean praxis. The Ignatian reflection group introduced me to imaginative contemplation, which offered an inner dialogical space with God, while the weekly meetings provided collective dialogue with others. JVC built on this by linking our young adult group life to concrete action in Ballymun and structured social analysis, avoiding the risk of purely verbal faith talk. This was comprehensive praxis: cycles of action in our placements, reflection in our spiritual and personal development days, and renewed action. Partners in Faith and Training for Transformation extended my participation from learner to co educator, increasing my agency in co-creating spaces for spiritual development with others, and modelling the kind of lay led conscientisation I now advocate.

Outside the Lines and Walls: A Limit-Situation in Relationship

If Slí Eile widened participation within Church structures, my relationship with one of the Jesuits I worked alongside pushed me beyond those lines altogether. I found myself outside the hierarchically accepted boundaries when we fell in love. After taking some time to consider, he left his order and his role as a priest. We planned to get married, but we were not going to be able to do that in the Catholic Church, as he had not formally left the priesthood. In the

Republic of Ireland in 2005, you could legally only get married in a Church or in a registry office. If you opted for the latter, there could be no mention of God or faith. This presented us with a real challenge, where both sacramental power and participation in public ritual were tightly controlled by institutional rules.

His decision was at the time framed by some as a choice between “giving his life fully to God” or “giving it to me.” We both felt strongly that this was a false dichotomy and did not want to reinforce it by opting for a marriage ceremony where there was no mention of God. So, we worked hard to find a way around the restrictions. In Northern Ireland, a limited number of hotels were able to hold registrar led weddings. These ceremonies also had a restriction on any expression of faith. By hiring two adjoining rooms and having our own ceremony, we were able to sidestep that restriction and have our faith based ceremony combined with a legal wedding.

We involved as many people as possible in the ceremony itself—friends and family. Two friends—a man and a woman—led the ceremony. One was married, the other single. Our parents blessed our rings, our godparents and my uncle (who was a priest) read a final blessing, our nieces and nephews collected stones we had invited people to use in an opening meditation, and a variety of friends read different reflections. We modelled the type of change we wanted to see in the Church, expanding who could participate and how power was shared in the ritual space. My biggest fear before the day was that, although technically we had things covered so that the wedding would be legal, the room itself would feel flat. I had cried at the thought that I would not get to walk down an aisle. I was scared that in the large hotel room it might be hard to shake the vibe of being at some marketing conference, or worse in a space that had previously held a teenage disco, rather than at our “special day.” I need not have worried. The gathering of people and the ceremony combined to make the atmosphere very special.

Seen through a Freirean lens, this was my first fully conscious resistance to the understanding of Church and leadership I had received through banking education. Our wedding became a lived response to a limit situation: the prohibition on expressing faith in a non Church ceremony, coupled with a structure that treated love of God and love of another as mutually exclusive paths. Two generative themes surfaced clearly.

First was vocation. The childhood message that one must choose between loving God and loving another was revealed, in practice, as a false dichotomy. Our ceremony embodied a different theology of vocation in which committed relationship and committed faith could belong together.

Second was Church itself. If Church is fundamentally people gathered in faith, then it need not be confined to clerical buildings. By weaving prayer, participation, and shared leadership into the ceremony, we created space to express faith beyond institutional control. Friends and family shaped the ritual. Authority was distributed rather than conferred from above. This was not abstract critique but embodied praxis: an action that both responded to a concrete constraint and prefigured a different way of being Church, with more equal participation and more widely shared power.

The ceremony marked a significant step in my conscientisation that lay people can create authentic spiritual space. It showed that Church, understood as community rather than structure, can flourish outside official walls.

Rewilded Faith: Moving Further Outside

In terms of what happened after our wedding, one image captured it powerfully for me. The image of “gorse beyond the walls” is captured in my poem “Woman of God” (Higgins 2018). Written after a bruising encounter with the blindness of the institutional Catholic Church to what women can bring, it crystallised a limit situation in the question: “Where do I go to be seen as a woman of God?” It grew out of an experience of glimpsing gorse aflame on a hillside outside the walled garden of a retreat house, at a moment when I felt radically frustrated at the limits placed on me as a woman, by the Church I was part of. That gorse beyond the walls image has remained a symbol of the vibrant potential of lay led, participative spaces that draw on Freirean tools to support spiritual development beyond institutional constraint. It joined with earlier images of stones and seeds in naming my own shift from being formed by the Church, and attempting to be part of its renewal, to co-creating participative spaces to explore and express faith and spirituality with others.

In the years after our wedding, several overlapping small groups emerged that provided space to continue to explore and express faith and spirituality with others. One strand was a group of former JVC volunteers, all women, who met together at least annually, and then began to also gather with respective husbands and children. Our current weekly online faith sharing group grew out of those connections. We now gather once a week from all over Ireland, rotating leadership, reflecting on scripture or poetry in light of our lives, and supporting one another’s social justice and community work. Rotating leadership and shared preparation mean that no one person holds ongoing power over the space: responsibility is spread, and participation is shared.

A second strand formed with others who had formerly been Jesuits, and their partners. This mixed group shared a desire not only to support one another, but also to offer open spaces for others who wanted something more (or other) than what was available in their local church. Out of this circle, we began to organise occasional, more public gatherings in outdoor and online settings. Others, who shared a background in Slí Eile or an interest in exploring faith also became involved in organising these events. This wider group adopted the name Still Point, inspired by TS Eliot's phrase "still point of the turning world" (Eliot, 2001, p.15).

From the start, Still Point gatherings adopted Slí Eile methods into rewilded settings. We experimented with outdoor faith sharing, family friendly liturgies, and simple rituals that could include children as well as adults. We learnt quickly that outdoor gatherings with potluck picnics from the back of cars, if raining, offered freedom and flexibility invaluable with children. It felt like gorse, aflame on the hill, beyond the walls. Other Still Point participants describe these spaces as "life giving reconnection" and "spaces to breathe spiritually" outside institutional limits (Still Point, 2021). A 2022 scenario planning process, documented in a Still Point report, likened such small group faith spaces to "war time resistance" in the face of wider institutional Church decline, underlining their perceived role as counter spaces where hope, community, and spiritual development can be sustained beyond formal structures (Still Point, unpublished).

Keen to find a way to work in a paid capacity in this area, I trained as an interfaith minister, a person who is now allowed to offer legal wedding ceremonies that include some expression of faith. I had my first wedding on the rewilded estate in Killyon just after COVID-19 and have gone on to lead 50 more since in a variety of settings. I use a dialogical approach with each couple, asking them to articulate their beliefs about marriage, who they would like to be involved in their ceremony, and how we can best capture what the day means to them. These dialogical rituals outside institutional Church walls—whether on a rewilded estate or the terrace of a hotel—further realise the gorse vision by widening who participates in ritual and how power is shared in its design.

COVID-19 provided the challenge of how to be the "gorse" online. Our faith sharing gatherings with friends managed the transition to online smoothly, and it was at this point they became weekly: they remain so at the time of writing, six years on. We gather once a week, from all over Ireland. All of us work in some kind of social justice or community work, and for each of us this gathering supports that work.

The open Still Point gatherings happened more frequently during COVID-19 as well, both online and in hybrid format—online while people were out in nature close to their own base. We put up a website and rather than replicate a hierarchical structure by being dependent on a web designer to make changes for us, we designed and managed the website ourselves.

One of our first gatherings post COVID-19 was on a beach near Dublin. As an icebreaker for small groups, I asked what pet Jesus might have had, followed by the question, “Where do you feel power?” After the groups reconvened, one of two younger boys replied to the first question: “a pigeon called Watcher”. I thanked him and moved to continue, until a young woman who had been in the group prompted him: “And will we tell them what we talked about around power?” Looking up, he said, “I feel powerful when I run”. There was a palpable hush. This little boy had a history of operations on his feet and legs, and for some time there were questions over whether he would be able to walk normally at all, let alone run. This was one example of how these gatherings can generate experiences that are more than the sum of their parts.

In Freirean terms, the Still Point gatherings and my interfaith ministry represent a shift into sustained lay led praxis. The gorse image has become a generative theme that shapes how we design spaces: outdoors, participative, low cost, and open to those who might feel marginalised in traditional church settings. Rotating leadership, shared preparation, and dialogical questioning distribute power more evenly, creating counter spaces where participation is not granted from above but co created by those present.

Dialogical Text Work: Rereading for Spiritual Development and Agency

Freirean problem posing can be used at an individual level as well as in groups. It is possible to take a dialogical approach into engagement with sacred texts themselves. My contribution to *Gathering: A Celebration of Women's Circles* (Higgins, 2025) demonstrates a dialogical rereading of patriarchal annunciation imagery, exploring what a fuller acknowledgement of the role of Mary in particular, and women in general, might have looked like. This textual work extends the lay led praxis described earlier into the realm of interpretation, treating readers' questions and experiences as valid starting points rather than deviations to be corrected.

Another text that lent itself to such dialogical work was (John 20:17), where the risen Jesus reportedly meets Mary Magdalene and says “Do not cling to me” when she reaches for him. This response jarred with me anytime I heard

or read it. If she had been one of the few who stayed to witness his brutal death on the cross, would he really brush her off in this first moment of meeting after that, when she would be realising he might still be alive? Using Ignatian imaginative contemplation, I stepped into the frustration I imagined Mary Magdalene must have felt, and raged at Jesus for his brusque response.

Giving space to this anger and frustration allowed room for the insight that followed: maybe Jesus needed Mary Magdalene's touch to know he was truly alive, and not just some kind of ghost. Her recognition confirmed his resurrection. "Do not cling" was not rejection—it commissioned her as first witness. It was asking her to be strong for him, for now. This gave rise to my poem *Mary Magdalene's thoughts on Easter Sunday afternoon* (Higgins, 2021).

These dialogical re-readings supported my conscientisation—a move towards interpretations of key texts that feel more authentic than those given through banking spiritual education. Both re-readings supported the possibility of increased women's agency: Mary and Mary Magdalene embody gorse beyond the walls figures, first witnesses whose experiences and leadership were initially sidelined yet central to the story. Such textual conscientisation complements the earlier practices by challenging power imbalances in representations of women and opening up more participatory ways of reading, in which lay women's questions and insights are taken seriously as part of shared spiritual development.

Mainstream Applications: Integration Work as Spiritual Practice

In addition to my work as an interfaith minister, I work part time with my local development company as a Community Integration Worker. In 2024 we secured government funding to promote the integration of International Protection Applicants through health and well being activities. As spirituality is recognised as a core dimension of health (Health Service Executive, 2022), I offered several "Self Care for Your Soul" walks as part of the project, including one during Donegal Social Inclusion Week in April 2025. These walks proved particularly effective in attracting roughly equal numbers of local residents and International Protection Applicants to a shared activity.

Each walk began in a local community space, where we introduced ourselves by sharing the origins of our names—an exercise recommended for intercultural groups in the *Intercultural Companion to Training for Transformation* (Sheehy, 2010). People were then guided in a short meditation, invited to connect with whatever they draw their energy and inspiration from, such as, God, nature,

the universe, and/or people who have gone before them. As we walked along the shore, we paused at points to consider themes such as sanctuary, journey, and transformation, using simple prompts, poems, and brief silences to invite reflection. Feedback highlighted the chance to meet people they might never otherwise have met and to talk about deeper questions in a gentle, non-threatening way.

In Freirean terms, these walks offered a small practice of freedom. Rather than positioning migrants as clients of services, they created a space where stories and meanings could be exchanged more equally between majority and minority ethnic groups. Dialogical methods, shared reflection and simple spiritual exercises—meditation, silence, being in nature—helped counter the othering intent of anti-migrant messaging by foregrounding shared humanity.

Summary of Autoethnographic Narratives

Taken together, these narratives trace one woman's spiritual development from banking spiritual education within Catholic structures to lay-led, dialogical practice beyond church walls. Across Slí Eile, an “outside church” wedding, rewilded Still Point gatherings, dialogical text work, and integration walks, Freirean praxis becomes visible in cycles of action and reflection that gradually redistribute power, widen participation, and support the growth of spiritually grounded, justice-oriented communities in both explicitly faith-based and mainstream settings.

Looking back across these episodes, many of the approaches that supported my conscientisation were not explicitly named, or perhaps intended, as Freirean. Standard adult education practices—small group dialogue, image work, and social analysis—became Freirean in effect when used to question inherited religious hierarchies and to link reflection on spirituality and faith with action.

Spiritual Development, Power and Practice Beyond Church Walls

Reading the Journey Through Freire

The narratives show how Freirean concepts of limit-situations, generative themes, praxis, and conscientisation can illuminate spiritual development from deposited, institution-centred faith towards lay-led, dialogical practice in which power and participation are more widely shared (Freire, 1970). Early spiritual education, using what Freire calls a banking method in which authority figures deposit religious knowledge into passive learners, presented God as a distant

male judge and vocation as a stark choice between loving God or another “fully”, embedding gendered hierarchies and tightly controlled participation (Freire, 1970). Over time, dialogical encounters, generative images such as stones, seeds and gorse beyond walls, and lay-led experimentation with ritual and small-group practice, enabled a gradual rereading of these limits as horizons of possibility rather than fixed walls (Freire, 1970). In post-Catholic Ireland, this arc traces a movement from being formed within church walls to co-creating spaces beyond them, where adults can explore faith, spirituality, and justice together, suggesting that power, participation, and spiritual development are closely intertwined in how lay people, especially women, learn to name and act from experience.

Gender, Patriarchy and Spiritually Sustaining Spaces

Mary Daly’s claim that “if God is male, then the male is God” remains useful in naming how patriarchal images of the divine and male-only structures of leadership shape women’s lives and limit their participation (Daly, 1973). In Ireland, many of the formal opportunities for adult spiritual development for Catholics have historically been located within institutional Church settings, particularly in programmes described as formation for priesthood or religious life (Inglis, 1998; 2007). Since Vatican II, such opportunities have widened to include lay people yet they have still largely been offered in church-related rather than community-based settings (Inglis, 2007). By contrast, the praxis described here suggests that Freirean approaches can also support the co-creation of spiritually sustaining spaces outside institutional church structures, where women’s experiences, questions, and interpretations become generative themes rather than marginal concerns, and where interpretive power is shared more widely (Freire, 1970). Supporting women’s fuller participation in interpreting texts, shaping ritual, and naming limits around leadership can therefore help shift entrenched religious male hierarchies. At the same time, these lay-led spaces—including the weddings, small faith-sharing communities and Still Point gatherings described earlier—also make room for some people whose participation in church life is constrained in other ways, for example LGBTQ+ people and others excluded from sacramental marriage. The potential of these lay-led spaces to widen participation and inclusion is only hinted at here but may be a fruitful area for further exploration.

Practical Considerations for Practice

Several practical considerations arise from this case for those who may wish

to create such spaces. Within groups that will meet on a repeated basis—such as small faith-sharing groups or wider Still Point-like settings—rotating leadership can help to distribute responsibility, encourage shared ownership, and lessen the risk of newer facilitators simply reproducing older clerical patterns; this concern aligns with later critiques of Freirean pedagogy (Vismara, 2022). Trauma-aware facilitation may be advisable when revisiting childhood religious images, since such material can carry fear, shame or exclusion; gentle pacing, clear opt-outs, and access to further support may reduce the risk of any possible re-wounding (Lotty, 2021). For both repeated gatherings and one-off events, attention to physical layout and symbols can matter too: circles rather than rows, avoiding raised platforms, and, where possible, outdoor or rewilded settings can help signal that every voice is welcome and that sacred space need not be confined to church architecture. The use of images and stories as codes may offer adults a way of rereading their own spiritual journeys and inherited religion in conversation with others, in ways that can support conscientisation while still allowing that people may be coming from different theological starting points. Were these practices to be more widely supported in adult and community education, the “gorse beyond walls” image may need to be revisited. Hedgerows that include clumps of gorse offer one image of such a development, suggesting that such spaces could be woven into new institutions while retaining something of their transformative sting. That said, while these codes have been powerful for me, and may also be for others, creating space for participants to find their own images is likely to have the greatest impact (Freire, 1970).

Small, Lay-Led Spiritual Innovation

The narratives above point to the role of small, lay-led initiatives as sites of spiritual innovation in post-Catholic Ireland. Over the period described, the Catholic Church has experienced a dramatic decline in clerical vocations and a reduction of parish-based structures that once carried much of the visible labour of spiritual formation and community life (Inglis, 1998; 2007). In Ireland, there are a number of small lay-led faith communities similar to our own, which, though not formally connected, draw at least some inspiration from the Latin American base Christian communities of the 1970s and 1980s (Hanley, 2018). Freire was not a member of those communities, but his pedagogy and their praxis can be understood as related strands within the wider liberation theology movement (Rosas and Orellana, 1981; Mackin, 2022). Within this wider pattern, weekly online faith-sharing, occasional Still Point gatherings, wedding ceremonies co-created with couples, and intercultural walks framed around spirituality, can be read as local expressions of an

impulse to craft alternative spaces of belonging and meaning at the margins of institutional provision. Such spaces may have particular significance for those who no longer attend church regularly, but they may also become important for practising Catholics as parish infrastructures weaken; spiritual work that develops adults' agency around their own spirituality equips them to discern how and with whom they wish to gather. These initiatives are not formally linked to adult and community education, yet they may align with its concern for agency, dialogue, and justice-oriented practice. From the perspective of this article, they can also be understood as forms of spiritual innovation: small-scale experiments in creating and sustaining spaces for faith, meaning-making, and justice-oriented reflection outside the institutional structures that have historically dominated this field. Seen through a Freirean lens, what matters analytically is their potential to redistribute interpretive and ritual power through praxis, even if, at this stage, the evidence comes from a small number of cases and remains exploratory (Freire, 1970). These counter-spaces remain small-scale, relational, and somewhat fragile. They depend on the time and energy of those who facilitate and participate and, while some activities such as ceremonies and certain community work are remunerated, much of the more explicitly spiritual exploration is voluntary. Their longer-term sustainability and institutional location, if any, are still open questions, particularly where spiritual exploration may be viewed with caution in secular education settings and where the historical dominance of clerical structures has limited current viable routes for non-institutional spiritual work to become financially sustainable.

Questions for Adult and Community Education

The narratives considered above suggest that small, dialogical faith spaces can endure over time, adapt to changing circumstances, and connect with wider community work beyond church walls. In my case, the weekly Still Point group gatherings and related practices have sustained spiritual development for those involved, while also showing how Freirean methods can travel into interfaith, partially post-faith, intercultural, and community integration settings. Rather than restating the limitations of the evidence, it is enough to say here that the account points to a wider possibility: that lay-led spaces shaped by shared reflection, rotated responsibility, and attention to power and participation, may have a role in supporting spiritually grounded engagement with questions of belonging, justice, and community life. For adult and community education, this raises modest questions rather than prescriptions. The purpose here is not to argue that small Christian, or other faith-based, communities should be incorporated wholesale into adult and community

education, but to suggest that educators might support adults' confidence and capacity to take ownership of such spaces where they judge them to be needed. Where dialogical approaches to spiritual exploration arise within broader work of reflection, integration or community building, what modest supports—for example, training, supervision, occasional convening of communities of practice, and access to rooms or outdoor settings—might help sustain them well? More broadly, the narratives considered here suggest that even tentative experiments in lay-led, dialogical spiritual practice can help adults co-create spaces that nurture meaning and belonging and sustain their individual, as well as any shared, action for a more just world.

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SECTION TWO

Case Studies on Improving Practice

Learning Across Borders: Power, Participation, and Lived Experience in Adult Education

DEBORAH ODEWORITSE ONIAH

Abstract

Adult and continuing education provides a distinctive space for recognising lived experience as legitimate knowledge, particularly for learners navigating migration, trauma, and social exclusion. This paper shows the transformative potential of adult education for empowerment, identity reconstruction, and community participation. Using a reflective and narrative approach, I analyse how formal, informal, and non-formal learning spaces, including higher education, Cork Migrant Centre, Nano Nagle Place, and community-based programmes, bridge personal experience and academic learning. It argues that learning is inseparable from lived experience, and that migration, trauma, resilience, and identity shape participation. While informal and participatory spaces foster agency, connection, and empowerment, formal education provides knowledge, validation, confidence, and access to opportunities. The paper concludes that trauma-informed, inclusive, and participatory approaches support both individual and community transformation.

Keywords: Adult Education, Migrant Learner, Belonging, Trauma-Informed Education, Inclusion

Introduction

Power, Participation, and Adult Learning

Adult and continuing education has long grappled with questions of power, voices, and participation, especially for learners whose experiences are marginalised within dominant knowledge systems (Freire, 1970; Brookfield, 2005). These traditions emphasise education as democratic and emancipatory, grounded in dialogue, reflection and lived experience. In

contexts shaped by migration, social isolation, and trauma, adult education is still profoundly relevant.

This paper examines how lived experience functions as a legitimate knowledge within adult and continuing education, drawing on my journey as a migrant woman navigating the asylum system, direct provision, trauma, and resettlement in Ireland. Learning occurred not only through formal academic pathways but also through informal and community-based spaces, which became sites of empowerment, identity reconstruction, and active participation.

Grounded in reflective practice and narrative inquiry, this paper shows how adult education can hold complexity, connecting trauma and healing, advocacy and learning, personal story, and scholarship. By valuing lived experiences, embodied, and relational knowledge, adult education challenges narrow ideas of learning, redistributes power, and fosters belonging, participation, and hope.

Methodology

This paper employs reflective practice and narrative inquiry as both methodology and pedagogy. Reflective practice supports learners in critically examining experience to transform meaning (Brookfield, 2017), while narrative inquiry confirms story as a mode of knowledge production, particularly for voices historically marginalised in academic discourse (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Throughout this paper, I draw on personal experiences of migration, direct provision, community learning, and participation in adult education spaces to illustrate how lived experience becomes a source of knowledge, empowerment, and identity reconstruction.

As a migrant woman, my narrative is shaped by my own lived experiences and not intended as a representative account, but it illustrates broader patterns within adult and continuing education. I have been both a learner and a practitioner: an advocate for women's mental health with AkiDwa, a national network of migrant women living in Ireland, Action Aid Ireland, and a trauma-informed practitioner and facilitator working with Quality Matters training panel. I draw on practitioner-research approaches that value experiential knowledge, relational learning, and critical reflection (hooks, 1994). This integration of emotion and analysis recognises that adult learning for migrants is inseparable from survival, healing, and the reconstruction of identity.

Learning Across Borders: Migration as an Educational Transition

Migration extends beyond physical movement; it is an ongoing cultural, emotional, and educational transition. The effect of migration changes the mind, a re-evaluation of one's identity, assumptions, and ways of knowing. My first years in Ireland were marked by isolation, uncertainty, and loss of identity. Education later became central in reclaiming agency, rebuilding confidence, and creating pathways from dislocation to participation.

Community-Based Adult Education as Sites of Power and Participation

Formal or non-formal and community-based education offered critical opportunities for healing, learning, and empowerment. At Cork Migrant Centre, peer learning, workshops, and short courses enabled skill development, a sense of belonging, confidence-building, and collective meaning-making. Participation in the women's group at the Nano Nagle Place, Cork, reinforced the value of dialogue, co-construction of knowledge, and collective empowerment (Brookfield and Preskill, 2009).

Community education exemplifies participatory learning where knowledge is created collaboratively. Through these experiences, I transitioned from learner to facilitator and mentor, embodying Freire's principle that transformative education requires learners to become co-creators of knowledge (Freire, 1970).

Higher Education, Inclusion, and The Sanctuary Scholarship

Inclusive initiatives at University College Cork, such as the Sanctuary Scholarship, enabled access to higher education for adult learners navigating migration, the isolation and mental issues caused, as well as trauma. Widening participation research emphasises that access alone is insufficient: meaningful inclusion requires supportive academic structures that address linguistic, cultural, and emotional barriers (Thomas, 2012).

Engagement in the Postgraduate Diploma in Trauma Studies combined intellectual challenges with a grounded and responsive learning environment, illustrating that higher education is a transformative space without replacing clinical intervention. Learning about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) provided me with a deeper understanding of myself and my own experiences, which supported my wellbeing and academic engagement.

Learning as Healing

Adult education prioritises safety, trust, collaboration, and empowerment. Two reframing insights were particularly transformative in my learning journey. First was the shift from asking “What is wrong with this person?” to “What happened to this person?”: a trauma-informed lens that recognises behaviour as an adaptive response rather than a personal limitation. The second was reframing lived experience as a legitimate knowledge base rather than a challenge, recognising that personal history can inform critical insight, participation, learning, and contribution within adult education spaces.

Participation in Action: From Learner to Facilitator

Adult education enables progression from learning alone to facilitating, advocacy, community leadership, and lifelong learning. In my case, engagement in parenting workshops, now facilitating sessions, as well as intercultural dialogue facilitation, and taking part in research and peer support proves how adult education supports relational and collective agency (Tett, 2010). Encouraging others to take part and access education creates ripple effects beyond individual learners, highlighting the transformative potential of adult learning.

Rethinking Knowledge, Power, and Participation

This narrative highlights the importance of recognising experiential, embodied, and relational forms of knowledge within adult education. When lived experience is valued, learning spaces can become more collaborative, with learners recognised not simply as recipients of knowledge, but as active contributors to it.

My own journey towards recovery and participation began in a coffee group at the Cork Migrant Centre and later continued at University College Cork. Beyond creating supportive spaces for migrant women to gather, connect, and share experiences, the centre also provided opportunities for adult learning through short courses and community-based mentoring. Through these programmes, I completed the trainer course which later enabled me to facilitate parenting workshops and intercultural dialogue sessions. I now serve on the panel of a national organisation in Ireland, supporting migrant families as they navigate legal systems, parenting expectations, and cultural differences. I am also a board member of AONTAS, The National Adult Learning Organisation, contributing to advocacy and policy discussion relating to adult and community education in Ireland.

These experiences demonstrate how adult education can move beyond participation alone to become a relational and empowering process in which learners are recognised as both holders and producers of knowledge. This is especially significant for learners navigating migration, trauma, and social marginalisation, where lived experience becomes a source of insight, capacity, and resilience.

Participating in learning also had a significant impact on wellbeing and belonging. Returning to education created structure, purpose, and connection, particularly as many migrants face isolation and uncertainty. For migrants like me, education becomes a pathway to identity reconstruction, social participation, and empowerment.

Current Policy and Barriers to Educational Inclusion for Migrants

While Ireland has, over the years, made progress in recognising the importance of adult education and migrant inclusion, the current policy environment presents significant barriers that undermine these gains. For international protection applicants, the introduction of the accelerated asylum process has intensified challenges regarding access to education. Migrants within the international protection system often face restrictions on their rights to work, limiting access to both the labour market and education. Prior to the new policy, access to education became possible six months after asylum application. However, under the new system, according to the Irish Immigration Service Delivery, applicants who receive a first-instance decision within six months are ineligible to apply for Labour Market Access Permission, effectively preventing many asylum seekers from accessing education and work during the protection process (Irish Immigration Service Delivery, 2025), leaving them in a prolonged state of limbo.

Also, for international protection applicants, children over the age of 18 are no longer considered dependent children within the protection process, even when they continue to live in one room with their parents. They are also not eligible for education; however, at the same time they are directly affected by the decisions made by the Department of Justice. This means that for education they are considered adults, while for decisions concerning everyday life, they are not. This situation leaves many families reliant on community-led spaces, informal learning spaces such as community coffee mornings, or peer-led groups. While this learning stays vital, these opportunities cannot fully substitute for structured, formal education pathways. Access to higher education scholarships, such as the Sanctuary Scholarship, becomes impossible

under these conditions, severely limiting participation and the potential for skill development, social integration, and personal development.

During my time in Direct Provision, *The Migrant Integration Strategy 2017-2020*, though requiring improvement, provided a framework for supporting migrants' participation in education and community life. Today this strategy has long expired, having concluded in 2021 (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017). Ireland currently lacks a coherent national integration strategy, leaving many migrants in precarious situations with limited access to formal learning opportunities and a structured integration process.

This policy creates structural barriers at a time when inactivity can intensify isolation, uncertainty, disempowerment, depression, and psychological distress, undermining mental health and the sense of belonging. Adult education has consistently proven the capacity to improve wellbeing, foster agency, and enable participation; the current policy framework, however, restricts these pathways. While accelerated procedures aim for administrative efficiency, they are reinforcing the structural exclusion that already exists. From an adult education and trauma-informed perspective, denying meaningful engagement and learning undermines agency, identity reconstruction, and social integration as human beings.

It is imperative that Ireland reconsiders these structural barriers. Migrants, including those under accelerated procedures, should retain the right to work and access education while awaiting decisions, enabling them to contribute meaningfully to society and feel recognised as human. Educational inclusion is not only a matter of personal development but also a social and public health imperative. By removing unnecessary barriers, Ireland could support integration, mental health, and social cohesion, aligning policy with the values of equality, dignity, and human rights.

Conclusion

Belonging, Solidarity, and Hope

Adult continuing education shapes identity, fosters belonging, and enables meaningful participation and independence. Through formal and informal learning, I moved from isolation to engagement, from silence to voice and advocacy. For example, participating in community-led learning spaces and peer support groups with AkiDwa Safe project, a space created to support migrant women and girls who have undergone Female Genital Mutilation, as

well as community dialogue groups, helped me rebuild confidence and improve communication skills after periods of uncertainty and exclusion. Returning to education also enabled me to engage more actively in discussion around social justice, migration, and domestic violence, areas that I now advocate for within my community and academic work.

Education strengthened my wellbeing by giving me a sense of purpose, routine, and achievement. It also inspired my children, who became more motivated in their own education after seeing my commitment to learning despite challenges, including becoming Student of the Year, Best Student in Irish, and receiving nominations for other achievements in college. In addition, education enabled me to contribute more meaningfully to my community through volunteering, peer research aimed at improving the lives of lone migrant parents, and community initiatives that encourage inclusion, such as Sanctuary Runners, and coffee morning groups across different areas of Cork.

In contexts shaped by migration, trauma, mental health inequalities, and the social fragmentation linked to race, religion, sexual orientation, disability, and other forms of exclusion, adult education offers far more than the development of skills. It provides connection, dignity, possibility, identity, and hope. By centring lived experience, embracing complexity, and applying trauma-informed and participatory practices, adult education can foster solidarity, empowerment, social inclusion, and meaningful social transformation.

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“I am still part of the world even though I am behind bars”: A Review of “A Footbridge to the Pathway”, an Adult Higher Education Learning Experience in Ireland’s Maximum-Security Prison

SARAH SARTORI, JOHN BALFE, AND KEVIN

Abstract

“A Footbridge to the Pathway” is a pilot degree programme in Community Leadership and Development delivered to students in Portlaoise Prison, Ireland’s maximum-security prison. This article reviews the initiative from the perspective of a participant in the prison, the initiative’s coordinator, and a lecturer on the programme, to provide a multifaceted overview of the programme’s success and challenges, as well as a rationale for why this type of programme is warranted within the context of prison education. Twenty-six men have engaged with the degree programme over the course of 24 months and have been challenged through sociological discourse with fellow classmates to explore topics such as Citizenship, Democracy, and Social Activism, within the confines of the prison environment.

Keywords: Prison Education, Group Learning, Marginalised Voices, Access to Higher Education

Foreword by Prison Participant¹

As someone in an Irish prison, my citizenship becomes paradoxical. While being legally excluded from civic participation, I may still be able to engage in acts of citizenship—such as writing, promoting the common good (advocacy), voting, or symbolic and even digital protest—that challenge excluding norms. This aligns with Iris Marion Young’s (1990) analysis of structural injustice, which calls for recognising marginalised voices in democratic discourse.

¹The incarcerated co-author is recognised here as a full author of this article. In keeping with the emancipatory, “education for all” principles that the programme embodies, and in order to honour his intellectual contribution, his authorship has been retained in full. The decision to retain his authorship, rather than to reduce his contribution to that of an anonymous source, is deliberate and consistent with the article’s commitment to recognising marginalised voices.

Before [participation on “A Footbridge to the Pathway” programme], I simply viewed citizenship as being the natural-born or naturalised status of a person, that automatically comes with identity, rights and corresponsive responsibilities to a State. In one session, the lecturer began by asking the class; What does democracy feel like? Is democracy happening for us now? If it is happening, where do you see it?

Most of my classmates answered that it was non-existent here in prison. They gave examples wherein we were not heard and, initially, I was thinking the same as the majority, having experienced these same scenarios. However, after much careful thought I brought my answer to the discussion table and argued that YES, although not 100% of the time, some form of democracy is happening and existing here in our prison community, because I know that there are several avenues and systems in place that can bring light or where we can assert what we need and want, and where we can influence decisions by the people or authority looking after our custody. But to do that successfully, the inmate concerned needs to be involved, be actively engaged and participative in taking leadership roles in this community. In short, citizenship and democracy, while two different concepts, in this context, are dynamic and relational.

One example of this in action is when it became challenging for South East Technological University (SETU) Portlaoise Prison students to secure additional access, outside of school hours, to the computer unit. The inmates coordinated in unison to make petitions, art murals, and host open forums. We argued that we are committed to lifelong learning, personal and community development, and on this basis we pressed successfully for extending access to use the computer facility.

Even though I am restricted physically to be enclosed in a cell most of my days, I believe I can still further radiate this awareness, realisation view, and advocacy of mine to be shared with not only my family and loved ones in my contact list, but also through interacting with the third-party services that look after our welfare and custody in this holding facility, potentially causing a butterfly or ripple-effect that may have the possibility to expand a million-fold.

After all, I am still part of the world even though I am behind bars.

“A Footbridge to the Pathway” – the Context, by Programme Coordinator

“A Footbridge to the Pathway” is a pilot initiative between SETU’s Lifelong Learning Department (LLL), Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board (LOETB), and the Irish Prison Service (IPS), and is a SETU higher education degree programme in Community Development and Leadership, delivered to men in Portlaoise Prison. This was in response to calls from people with criminal justice history for clearer education pathways to Irish higher education institutions to support a route out of crime (Meaney, 2020). While prison/university education programmes have been running successfully in the US, Canada, and the UK since the early 2000s (Meaney, 2020), there is currently no other higher education institution in Ireland that we are aware of, offering a complete, in-person, higher education degree programme directly to prisoners in any of the Irish prisons. This project is therefore groundbreaking in an Irish context, while speaking to the Community Development values of equality, diversity, and inclusion.

SETU has a strong relationship with the Irish Prison Service, through its programme in Custodial Care, which has supported 1000 recruit prison officers since 2017. “A Footbridge to the Pathway” complements SETU’s existing body of work in this space, by connecting people in custody meaningfully to higher education in Ireland through the provision of an adult educative higher learning experience. In September 2025, with the support of the teaching staff and prison officers in Portlaoise Prison, we delivered the final module of the first year of a degree in Community Development and Leadership. Twenty-six men have engaged with the programme, with seven having successfully completed all 60 credits, or the first year of an undergraduate degree, delivered entirely in the prison. Fourteen others have successfully completed between one and five modules of the programme. Programme delivery is ongoing.

Participating in higher education has been shown to improve self-perception and confidence, strengthen personal relationships, and reduce recidivism, yet outside of Open University (OU), which is a distance-learning education provider, there are limited opportunities for those incarcerated to access university (Gosling and Burke, 2019). Additionally, while OU offers invaluable access to a third-level qualification to those in a prison setting, the learning is largely autonomous, and teachers in the education unit of Portlaoise Prison were keen to see their students challenged through the group dynamics and methodologies of adult education pedagogy. This initiative has taken the

university experience inside a prison, opening up elements to higher education such as lectures, group learning and projects, discussion and debate, in a manner not previously accessible at this level within this context.

Prison Education as Resistance

People in prison are often forgotten, overlooked, othered, or seen as “not deserving” by mainstream society. The challenge of “othering” is heightened through demonisation and dehumanisation by the Irish media: a distortion that is fuelled by the use of language such as “animals” and “thugs” (Lalor et al., 2007, p.38), and highly charged adjectives such as “stomach-churning” or “sickening”. Added to this is the disproportionate amount of coverage given to rare and extreme crime that forms the bulk of media reporting (Black, 2015). The reality is that most people in prison have “been victim” to circumstances in their lives, which have played a role in their ending up in prison. One study found that, “people with childhood histories of trauma, abuse and neglect make up almost our entire criminal justice population” (Teplin et al., 2002, cited in Liddle et al., 2016, p.49). The research bears this out: in one study of 200 violent young offenders, 91% had experienced childhood abuse and/or significant loss (Boswell, 1996, cited in Liddle et al., 2016, p.35), while among women entering custody, 99% reported at least one traumatic life event and 81% reported five or more (Cook et al., 2005, cited in Liddle et al., 2016, p.35). These figures underline the significant link between early-life adversity and later involvement in the criminal justice system (Liddle et al., 2016). Another reality is that most people in prison will one day be returning into the community, and higher education can play a significant role in supporting desistance from crime (Hughes, 2021).

Ireland has an increasing number of people in prisons with severe mental illness (RTÉ, 2026), and as pressures on the prison system continue to escalate, the impact of overcrowding has become increasingly evident (Irish Prison Service, 2024). Contrary to the rhetoric sometimes heard on radio talk shows where callers-in who have never set foot inside a prison purport conditions to be akin to those in hotels, in fact the air in a prison is thick with indicators of anything but: prison is nothing like a hotel. Prison is alienating, bureaucratic, status-oriented, disciplinary, and has the capacity to strip a prisoner’s sense of self, hope, and meaning (Costelloe, 2014, p.32). Prisoners are required to appear when ordered, and to demonstrate their complacency and compliance within a system that operates through various structural deprivations: liberty, autonomy, goods and services, and heterosexual relations (Key and May, 2019). The loss of the societal markers of hegemonic masculinity can be seen as

contributing to a re-conceptualisation of masculinity through extreme adapted behaviours. Behaviours such as high levels of violence, callous sexual attitudes, and experiencing danger as exciting are a toxic and distorted reconstruction of masculinity into hypermasculinity, or what Anna Curtis (2014) refers to as “dangerous masculinity”.

However, within the confines of the education unit of a prison, there takes place another aspect of the daily routine for many prisoners that many adult and community educators would be familiar with, but which many members of the public would not. In the confines of the classroom, “tough guy” masks are lowered, and vulnerabilities revealed as part of the learning process. Researchers have expressed amazement at how often the word “freedom” appears in prisoners’ descriptions of prison school, and how this concept could be evoked within a system that denies it (Carrigan, 2015). We have heard prisoners refer to the prison classroom as a “sanctuary”, an “escape”, and a place where “you can forget where you are”, and within this system, adult education functions to restore individuals’ self-worth and as a means of resistance to the discourse that prisoners’ lives do not matter:

The classroom provides a ‘back-stage’, where students can be themselves and resist hypermasculinity by revealing their vulnerabilities and participating in a discourse that produces them as learners instead of threats, and people instead of numbers. (Key and May, 2019, pp.14-15)

“A Footbridge to the Pathway” – the Programme, by Programme Lecturer

Prison-based education requires a fundamental shift away from the traditional ways of teaching in higher education. With due regard to programmes such as Inside-Out—the prison-university education programme run by University College Cork in Cork Prison, which is based on the US “Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programme” and delivered as part of the BA Criminology degree in Cork (White et al., 2025)—this initiative adopts a different approach (albeit with similar objectives) in terms of in-person delivery of an Irish university degree inside the prison walls. The project has required the careful navigation of the protocols of a maximum-security prison while creating a democratic civic space for learning, that requires a shift from hierarchical ways of teaching to one where the lecturer develops more of a facilitator role (King et al., 2019). It also requires an insight into the hidden curriculum issues of context; prison requires a certain type of bravado from students to survive, but to learn effectively you need to cross that psychological bridge from a philosophy of punishment to a restorative

and rehabilitative learning space (Toews, 2013; McAleese and Kilty, 2020). That is what good facilitation does – it brings in collaborative peer learning (King et al., 2019), it integrates the students' lived experience with module content (Reuss, 1997), and it honours students as producers of knowledge and values them as educators in their own lives (White et al., 2025).

Perhaps the most transformative observation that I witnessed as a lecturer on this programme, and which occurred through multiple modules over time, was with the sense of identity, the shifting from the label of prisoner to university student. This transformation was evident through dialogue in the classroom, through assignment submissions, and through students' reflective journals and essays. Like other initiatives in Irish prisons and universities (see White et al., 2025), incorporating the narrative of the student's prior learning experiences and situating these within the context of poverty and exclusion, opens an alternative lens to education. By facilitating learning through a more inclusive and participatory conversation, whilst thinking critically about social justice issues (White et al., 2025), we allow for a more de-stigmatising understanding of education (Martinovic et al., 2025). From my perspective, often the key that unlocked this critical thinking was personal insight and the subsequent challenging of rigid thinking patterns. Students took the subject content and challenged themselves, and others, when critically analysing issues like democracy, citizenship, the environment, and social action, hence sowing the seeds for future restoration within their families and communities.

The teaching on this programme was not just a shift in pedagogical approaches. There were also hidden challenges such as navigating prison-clearance and incorporating the use of equipment that would be standard within a university such as laptops, projectors, and internet access, but which pose potential risks in a maximum-security prison. Added to this is the unknown subjective nature of transformative education, and the vicarious stigmatisation placed on educators from certain sectors in society when teaching on these programmes.

Despite this, when the pedagogical emphasis fuses the content with the life experiences of prisoners, it creates a liberating experience for the students to explore concepts, and indeed themselves, in an incarcerated environment. This can have a humanising effect (King et al., 2019), it can lead to positive changes in “de-othering” (Grady and Hamilton, 2019), it can facilitate transition of feelings of oppression to empowerment (Fayter, 2016), and the breakdown of hierarchical power dynamics can lead to broader, more positive identity changes (Kett, 2001). From a teaching perspective, “A Footbridge to the Pathway” encapsulated these factors and the pedagogy reconnected the students to be “still part of the world, even though I am behind bars.”

Conclusion/Reflections

Core to a transformative adult education pedagogical approach is critical thinking and self-reflection (O'Brien et al., 2022), as “once you learn to look at yourself critically, you look at everything around you with new eyes” (hooks, 1994, p.117). We often speak of the “ripple-effect” in prison education, as we hear anecdotally how prisoners’ families are positively affected; “my daughter’s applying to university” or “my partner is doing a course”. The “A Footbridge to the Pathway” project had a similar institutional ripple effect. At the end of every module, as the person coordinating the programme, I carried out an evaluation with participants, to assess how things had gone and to plan next steps with our university lecturers, and with the education unit manager and teachers in the prison. Teachers reported feeling that the programme “elevated” and “raised the bar”. John and other lecturers delivering the programme felt welcomed and supported within the education unit, and by the Irish Prison Service, who went above and beyond to facilitate entry and access. The intention is to extend the evaluation of this programme to pay attention also to the ripple-effect within our university, where we have seen first-hand how both our extended students and staff have been challenged to consider what we mean by “education as a right” and how we embody this principle, evident not least through the admittance of an incarcerated student onto our master’s programme in Teaching and Learning. Such an evaluation, planned for the next phase of this pilot, will build on learnings captured through resources like The North South Together toolkit, that shares learnings from two university-prison education classrooms in Cork and Belfast (White et al., 2025), and would afford us the ability both to share the project as an example of best practice, as well as to make clear recommendations on how to embed, sustain, and measure the impact of similar prison-university initiatives going forward.

As touched on above, the inclusion of prisoners on higher education programmes within the prison requires a reimagining, or perhaps revisiting, of traditional analogue education. McCabe (2025) highlights how digital skills have been made essential for societal participation, and that for adult learners without the ability to use the internet or digital devices, the risk of social exclusion is heightened. For people in prison, internet and digital access is severely restricted, for genuine security reasons, so one of the challenges in delivery is how we facilitate participation in a digital age in a manner that does not disadvantage this cohort in comparison with their peers.

This project has required the foresight and collaborative efforts of multiple agencies and individuals who got behind it, galvanised by a binding sense of common purpose. The challenge now is how to integrate this model sustainably,

meaning properly fiscally and materially resourced. We know that people in prison who go on to achieve a higher education qualification have a much lower recidivism rate than the general prison population (Behan, 2014). The school-to-prison pipeline is well-rehearsed in penological literature (Bacher-Hicks, 2021), and while the pathway might be less worn, “A Footbridge to the Pathway Project” has shown that changing the narrative to a “prison-to-college pipeline” (Dreisinger, 2016) is possible.

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Engaging Communities Through Creative-Based Practices: Case Studies from Formal and Non-Formal Education

FEDERICA LIBERTI AND SARA GEMMA

Abstract

This article presents two exploratory qualitative case studies conducted in distinct educational contexts. The first, based at the University of Victoria (Canada), involved two art-based workshops with undergraduate and master's students, and one session with doctoral students, to explore relational care practices within university settings. The second centred on several sessions of podcasting workshops developed in a social cooperative in Naples (Italy) as part of Italian as a second language (L2) course with Unaccompanied Foreign Minors and refugees. Drawing on participatory action research and autoethnography, both case studies share a commitment to researching with and for communities and employ creative practices as pedagogical tools for generating non-judgmental relational spaces in which unspoken dimensions may emerge. Taken together, these experiences highlight the potential of creative and care-based approaches to welcome vulnerability in both formal and non-formal settings, reconfiguring them as spaces oriented towards collective wellbeing.

Keywords: Transformative Education, Participatory Action Research, Art-based Practices, Care, Migration

Introduction

This article emerges from our encounters during doctoral journeys, our recognition of shared values, and from our desire to reflect together on the educational challenges within our respective life and research contexts. This shared reflection frames the introduction and conclusions, which were jointly authored and reflect the common theoretical, ethical, and methodological ground of the article; each case study section is written by the author who carried out the research. Our aim is to reimagine and

reconfigure educational and research spaces as sites of resistance, care, and transformation, highlighting the potential of creative-based practices.

Accordingly, this article presents two qualitative exploratory case studies across distinct educational contexts: one formal, carried out by Federica within the university, and one non-formal, carried out by Sara within a social cooperative working with young migrants and refugees.

Bringing these two studies together highlights a common relational approach to care in educational practice, one that extends beyond the specificities and constraints of different educational settings and the heterogeneity of participant groups, in order to cultivate meaningful participation.

Both studies involved the design and facilitation of workshops grounded in participatory action research (PAR) frameworks reflecting a shared commitment to research with and for communities (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). In both contexts, collaboration is central, and learning unfolds as a relational, situated, and transformative process, emerging through care, embodiment, creativity, and collective meaning-making.

Building on these considerations, we both positioned ourselves as participant-researchers within the process, drawing on autoethnography (Belbase et al., 2008) to sustain an ongoing reflective cycle through the use of field diaries. Across both studies, characterised by linguistic and cultural heterogeneity, we integrated creative practices as pedagogical tools in the design of the workshops to overcome language barriers and to enable more inclusive and attentive modes of expression. As Martikainen and Hakoköngäs (2022) suggest, artistic practices function as inclusive and participatory tools. Indeed, they foster the involvement of diverse social groups, make abstract social representations tangible, support the exploration of how individuals make sense of social reality, provide access to embodied and affective experience, and illuminate differences in values and norms that may otherwise hinder community-building.

Finally, we reflect on the ways in which contexts are never neutral, and on how creative educational practices rooted in care can contribute to the development of new visions for personal and collective futures.

Come and Be Grounded: An Art Workshop for Collective Care

Come and Be Grounded is a series of workshops facilitated within the educational context of the University of Victoria (Canada), where I had the

great pleasure to spend five months as part of my doctoral programme. The workshops were developed within a broader research study that explores care as a relational, political, and embodied practice. The study is grounded in a shift from cure—understood as the repair of what is damaged—to care, conceived as a practice of attention, presence, and relational accountability (Wilson, 2008; Thomas, 2018) capable of reshaping how we relate to ourselves, to others, and to the world.

Care has long been confined to the private sphere, feminised, and removed from political imagination (Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Clover et al., 2022). What might it mean, instead, to understand care as a relational infrastructure, one that actively shapes how we live, learn, and attend to one another?

Building on this conceptual core, the study was guided by the following research questions: “What does it mean to care, and to be cared for, today? How can relational care practices be explored and co-created in university settings? What transformative potentials might they hold?”

Autoethnography was employed as a reflexive device within the PAR process, enabling a critical interrogation of my dual role as researcher and participant. Within this framework, I integrated art-based practices into the design of the workshops. As noted in the literature (McNiff, 2008; Rolling Jr., 2016), art-based methodologies offer alternative languages through which to express what words alone may fail to capture, transforming emotions, intuitions, and perceptions into shared forms of knowledge, and rendering visible dimensions that might otherwise remain obscured.

It is within these perspectives that the workshops were conceived: as spaces inviting participants to explore mental health and relational care as shared, embodied, and collective processes. The aim is to reimagine educational environments—both formal, as in this case study, and non-formal, as in the one that follows—as sites more attentive to relationships, embodiment, and psycho-physical wellbeing.

The workshops, of approximately two hours’ duration, were conducted with different groups within the Faculty of Education, Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies, specifically:

- 16 master’s students in Leadership Studies: two sessions followed by a final walkthrough
- 27 undergraduate students in Social Justice: two sessions followed by a final walkthrough

- 10 doctoral students, researchers, and lecturers: one session conducted during the Association of Graduate Education Students' (AGES) Weaving Connections conference

During sessions with students, course lecturers participated not only as facilitators but also as co-participants, contributing to a shared process of exploration.

Guided by the question “What does it mean to be present?”, the workshops were co-designed to cultivate conditions for attentive listening, vulnerability, and shared meaning within a non-judgmental space. A wide range of materials, including collage, drawing, painting, and textiles, was made available. The spatial arrangement, organised in a circle with the option of floor seating, supported a co-inhabited space-time oriented towards relational presence. Such attention to care is significant given that university students face elevated risks of mental health difficulties (Merryman et al., 2015; Evans et al., 2018).

The first phase, “How are you feeling?”, began with a grounding and breathing practice aimed at fostering connection with self and space. Participants were invited to represent their experience through a chosen medium (e.g. writing, collage, painting), either by creating a symbolic creature—imbued with a name, shape, colour, texture, taste, and associated emotions—or by selecting an evocative image as a starting point for self-narration. Moments of sharing and reciprocal listening gently wove these individual narratives into a broader tapestry of collective understanding.

The second phase, “How are we feeling?”, invited participants to co-create a shared artwork, deepening engagement with care as a collective and communal practice.

A qualitative analysis, combining immersive content engagement with thematic synthesis, identified recurring patterns across participant groups. Participants engaged actively with the creative prompts, often describing the workshops as spaces that enabled forms of expression not always available within academic settings. The resulting collages constituted a key outcome of the process, functioning as a visual and symbolic map of a desired society, one that is attentive, empathetic, and just. Participants reflected on the interplay between social position, community care, awareness, action, and reflection as interconnected elements sustaining wellbeing across their academic journey (e.g. *Image 1*). Care emerged as a relational fabric, enacted through multisensory and intergenerational practices, frequently shaped by invisible and feminised labour, shared rituals, and ecological awareness (e.g. *Image 2*). It was consistently framed as a political, pedagogical, and affective practice, encompassing intersectionality, LGBTQIA+ rights, anti-racism, and economic



Image 3. Connections

A significant outcome was the articulation of interconnections between care, social justice, and leadership, shaped by participants' disciplinary orientations. Social Justice students articulated care and wellbeing in relation to justice, asking, for instance: "How can we care for ourselves while engaging in social justice work?" Similarly, Leadership students understood leadership as distributed and relational rather than hierarchical, rooted in trust, intergenerational exchange, and commitments to social justice. This was exemplified in an artwork representing an intergenerational "leadership tree", where leadership was associated with the sharing of knowledge and care practices, particularly through the figure of the grandmother. A small, crocheted element along the trunk evoked the weaving of care, relationships, and teachings, while a "medicine" placed at the margins recalled, in the words of one participant, the ability to "always have care ready for every situation".

While these patterns were shared across groups, differences emerged in how care was experienced and articulated across educational levels. Undergraduate students tended to feel care through relational and affective engagement; master's students more often conceptualised care as generative and pedagogical; while doctoral students and staff tended to problematise care, foregrounding emotional labour, burnout, and the need for safety and rest. These differences reflect situated forms of critical awareness and contribute to a plural understanding of care across educational trajectories.

The workshop was met with enthusiastic engagement, with teaching staff expressing interest in integrating these approaches into their own practice. At the same time, a recurring challenge concerned the limited time available for reflection and group dialogue, with participants suggesting longer sessions.

Findings are not generalisable, as they are grounded in a specific context, reflecting the ethical responsibility of caring for co-produced visual narratives. The prominence of care-related themes also reflects the lived experiences of a significant number of international and migrant students within the university context. These perspectives align with those emerging in the second case study on non-formal education with young migrants and refugees, despite contextual differences, and point towards a shared desire for renewed forms of collective care.

Podcasting as a Tool of Education-Mediation

Resilient Voice was a podcasting laboratory developed within a broader doctoral research project in experimental pedagogy in a non-formal educational context. The thesis work, grounded in qualitative and autoethnographic methodologies, involved two years of PAR carried out within a reception and integration cooperative for refugees in Naples, Italy. As a researcher and an educator engaged in migration reception and care, I was continually required to define and negotiate the boundaries of my positionality (Holmes, 2020) within the field during the initial phase of the research. In addition to observing the different dynamics of reception and case management concerning asylum seekers within the multidisciplinary team, I spent several months working in close contact with Unaccompanied Foreign Minors, particularly during activities related to the teaching of Italian as a second language, acting as a classroom tutor and support to the teacher.

The Italian as a second language (L2) support course was designed to address a set of interconnected educational challenges emerging in the reception context, particularly related to low engagement in learning activities, weak motivation in second language acquisition, and tensions affecting group cohesion and individual wellbeing among young refugees approaching adulthood. Specifically, during the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) A1/A2-level Italian course held from May to August 2024, a moment of team reflection brought to light the difficulties in engaging the young participants, also due to a series of tensions related to their cohabitation and the uncertainty surrounding their future. As often occurs among those approaching the age of majority, anxiety about the future and the possibility of having to leave the reception project, can generate a sense of distance from community dynamics and from the perceived necessity to attend the courses.

For this reason, the specific research questions that guided my observational pathway were: “What role can education-mediation play in promoting

wellbeing and preventing inter-group marginalization in vulnerable contexts?” and “How can creative tools promote agency and support the learning of Italian as a second language in a non-formal education setting?”

So, during the Italian course, according to the teacher, an educator-mediator, and a team of radio professionals who brought their recording and editing equipment to the Cooperative, participants were invited to co-design and co-produce a podcast at every stage of the process.

Erta-Maj and Vaquero (2023) classify podcasts among transmedia tools that facilitate education in non-formal educational contexts, while Smith (2019) highlights their potential as instruments of horizontality, fostering cooperation and critical reflection on practices. Particularly in highly complex and vulnerable learning environments, the process of producing a podcast (Menéndez et al., 2025) requires participants to negotiate among themselves the most appropriate modes of implementation, to assess the technical competencies available to them, and to decide how to construct an effective project both in technical and content-related terms. These are processes of collaborative multimodal composition that offer participants the opportunity to build partnerships among themselves (Sottocorno, 2025).

The workshop involved 15 participants aged between 16 and 18, from various countries, including Egypt, Tunisia, Sudan, Mali, Gambia, and Côte d’Ivoire, with French and Arabic serving as working languages. The activity spanned four months, with two sessions per week on average, each lasting two hours, amounting to a total of 60 hours of activities. The learning environment consisted of a multimedia laboratory and included the collaboration of two media education practitioners and a linguistic-cultural mediator.

The podcasting laboratory was integrated into the Italian L2 programme as a ludic-pedagogical device aimed at fostering engagement among learners with low levels of language proficiency and recent entry into reception pathways. Initial resistance, often linked to frustration with language learning—particularly among participants with limited or no prior schooling—was addressed through a game-based and participatory pedagogical approach. Linguistic barriers were further mitigated through an embodied approach to learning and the use of digital media tools, as participants progressively familiarised themselves with audio recording and video production equipment.

The first episodes of the podcast focused on the writing, recording, and editing of participants’ personal stories and migration trajectories, which were then connected to a broader discussion on hate speech and perceived stigma upon arrival in the

new cultural context, as well as on whether certain experiences of discrimination may have led to the internalisation of similar attitudes or prejudices.

As in the first case study, the embodied experience and the meaning of multicultural coexistence proved to be valuable tools for exploring identities in transition. Through thematic focus groups involving educators and mediators, adolescents from different cultural and religious backgrounds reflected on the communicative value of various expressions related to the sacred, music, and dance as manifested in their respective traditions. The reflections that emerged were collectively translated into a performative script, adapted to the learners' linguistic level, which served as the basis for the design and production of additional podcast episodes that have not yet been published. The methodological framework underlying this proposal draws on PAR, conceived as a form of knowledge that emerges through collaborative processes with the community. By producing podcasts, it becomes possible to gather narratives rooted in the lived experiences of key community figures, while simultaneously involving learners in the collective construction of their own stories. In this way, the approach fosters multimodal literacy practices that affirm oral tradition as a valid epistemological foundation and as a means to influence both formal and non-formal educational processes.

For this reason, adult education—rooted most of the time in complex and layered situations (Hoggan and Hoggan-Kloubert, 2021)—should implement education-mediation techniques that involve continuous reflection on their own practices, in order to be able to foster, even in conditions of marginality, communities of practice and forms of resistance (hooks, 1990) through participation as illustrated in *Figure 1*.

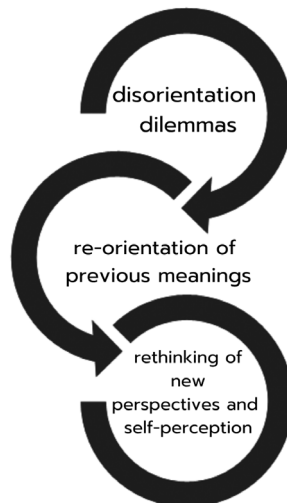


Figure 1. Adapted from Hoggan and Hoggan-Kloubert, 2021

The podcast was shown to be a democratic and participatory educational tool: those who, during the first weeks, were unable to write or narrate their own stories, and even less to perform them, were involved in the technical aspects of editing and sound systematisation. Through this strategy, participants were able to overcome the difficulties that had distanced them from language learning and instead immerse themselves in the script of their biographies, which were now transformed into stories to be told, e.g. as can be heard in the pilot episode of the podcast, J. states:

We faced a dangerous journey at sea; I feared for my life [...] now I am in Italy, learning the language and able to express my opinion through this microphone. This podcast is our way of giving a voice to those who are often not heard.

Conclusions

The reflections developed through the sharing of our respective workshop experiences have raised interrelated questions: “How might the academy be nourished by the knowledge already present within communities?” and “How might knowledge generated within academic spaces be meaningfully returned to those communities?”

While these questions remain open and require further exploration, our case studies highlight the pedagogical potential of creative practices as generative tools for collective questioning, shared aspirations, and the cultivation of a sense of community. In heterogeneous and often vulnerable contexts, care-rooted creative practices appeared to suspend judgement and enable broader participation through multiple forms of expression. As also noted in the introductory literature, creative mediation allowed for the elicitation of themes and needs that might otherwise have remained unspoken or unseen.

In relation to migrant inclusion and learner wellbeing, non-verbal and creative approaches opened up relational and playful dimensions, offering ways to hold tensions without necessarily resolving them while creating space for complexity to coexist. At the same time, our dialogue and exchange of practices brought to light several important differences. A first concerns temporality: workshops in the formal context were subject to more restrictive time constraints, limiting opportunities for sustained dialogue. A second relates to participation: although both studies were met with enthusiasm, engagement did not occur on equal terms. In the non-formal context, the reception community, the workshop formed part of a mandatory Italian as a second language course.

Nonetheless, beyond these differences, limitations, and structural constraints, the effort remains that of committing to relational care as a pathway for transformative learning, capable of nurturing and sustaining the capacity to imagine possible futures in an ecological, reflective, and caring way.

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Collaborative Pathways into Higher Education: Practice-Based Learning from SETU–An Cosán and the AONTAS Education Summit

COLM DOWNES

Abstract

This paper examines effective practices for integrating the learner voice within collaborative partnerships between student-led community education and higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ireland. Drawing on insights from the AONTAS Education Summit workshop and the long-standing South East Technological University (SETU)–An Cosán partnership, the paper situates practitioner and student perspectives within current policy, funding, and pedagogical contexts. It synthesises workshop contributions into seven guiding principles emphasising relational infrastructure, learner-centred design, flexible and place-based delivery, joined-up governance, adequate resourcing, policy alignment, and sector-level advocacy. By connecting national initiatives such as the National Access Plan and Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) funding with community-embedded practice, the paper offers a pragmatic model for sustainable, inclusive tertiary pathways. It concludes that whole-system commitment—across policy, institutions, and communities—is essential to embedding equitable, learner-driven access to higher education.

Keywords: Community Education Partnerships, Learner Voice, Widening Participation, Access, Inclusion Policy

Introduction

This paper examines good practice for integrating the student voice within collaborative higher education partnerships between community education and higher education institutions (HEIs). It draws on learning from the “Collaborative Partnerships for Pathways into Education” workshop,

where practitioners and students from further education (FE), adult and community education (ACE), and higher education shared experiential insights and co-developed guiding principles for future collaborations. These insights are situated within the longstanding partnership between South East Technological University (SETU) and An Cosán, Ireland's largest community organisation, and synthesised into a set of design principles to inform policy and practice across Ireland's tertiary system. The analysis is guided by three intersecting rationales:

1. Equity and participation policy under Ireland's National Access Plan (NAP) 2022–2028, which prioritises socio-economically disadvantaged learners, Traveller and Roma communities, and learners with disabilities while widening participation and success (Higher Education Authority [HEA], 2022).
2. The evolving funding landscape—particularly the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)—which increasingly mainstreams access supports and incentivises multi-partner, regionally embedded initiatives (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science [DFHERIS], 2025; HEA, 2025a).
3. The pedagogical foundations of community and adult education—learner-centredness, interactive practice, and empowerment—rooted in Freirean critical pedagogy and strengthened by contemporary research on community learning, social capital, and participatory action research (PAR) (Freire, 1970; Brookfield, 1986; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Tett, 2012).

By linking these policy, funding, and pedagogical strands, the paper offers a practice-informed model of collaboration that addresses barriers such as fragmented funding, childcare and transport gaps, digital divides, and challenges of trust and tokenism in integrating the learner voice. Emerging from the workshop, it synthesises key principles—communication, trust, learner voice, flexible design, resource sharing, collective action, and reflective practice—into actionable recommendations and a forward agenda for sustainable, inclusive tertiary pathways.

Context of the Project

The SETU–An Cosán Partnership

Since 2008, SETU and An Cosán have co-created a long-term partnership delivering evidence-based, holistic higher education pathways for adult learners from Ireland's most disadvantaged communities. Its distinguishing feature is a community-led, multi-level design integrating major National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) Level 7 and 8 awards in Leadership, Community Education, and Community Development, alongside stackable minor awards responsive to local needs. Provision combines SETU's online infrastructure with An Cosán's learner-centred wraparound supports—childcare, flexible scheduling, tutor support, and community learning hubs—removing barriers that have historically hindered adult participation (Tett, 2012).

In 2023, the partnership received €1 million from the Higher Education Authority (HEA) Performance Fund, enabling expansion of provision and holistic supports. This investment aligns with national commitments to widen participation, build institutional capacity, and support NAP's student-centred goals (HEA, 2022; DFHERIS, 2025). The partnership exemplifies cross-sector cooperation among a public university, a national community organisation, and local partners (Education and Training Boards [ETBs], development companies, Non-Governmental Organisations), demonstrating how tertiary system integration can operate in practice (Eurydice, 2025; HEA, 2025b).

Policy and Funding Alignment

Ireland's NAP 2022–2028 aims for a higher education population that reflects Ireland's social mix and for HEIs to become inclusive, universally designed environments prioritising student success (HEA, 2022). The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) advances this through multiple strands—PATH 1 (Initial Teacher Education access), PATH 2 (1916 Bursary), PATH 3 (regional/community partnerships), PATH 4 (Universal Design for Learning and intellectual disability supports), and PATH 5 (Traveller/Roma supports) (DFHERIS, 2025; HEA, 2025a). In 2025, PATH 1 and PATH 3 were mainstreamed, providing sustainable funding and enabling multi-annual planning—critical for partnerships reliant on stability and capacity building.

Beyond PATH, ESF+ investments (€508 million) support inclusive education and fund projects improving learning environments for disadvantaged students (European Commission, 2025). Additional supports include the HEA's Equality,

Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Enhancement Fund and the SOLAS/ETB Reach Fund, which resource institutional EDI initiatives and community education pathways (Grants and Funding, 2025; HEA, 2025b). These instruments prioritise measurable inclusion outcomes, requiring evidence of participation, progression, and impact among under-represented groups. Collectively, they incentivise data-driven collaboration, alignment with national priorities, and scalable, accountable practice (HEA, 2022; 2025c).

Pedagogical Foundations

The partnership's pedagogical approach is rooted in adult education's critical and democratic traditions, shaping how learning is structured and experienced. It has evolved through collaboration among community partners, learners, and HEI staff, responding to under-represented learners' needs for participatory, flexible, and locally grounded provision. In practice, this involves collaborative, discussion-based methods that use learners' experiences as starting points and position them as active contributors.

Learning is embedded in community contexts through group-based and peer-supported models that foster progression, confidence, and belonging (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). PAR is integrated into programme cycles, enabling learners and partners to investigate local issues and inform curriculum, pedagogy, and supports (Reason and Bradbury, 2008; Kemmis et al., 2014).

Critical reflection encourages learners and educators to examine assumptions and barriers to participation (Brookfield, 1986). These approaches respond to structural inequalities in access to higher education and align with Freirean principles of dialogue, agency, and praxis (Freire, 1970). While the NAP does not explicitly adopt an adult education framework, this pedagogical orientation aligns with its focus on student success and inclusive design, reinforcing the value of co-owned, evidence-driven, iteratively developed pathways (HEA, 2022; DFHERIS, 2025).

Model of the Project

The SETU–An Cosán model can be understood as presented in Table 1 below, across five key dimensions which, collectively, have supported the development of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), bringing together educators, support staff, and external partners in a shared enterprise focused on improving learner outcomes. Through regular interaction, knowledge exchange, and collaborative decision making, learning, support, governance,

and research coalesce around learner agency and social justice, operationalising national access commitments through data informed collaboration.

Dimension	Key Features / Components	Purpose / Contribution
Dimension 1: Pathway Design and Award Architecture	Major awards (NFQ L7 and L8) in Childcare, Addiction, Leadership, Community Education, and Community Development. Minor awards as flexible entry points and credit-stacking opportunities. Curricula co-designed with learners and community stakeholders, integrating local, national, and global issues alongside work-integrated projects.	Supports long-term educational progression and employment pathways. Enables flexible participation and gradual engagement with higher education. Ensures programmes remain relevant, participatory, and community-responsive.
Dimension 2: Delivery Modality and Digital Infrastructure	Blended learning model combining SETU online platforms with An Cosán community learning hubs. Digital inclusion initiatives including coaching and accessible materials.	Reduces travel and time barriers while maintaining peer support and community presence. Addresses rural infrastructure limitations and digital divides. Builds learner confidence and continuity in participation, aligning with ESF+ priorities for inclusive learning environments.

Dimension	Key Features / Components	Purpose / Contribution
Dimension 3: Wraparound Supports and Learner-Centredness	Childcare, holistic supports, flexible scheduling, tutor support, and advice services. Peer leadership, student representatives on programme boards, and student councils.	Addresses structural barriers affecting adult learner participation, including socio-economic and care-related constraints. Enhances retention, Learner Voice, self-advocacy, and co-governance. Reflects a holistic adult education ethos while highlighting tensions with the more individualised focus of the NAP.
Dimension 4: Governance and Partnership	Co-governance structures involving learners, adult/ community education representatives, and higher education stakeholders. Data-informed learning using progression, retention, completion rates, and qualitative narratives.	Promotes mutual respect, shared decision-making, and open communication. Supports adaptive management and accountability.
Dimension 5: Research Integration and Impact	PAR addressing community-defined problems and interventions. Doctoral research streams investigating systemic barriers and enablers.	Feeds evidence into curriculum redesign and service improvement. Strengthens policy advocacy and sectoral learning. Connects research, practice, and community impact in a continuous improvement cycle.

Table 1. Key dimensions of the SETU-An Cosán Model

Feedback from the AONTAS Education Summit Workshop (2025)

Data for this study was generated through a facilitated workshop involving approximately 45 participants, including learners and representatives from adult, community, further, and higher education sectors. The workshop, “Collaborative Partnerships for Pathways into Education”, included four short presentations to provide context and stimulate discussion.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups (approx. 15 per group), with broadly similar but varied sectoral representation. Each group had a designated rapporteur tasked with documenting (i) the guiding principles identified, (ii) key discussion points, and (iii) examples, challenges, and enabling factors. Participants were asked to collaboratively generate three to five guiding principles for effective partnership working, while also capturing additional insights that emerged. Groups recorded their outputs on flipchart paper and presented summaries in a plenary session.

Data comprised rapporteur notes and written group outputs. Our analysis used a thematic approach, involving iterative review and coding of all materials to identify recurring patterns across groups. We then grouped the codes into broader themes reflecting shared perspectives, while noting areas of divergence, enabling a synthesis of practitioner-informed insights grounded in participants’ experience.

Theme 1: Access and Infrastructure

A recurring barrier identified across groups is the lack of infrastructure, particularly in rural areas. Participants emphasised that while remote learning can be presented as a solution, it is not universally feasible due to connectivity issues and digital exclusion. Practical considerations such as transport and childcare were also highlighted as critical enablers or obstacles to participation. These challenges underscore the need for joined-up thinking between providers and policymakers to ensure equitable access.

Theme 2: Relationships, Trust, and Communication

All groups stressed the importance of open communication and trust building as foundational principles for adult education. This includes developing a common language among stakeholders and fostering mutual respect so that learners and practitioners feel valued for their strengths. Trust was linked to willingness to share vulnerability, which can create authentic partnerships.

Furthermore, networking and collective action were seen as practical strategies to share resources and reduce competition between organisations. The emphasis on learner-centred approaches—empowerment, participation, and avoiding tokenism—reflects a commitment to relational practices that prioritise dignity and agency.

Theme 3: Flexibility and Responsiveness

Flexibility emerged as both a principle and a challenge. Participants called for adaptive systems that respond to learners’ needs, including flexible frameworks and programme structures. This flexibility extends to recognising diverse pathways into education and valuing peer leadership and student voice on boards and within governance structures. However, tensions were noted around power imbalances (i.e. the number of learners versus the number of organisational representatives) which can undermine collaborative efforts. The need for proactivity—investing time and resources to build relationships—was highlighted as essential for sustaining engagement. There was a strong recognition of the role that funding plays in the integration of relationship-building into the jobs of those who staff these partnerships.

Theme 4: Resources and Sustainability

Resource constraints were a dominant concern. Groups cited lack of funding, human resources, and organisational support as significant barriers. This scarcity often leads to competition between stakeholders, creating a “tug of war” dynamic that detracts from shared goals. Participants suggested that advocacy from umbrella organisations (e.g. AONTAS) could help secure funding and reduce fragmentation. Creative solutions, such as leveraging networks to identify resources and coordinate supports like transport and childcare, were proposed as ways to mitigate these challenges.

Theme 5: Vision, Recognition, and Purpose

Finally, participants stressed the importance of a clear, shared vision for adult education. This includes clarity of purpose, common goals, and recognition that this work constitutes a “real job” deserving parity of esteem with other sectors. Reflection and creativity were identified as practices that can sustain this vision, ensuring that adult education remains dynamic and responsive. Without such recognition, there is a risk that people’s efforts are undervalued, which can erode motivation and buy-in from key stakeholders.

In summary, the feedback converges on five interconnected themes: access and infrastructure, relationships and trust, flexibility, resources, and shared vision. Addressing these areas requires systemic coordination, sustained investment, and a commitment to learner-centred principles that empower individuals and communities.

Guiding Principles for Future Collaborative Projects (Synthesis)

Drawing on the workshop data, an inductive thematic analysis was employed to synthesise insights from rapporteur notes and group outputs. This process identified seven guiding principles outlined in Table 2 below, which were then interpreted in relation to the SETU–An Cosán partnership as a model and the broader national policy context.

Principle	Core Focus	Key Ideas	Operationalisation
Principle 1: Relational Infrastructure— Trust, Common Language, and Parity of Esteem	Building trust, shared understanding, and equitable relationships across partners.	Shared language around concepts such as access, progression, success, and co-design. Recognition of mutual expertise among HEIs, community providers, and learners. Formal mechanisms (e.g. Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs), co-governance charters) to support parity and to resource relationship-building work.	Develop joint principles charters, shared glossaries, and co-designed decision-making protocols. Embed cross-organisational practices such as joint teams, secondments, and regular meetings. Allocate time and resources for relational work and facilitated dialogue. Ensure learner/ community representation through ambassador programmes and governance participation. Support staff development to build shared understanding and partnership approaches.

Principle	Core Focus	Key Ideas	Operationalisation
Principle 2: Learner-Centred Design—Empowerment, Participation, and Non-Tokenism	Embedding authentic learner participation and holistic support structures.	Participatory design and co-governance. Avoidance of tokenistic inclusion. Wraparound supports (childcare, transport, scheduling flexibility) treated as core programme elements. Alignment with inclusive and universally designed learning environments.	Conduct needs assessments through PAR cycles to identify material and relational barriers. Undertake resource mapping with local services. Integrate childcare and transport funding into project proposals.
Principle 3: Flexible, Place-Based Delivery—Blended Learning with Community Presence	Combining digital learning with local community-based support.	Recognition that remote learning is not universally accessible. Importance of community hubs, study circles, and blended learning for belonging and identity development. Attention to rural infrastructure and digital confidence barriers.	Develop and resource place-based learning hubs. Use blended delivery models combining in-person and online supports. Create hybrid timetables responsive to care and work responsibilities. Provide digital inclusion supports, coaching, and accessible content standards.

Principle	Core Focus	Key Ideas	Operationalisation
Principle 4: Joined-Up Partnership Governance— Collective Action and Smart Coordination	Coordinated governance, shared evidence use, and reduction of duplication.	Shared governance, pooled resources, and aligned evidence use. Critical examination of what counts as “evidence” in partnerships. Collective interpretation of data to avoid narrow performance framings.	Develop shared evaluation frameworks integrating quantitative and qualitative indicators. Conduct partnership audits of funding, resources, and services. Create collective processes for interpreting evidence. Advocate for collaborative funding and governance conditions through representative bodies.
Principle 5: Recognition and Resourcing of Partnership Work	Treating partnership-building as skilled, funded, and sustained work.	Partnership activity requires time, continuity, and expertise. Policy recognition through PATH 1 and PATH 3. Need for dedicated roles, budgets, and capacity development.	Embed partnership activity in organisational strategies and budgets. Develop formal agreements outlining goals and resource commitments. Establish joint resourcing models such as co-funded roles and pooled budgets. Create governance structures recognising partnership as a collective responsibility.

Principle	Core Focus	Key Ideas	Operationalisation
Principle 6: Policy Alignment and Evidence	Aligning projects with policy priorities and generating practice-based evidence.	Alignment with NAP targets, PATH strands, and ESF+ priorities. Use of PAR and doctoral research for iterative improvement. Reports used to inform policy reform and revisions.	Link project actions to NAP and ESF+ outcomes using mixed-methods evaluation. Produce policy briefs and thematic synthesis reports. Establish formal channels for policy engagement, including consultations and national fora.
Principle 7: Structural Enablement and Advocacy	Addressing systemic barriers through collective advocacy and enabling policy contribution	Structural challenges include funding, procurement, legal frameworks, and power imbalances. Advocacy requires collaboration among partnerships, HEIs, sectoral networks, and representative bodies. Organisations such as AONTAS support policy dialogue and dissemination of practice-informed standards.	Establish multi-actor advocacy coalitions engaging with DFHERIS, HEA, and ETBs. Convene policy roundtables and dialogue spaces. Develop sectoral codes of practice for equitable partnership working. Leverage funding streams (e.g. HEA EDI funds) to build cross-sectoral collaboration capacity.

Table 2. The Seven Guiding Principles for Future Collaborative Projects

Conclusion

This paper has examined good practice for collaborative higher education partnerships between student led community education and HEIs, drawing on the SETU–An Cosán model and AONTAS Summit practitioner insights

within Ireland's current policy and funding landscape. Seven core principles emerge and are described below:

1. Relational infrastructure—trust, common language, and parity of esteem—is foundational. This infrastructure must be codified and resourced.
2. Learner centredness is not a slogan; it is a core requirement in the design of curricula, supports, governance, evaluation through participation, co ownership, and non tokenistic voice.
3. Flexible, place based delivery sustains participation, particularly in rural or digitally constrained contexts, where community presence is indispensable.
4. Joined up governance—collective action, service coordination, and shared data—reduces duplication, recognises learners, and strengthens evidence and impact.
5. Recognition and resourcing of partnership work must be explicit; mainstreamed PATH strands signal a policy turn towards sustainability.
6. Policy alignment and evidence (NAP, PATH, ESF+) confer legitimacy and unlock scale—practice based research grounds innovation in real contexts.
7. Structural enablement and advocacy (via AONTAS and sectoral bodies) address procurement, legal flexibility, and funding fragmentation, embedding collaboration as standard practice.

A recurrent and central message of this paper positions a requirement for a whole system commitment to realise sustainable collaborative pathways: learner centred design, co governed partnerships, evidence informed improvement, and policy enabled resourcing. Ireland's evolving policy framework provides a platform; partnerships like SETU–An Cosán demonstrate feasibility; and AONTAS can catalyse sector wide adoption. The next phase is to institutionalise these principles, ensuring inclusive, lifelong higher education becomes a lived reality—not merely an aspiration—for adults across Ireland's diverse communities.

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Ancient Practice and Modern Participation: A Case Study of Winterage on the Burren

ORLA WATSON, AISLING MARTINA BURKE, AND EMMA CARROLL

Abstract

This article examines the Winterage Festival as facilitated by the Burrenbeo Trust as a model for adult and community learning. It argues that peer-led learning through active participation fosters belonging, trust, and shared responsibility in rural communities. By embodying learning within shared practices such as the cattle drive and informal discussion, the festival positions participants as learners and contributors. The case study illustrates the value of participatory peer-led approaches that connect learning and lived experience, and this is of value when applied to heritage activities. It concludes that place-based, culturally significant activities can strengthen engagement, support collective action, and sustain learning over time.

Keywords: Communities of Practice, Peer-Learning, Informal Learning

Introduction

Informal community-based learning is evident across many communities in Ireland and perhaps most notably in areas with rich cultural and environmental practices as a means of preserving the ways of the past while looking to the future. The Burrenbeo Trust has facilitated community-based, peer-to-peer learning and has provided the opportunity for the continuation and expansion of the rich cultural practice of Winterage, whereby animals are moved from the lowlands to the upper ridges of the Burren during the winter. This practice of reverse transhumance is informed by local ecology and is deeply ingrained in the local agricultural community. The Burrenbeo Trust's involvement has enabled peer-based informal learning to be placed at the core of the Winterage Festival, while also providing opportunity for the application of other learning forms through festival events that take place alongside the

Winterage practices. There is a wide appreciation of the cultural practice and interest in its preservation for future generations by providing opportunities for active community participation in this ancient tradition. This research seeks to answer the research question “How does the Burren Winterage Festival demonstrate informal peer community learning driving social transformation in the Burren?”.

Literature Review

The purpose of this thematic literature review is to outline seminal work in the areas of informal, peer- and community-based learning, thereby outlining a theoretical framework through which the Burren Winterage Festival can be evaluated to answer the research question. We subsequently examine learning in agriculture, indigenous practise and festivals to further inform and justify the evaluation.

Foundational Literature

Peer-learning, as characterised by Boud (1988), can be described as a reciprocal and bi-directional form of autonomous learning. This form of learning results in a mutually beneficial learning outcome whereby interdependent learning has occurred (Boud, 2001). Furthermore, power is seen as non-existent between peers who are deemed to be of equal authority with no hierarchical distinctions, despite potential differences in expertise or experience. Such learning lends itself well to informal adult education, particularly given its autonomous and interdependent nature, as reciprocal learning emerges naturally through peer networks as learners both contribute to and receive learning (Boud, 2001). The recognition of peer-based, equal-power, and mutually beneficial learning distinguishes peer-learning as distinct from hierarchical and formal models of learning, and positions it as relevant to informal community and agriculturally based learning.

Freire et al. (1970) formulates a problem-posing educational concept in which learning takes place within a mutually beneficial and bi-directional teacher-learner relationship. This formulation promotes informality between the teacher and learner and is consistent with Boud’s (1988) later expression of reciprocal peer-learning. When examined through a peer-learning lens, the relevance to informal adult learning and real-world scenarios as a form of expansive learner and teacher liberation is clear. Freire et al. (1970) also introduces a conflicting model of knowledge transfer from the oppressive teacher to the passive student

thereby framing learning itself as a form of oppression. However, oppression is framed as a changeable concept, not a permanent concept, allowing for this state to evolve and change. “Culture circles” (Freire and Ramos, 1974, p.38) are expressed as informal learning with a coordinator rather than a teacher, so removing some hierarchical formalities. Learning takes place via conversation and active pursuit of critical consciousness allowing the learner to lead the dialogue and link it to their lived reality. Critical consciousness is seen as an enabler of democracy (Freire and Ramos, 1974) and the evolution of students with critical skills enables learners to contribute to their education in an active role.

Communities of practice are identified as critical enablers of informal learning, whereby learning is embedded within community, and learners play a role as participants in a wider world (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Participants are identified as either new or existing entrants to the community, and their engagement and participation results in a cyclical community of practice (Wenger, 1998). While existing participants are recognised as valuable to the learning experience of newcomers, no hierarchy exists given the flat, mutually beneficial and bi-directional relationship, and this echoes the peer-learning literature (Boud, 2001). Wenger (2000) identifies three modes of belonging within communities: engagement, imagination, and alignment. This formalises a community of practice framework which situates learning firmly within a community organisation requiring active participation to facilitate the experience of belonging. As such, a community of practice demonstrates a model applicable to adult learners as it recognises learning through lived experience.

This foundational literature discussion seeks to establish a theoretical framework drawing on the works of Boud (1988; 2001), Freire (Freire et al., 1970; Freire and Ramos, 1974; Freire and Freire, 1994) and Wenger (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; 2000). It seeks to embed peer-learning (Boud), active and expansive learner experiences via critical consciousness (Freire), and community of practice (Wenger) as complementary concepts with relevance to modern, real-world application as demonstrated in the next section of the literature review.

Situating the Seminal Work in an Agricultural Festival Setting

Informal and peer-learning within the agricultural community is not a new concept nor limited in geographic scope (Darnhofer et al., 2016; Laforge and McLachlan, 2018); it is seen where farmers serve as subject matter experts and both experimentation and longstanding tradition exist together.

Indigenous knowledge is recognised as holding substantial value (Whyte, 2013). Cooperation between indigenous and non-indigenous experts and ensuring indigenous participants hold participatory power is therefore of high importance when it comes to matters of ecological concern. As such, the work of Boud (2001) remains relevant across modern applications of indigenous learning. Multi-generational indigenous knowledge is deemed critical (Laforge and McLachlan, 2018; Nesterova, 2020) along with the need for informal or social knowledge exchange which directly complements the community of practice belonging discussion outlined above (Wenger, 2000). Thus, there is scope for the application of the Freire, Boud, and Wenger theoretical lens identified previously to agricultural examples.

Peer-learning within the agricultural community is characterised by the sharing of knowledge held within the community (Cooreman et al., 2021). The informal nature of knowledge sharing which occurs through on-farm demonstrations enables real-life, practical interaction and reciprocal engagement among participants (Cooreman et al., 2021; Sutherland and Marchand, 2021). Peer-learning facilitates capacity building among rural communities (Vannary, 2025) where groups organically form and grow as participants invite friends, fostering a sense of belonging (Jalil et al., 2026). This permits rural communities to counteract the external structural pressures they face, namely economic pressures, market and price fluctuations, youth retention, and environmental challenges (Darnhofer et al., 2016; Mair and Duffy, 2018). Through participatory learning these actors are enabled to collaborate to ensure the sustainability of agricultural practices for future communities (Mair and Duffy, 2018; Utami et al., 2022). This complements Wenger (2000) as relevant to the creation of a community of practice.

While informal peer-learning is well established within wider agricultural literature (Darnhofer et al., 2016; Laforge and McLachlan, 2018; Utami et al., 2022; Wright, 2023), the role of cultural festivals as opportunities for informal peer-learning within agricultural communities remains under-explored. This paper proposes a triple evaluation framework leaning on the works of Boud (1988; 2001), Freire (Freire et al., 1970; Freire and Ramos, 1974; Freire and Freire, 1994) and Wenger (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; 2000) resulting in the demonstration of informal peer-learning driving social transformation using the Burren Winterage Festival as a case study. Festivals and cultural activities promote active participation in traditional praxis along with multi-directional knowledge transfer as characterised by Boud, (2001). Furthermore, festivals and cultural activities promote the inclusion of peripheral community members who belong to an outer circle of community thereby fostering inclusion and active participation by including those who are new or who otherwise might

experience disengagement (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Mair and Duffy, 2018; Rossetti and Quinn, 2021). In an agricultural context, festivals promote the inclusion of a geographic community that also recognises the value of their immediate surroundings. This mechanism of praxis and active participation can be transformative for community level resilience.

Methods

This work uses a qualitative instrumental case study approach (Stake, 1995) to examine the Burren Winterage Festival, considering the theoretical framework outlined in the literature review, using publicly available sources including charity and public body reports, and festival documentation. Data sources were thematically analysed through the triple lens theoretical framework of Boud (1988; 2001), Freire (Freire et al., 1970; Freire and Ramos, 1974; Freire and Freire, 1994) and Wenger (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; 2000).

Case Study: The Burrenbeo Trust and the Winterage Festival

The Burrenbeo Trust is a registered charity situated in Clare with activities centred predominantly around the Burren Region of Ireland. The charity involves itself with heritage preservation with strong inclusion of the local agricultural community (The Burrenbeo Trust, 2025). The Trust actively engages the local farming community and positions both themselves and farmers as co-stewards of the area. The Burren is a unique karst landscape consisting of lowland limestone pavements and upland hills bordering the Atlantic Ocean. Ecologically, the Burren supports flora and fauna specific to the area (Harrington, 2003; Hollingsworth and Collier, 2020) and traditional agricultural practices exist in tandem with the indigenous ecology, resulting in benefits to both.

The Burrenbeo Trust facilitates the traditional practice of Winterage alongside the local agricultural community. This practice involves moving cattle upland to limestone hills in winter and is recognised as a form of reverse transhumance (The Burrenbeo Trust, 2025). The limestone environment's thermal mass stores heat from the summer months enabling enough grass growth or "standing hay" while controlling levels of scrub which would otherwise choke native flora (Ford, 2022). Furthermore, rising water tables during the winter months facilitate stock survival upland. During the spring, cattle are moved off the mountains to facilitate new growth. The presence of cattle on the upland areas over winter both prevents overgrowth of plant matter and facilitates fertilisation of the rocky upland ground. As such, local indigenous knowledge and praxis are intertwined with ecological benefits.

Discussion of The Burren Winterage Cattle Drive

The key event in the Winterage celebration is the Cattle Drive when the local community and herdsmen drive cattle upland for the winter. This practice enshrines the agricultural focus of the festival and exemplifies active community participation in informal peer-learning. The free participation of the local and peripheral community facilitates informal learning as participants learn and actively take part (Lave and Wenger, 1991) in an ancient event of cultural, agricultural, and ecological importance, facilitating Boud's (2001) reciprocal knowledge exchange. The active participation in community practice fosters a sense of belonging among participants and results in "accidental learning" through doing (Wenger, 1998). Furthermore, the walk is led by local farming families and takes place in a different village each year: this fosters multi-generational, mutually beneficial, and bi-directional teacher-learner relationships characteristic of peer-learning, and local knowledge is transferred from families to learners without formal instruction.

The Winterage Cattle Drive directly exemplifies the problem-posing education model proposed by Freire et al. (1970) as learners do not receive direct instruction, rather they accompany those who hold the knowledge in tradition praxis. The ecological and agricultural reasons behind the tradition are under active discussion during the walk where participants gain knowledge through lived experience. Additionally, the festival rotates between local villages each year further broadening the scope of knowledge transferred. Revival and continuation of this traditional practice promotes peer-learning, informal learning, and communities of practice as supported by Freire et al. (1970), Boud (1988), and Lave and Wenger (1991).

Discussion of Festival Events

Ancillary festival events—including community food events, guided walks, workshops, storytelling, and music—support active community participation and both formal and informal learning practices. Throughout the festival, the emphasis remains on peer-led informal learning. During the most recent iteration of the festival in 2025, the community-led events offered fruitful opportunities for such informal learning, as well as more formal education. The Burrenbeo Trust endeavours to facilitate this learning and social connection in place, and ticket numbers increased in 2025 to 1,100 ticketed participants across the Winterage weekend (The Burrenbeo Trust, 2025).

Over the course of the week in 2025, webinars took place under the overarching topic of "Farming for Nature" (The Burrenbeo Trust, 2025). Inclusive

discussions focused on how farmers might transition to low-input, nature-focused farming methods, letting the farmers themselves share insights on the economic and environmental challenges of upland farming. This balance of direct instruction paired with peer-to-peer, multidirectional learning echoes the learning described in Boud (2001) and in the more agriculture-specific writings of Utami et al. (2022).

The remaining events of the festival portray the essence of concepts seen in Boud (1988) and Lave and Wenger (1991), with the events' semi-structured nature emphasising the importance of informal learning opportunities in community-driven situations. Farmers passed on their experience and learning to those of the community and other participants of the festival, sharing their rich histories and stories of Winterage itself. A community céilí presented an opportunity for fun alongside the exchange of local traditional music. A morning of planting native Burren pines offered an innovative way of contributing to the area and having informative discussions on the indigenous plants of the Burren. More formal learning offered balance to the week, but outside the confines of a sometimes daunting formal structure: farm walks led by Dr. Brendan Dunford included discussions on the uniqueness of the Burren and on how the community can contribute to protecting biodiversity in the region.

Events such as the exchange of stories by the farmers of the Burren sound directly with Freire et al.'s (1970) discussions on dialogical education, with old and young, farmer and participant, joining together to exchange their experiences and insights with one another. Dr. Dunford's talk spoke clearly to Freire et al.'s (1970) emphasis on critical consciousness, highlighting the history of this unique corner of Ireland while also offering the opportunity to hear from experts on what the community can do to protect the biodiversity of a region that the rest of the country could easily take for granted. In the 2025 schedule of events, the talk was put into action on the same day with the planting of native Burren pines—the festival participants taking real action to protect the region. The combination of these events, critically on the same day, is arguably the essence of Freire's (1970) concept of praxis: the reflection on what is occurring in the Burren and taking positive action to improve the situation.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of Legitimate Peripheral Participation and their emphasis on communities of practice are held at the core of the festival. The festival doesn't limit its target audience to the farmers of the Burren, despite events that do bring farmers together, but is inclusive of the entire community and visitors. Unfamiliar learners engage in discussions on what is happening in the area but also participate in the aforementioned Burren pine planting and in the event's capstone Winterage cattle drive. Through informal sessions,

people in the community shares their knowledge with each other and with anyone interested in joining them, thereby promoting the creation of informal peer communities (Vannary, 2025; Jalil et al., 2026).

Key takeaways from Boud (1988) form the cornerstones of the festival. It stands as an annual opportunity for the Burren farming community to bring their experience and expertise to the forefront. The inclusion of sharing histories and traditional song drives Boud's (1988) point that autonomous learning requires one to reflect. The informal and formal discussions, the walks through the landscape, and the drive towards real action in the locale encourage the peer-to-peer learning that is experienced during the week of events to blossom and continue to grow throughout the remainder of the year, emphasising the idea that learning does not exist simply in the moment that education is happening, but can (and should) be carried on after the event has ended.

Discussion and Conclusion

When considering the research question "How does the Burren Winterage Festival demonstrate informal peer community learning driving social transformation in the Burren?", a framework of informal learning was required to fully evaluate and to seek an answer. The Burren Winterage Festival offers a suitable demonstration of peer-learning (Boud, 1988; 2001) which is embedded in the multi-generation participation of festival goers, thereby strengthening communities of practice within the Burren (Freire et al., 1970; Freire and Ramos, 1974; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2000). The relevance of this work to the adult learner is the firm foundations which value the participation of experienced participants as peer participants and not as teachers. As such, adult learners are both valued contributors and learners from the informal learning process. The facilitation of this within a community sphere permits the extension of traditional practice and determines that ongoing social transformation in the Burren is protected by virtue of shared ownership of knowledge, practice, and responsibility across the community.

Peer-learning through active participation also emerges as a key recommendation for adult and community education. The Winterage Festival demonstrates how learning embedded within shared practices, such as the cattle drive and associated informal discussions, fosters a strong sense of community belonging. Participants engage as both learners and contributors, strengthening relationships and trust within the community. In a rural context, this sense of belonging is particularly pertinent in addressing ongoing external challenges. Consequently, community education initiatives should

prioritise participatory, peer-led approaches that embed learning within lived community experiences, as this not only enhances engagement but also supports collective action through shared responsibility and collaboration.

Situating the Winterage Festival around a core heritage activity, and developing a wider programme of events around this practice, provides a potential model for adult and community education. The Winterage Festival, facilitated by the Burrenbeo Trust, demonstrates how anchoring learning in a lived, culturally significant activity enhances engagement while increasing the visibility of local knowledge and traditions. The inclusion of recurring and complementary events supports sustained participation and reinforces learning over time. As such, community education initiatives should consider structuring programmes around a central, place-based practice in order to support ongoing engagement and enable collective action.

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Strengthening Workforce Capacity for Early Numeracy Through Communities of Practice and Reflective Continuous Professional Development

WEIYI LIU, CATHY STEENSON, JULIE BOOTH, BRIGINA O'RIORDAN, LÁNA CUMMINS, AND JOSEPHINE BLEACH

Abstract

This practice-based paper presents how the Early Learning Initiative (ELI), a community-based programme, uses continuing professional development (CPD) to strengthen educator capacity and support early numeracy learning opportunities. Delivered through partnership between homes, early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, schools, and a third-level institution, the programme combines continuing professional learning, communities of practice, family engagement, and ongoing evaluation. Drawing on educator evaluation data over three years (2022-2025), this paper analyses CPD feedback from 76 educators and numeracy event staff evaluation from 399 educators. Descriptive and thematic analyses were conducted for quantitative and qualitative data. The findings indicate high levels of educator engagement and confidence, with qualitative evidence highlighting the value of collaborative learning, peer discussion, and shared reflection. Educators also reported integrating numeracy more intentionally into everyday practice and strengthen children's engagement and family participation. This study provides practice-based evidence to inform the design of sustained CPD for early numeracy in disadvantaged communities.

Keywords: Continuing Professional Development, Communities of Practice, Reflective Practice, Educational Equality

Introduction

The Early Learning Initiative (ELI) National College of Ireland Early Numeracy Programme aims to strengthen numeracy learning from birth to six years. This programme delivers in areas of educational disadvantage through community

partnerships with parents, early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, primary schools, after-school services, local libraries, and a local third level institution and is supported by ongoing monitoring and evaluation (Bleach, 2013; 2015). While the early numeracy programme focuses on children's early learning experiences, its design recognises that equitable and sustained improvement depends on the adults, interactions, and settings that shape children's daily learning.

Drawing on communities of practice and reflective practice, this paper examines how a sustained continuing professional development (CPD) model supported educators' professional learning and reported early numeracy practice within a community-based programme. The study was guided by three research questions:

- How did educators experience the pre-numeracy workshops as part of the CPD model?
- How did educators report applying CPD learning in practice?
- What perceived changes did educators identify for children, parents, and staff?

This paper first outlines the programme background and delivery. Next, it reviews relevant literature and national policies on CPD, early numeracy and workforce development. It then presents the evaluation methodology, including the analysis of CPD feedback and numeracy event staff evaluation. Finally, it discusses the findings and this programme's practice-based contribution to strengthening workforce capacity and promoting early learning opportunities.

Background

To strengthen early numeracy learning in areas of educational disadvantage, the ELI Early Numeracy Programme was established in 2010. Internal evaluations over three years previously identified low levels of numeracy attainment within the local area (Bleach, 2015). These findings, together with national and international evidence on persistent inequalities in early mathematical development, informed the adoption of a community action research approach to support children, parents and educators (Bleach, 2013; 2015). The programme integrates child-focused activities with ongoing support and engagement by providing theme-related home-school-ECCE-community numeracy activities for parents and professional development for educators.

The programme operates through six interconnected cycles (see *Figure 1*). The professional development-focused cycles are now outlined.

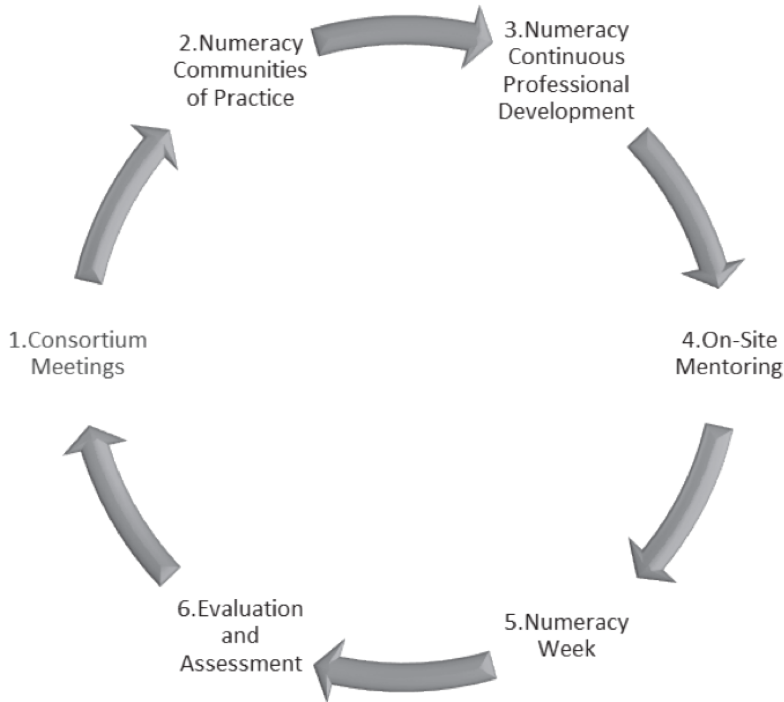


Figure 1. Programme Planning and Implementation Cycle

Strategic planning meetings involving school leaders, ECEC managers, community agencies, and ELI staff provide shared oversight and support reflective planning. The numeracy working group meets regularly to support planning, implementation, and review across participating settings. It brings educators across ECEC services and schools to share observations, reflect on practice and inform planning. The rotation of numeracy nominees across age groups broadens participation and includes diverse perspectives.

The pre-numeracy workshop, delivered approximately two weeks before each Early Numeracy Week (“Numeracy Week” in Figure 1), provides 1.5-hour CPD sessions focused on key pillars of *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2015), including planning, interaction, assessment, and learning environments. By combining collaborative planning and resources exploration, these workshops connect policy and curriculum frameworks with daily numeracy pedagogy.

On-site mentoring is provided before, during, and after Early Numeracy Week. Pre-week visits provide situated support in-week visits focus on implementation in practice, and post-week visits focus on reflection, documentation, and action planning. Early Numeracy Week brings children, parents and educators together through shared numeracy activities, with parents participating alongside their children using ELI resources facilitated by educators.

Materials, including resources cards and home-activity cards, which are co-developed with local educators from ECEC settings and schools, aligned with the primary school curriculum (NCCA, 2023) and *Aistear Síolta Guide* (NCCA, 2015), and reviewed collaboratively and iteratively.

Ongoing evaluations draw on educators’ feedback on CPD mentoring records, and parent feedback to support responsive professional learning and programme improvement.

Approximately 190 educators take part in the programme each year, including 28 participating in pre-numeracy workshops and 190 participating in Early Numeracy Week activities. *Table 1* shows the overview of participating services; age groups of children and number of child participants during the Early Numeracy Week in 2024-2025.

Type of Services	Number of Services	Age Group	Number of Child Participants during the Numeracy Week
ECEC Service	11	0-6 years	450
Infant Classes	11	3-5 years	574
Afterschool Services	3	4-8 years	185
Home Visitors	8	0-3 years	100
Local Libraries	5	0-8 years	Invites all above services in for Numeracy related activities

Table 1. Overview of Participating Services, Age Group and Number of Participants

Conceptual Framework and Policy Context

Early numeracy skills provide a foundation for later learning, shaping mathematics achievement and long-term academic success (LeFevre et

al., 2009; Skwarchuk et al., 2014). Children's mathematics development is strongly supported through every day and play-based interactions within their immediate environments, including the home and ECEC settings (Dunst et al., 2017; Susperreguy et al., 2020; NCCA, 2024). The quality of adults' interactions with children is therefore a key determinant of early numeracy development (Goble and Pianta, 2017). However, access to quality and adequate learning interactions and adult support is unevenly distributed across socio-economic contexts (Bleach, 2015; French, 2022; Pearson et al., 2024). Consequently, differences in numeracy knowledge emerge before children enter formal schooling and often persist across the school years, leading to unequal patterns of school engagement (Davis-Kean et al., 2022) and educational participation (Bleach, 2015; French, 2022).

Strengthening workforce capacity is one important way to support more equitable early numeracy development (Bleach, 2015; Government of Ireland, 2018). Research shows that CPD broadens teachers' understanding of mathematics and strengthens confidence and enthusiasm (Wayne et al., 2008; Bruns et al., 2017), particularly with participants reporting more positive attitudes than non-participants (Askew et al., 1997). These improvements in teachers' knowledge and dispositions are linked to higher-quality numeracy interactions and learning opportunities for children (Bruns et al., 2017; Goble and Pianta, 2017). Moreover, effective professional learning for educators requires more than formal qualifications (Smit et al., 2021) or one-off training sessions (Sheridan et al., 2009; Pearson et al., 2024). Sustained, practiced-based professional learning is more strongly associated with improvements in teaching quality and learning outcomes (Kleickman et al., 2016; Bruns et al., 2017).

In this paper, "community" is used in two related but distinct ways. First, it refers to the local partnership context involving ECEC services, schools, families, local libraries and a third-level institution. It also refers to communities of practice, where educators learn through peer learning, shared discussion and planning and reflection (Wenger, 2000). Therefore, the local community provides the programme structure, while the community of practice explains the professional learning process.

This study draws primarily on communities of practice, with reflective practice understood as a process through which learning within that community is examined and enacted. A community of practice refers to a group of practitioners who develop shared knowledge through regular interaction, joint engagement and collective work around a common area of practice (Wenger,

2000). This frames professional learning as socially situated and collaborative instead of the individual acquisition of knowledge (Vescio et al., 2008). Within communities of practice, reflective practice enables educators to examine their teaching, interpret evidence from their interactions, and refine teaching strategies over time (Bleach, 2013; Galea, 2012; Kleickman et al., 2016; Goble and Pianta, 2017). This is particularly relevant to ELI's numeracy CPD model that combines workshops, collaborative planning, and on-site mentoring, where learning is shared, revisited, and translated into practice.

Methodology

We used a mixed-method evaluation design to examine educators' professional learning within the early numeracy programme. Although the wider programme evaluation drew on multiple sources of data, such as parent evaluation forms, on-site observations, and photographic documentation, this article specifically focuses on educators' immediate experiences of CPD and reported influence on practice. We draw on two datasets collected from educators over a three-year period: pre-numeracy workshop feedback forms and staff Early Numeracy Week evaluation forms.

Participants were educators from participating ECEC settings and schools involved in the numeracy programme. We collected data as part of routine programme evaluation. The first dataset comprised CPD feedback forms completed by 76 educators following pre-numeracy workshops. These forms examined educators' experiences of workshop engagement, reflection, confidence and application of learning in practice. The second dataset comprised staff evaluation forms completed by 399 educators following Early Numeracy Week. These forms examined educators' perceptions of the value of Early Numeracy Week for children, parents and staff, alongside their reflections on how numeracy activities were planned, delivered, and embedded within practice.

Both evaluation forms included closed and open-ended questions. The closed-ended items generated quantitative data on satisfaction, engagement, confidence and perceived programme impact. The open-ended items invited reflection on workshop learning, numeracy practice and perceived outcomes.

We analysed quantitative data from both forms descriptively to identify broad patterns in educators' reported experiences and perspectives. We interpreted findings in relation to Veerman and van Yperen's (2007) quality standards, using 95% as the benchmark for participant satisfaction and 90% for programme goals achieved.

We analysed qualitative data from the open-ended responses using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. We analysed the CPD feedback and Early Numeracy Week evaluation forms separately to maintain a clear distinction between educators' immediate response after the workshop and their later reflection on practice. We began by reading the responses within each dataset repeatedly to become familiar with the data. We then generated initial codes from the responses and compared these codes within each dataset to identify recurring ideas and patterns. Next, we grouped related codes into broader categories and reviewed them for consistency. We subsequently refined these categories into preliminary themes that captured recurring patterns across responses before defining and naming the final themes to reflect the main ideas.

The authors reviewed and refined the preliminary themes together, considering their fit with the data, research questions and underlying categories. We also compared qualitative and quantitative findings to strengthen the credibility of the analysis through triangulation (Crewell, 2009). For example, we compared high quantitative ratings for Early Numeracy Week with educators' qualitative accounts of numeracy practice and child and parent participation to examine how these findings supported or extended one another.

Findings

The findings are organised into five themes that address research questions. The first two themes draw primarily on educators' CPD feedback following the pre-numeracy workshops, while the last three themes draw primarily on educators' feedback following Early Numeracy Week. While some outcomes are documented in ELI annual reports (ELI, 2023; 2024; 2025), this section shows how educators' accounts moved from professional learning to reported pedagogical change and perceived outcomes.

Theme 1: Peer Learning and Shared Knowledge

A central theme in the pre-numeracy workshop feedback was the value of learning with and from each other. Quantitative findings showed that 97% of participants agreed that these workshops were engaging and supported active participation in discussion.

The qualitative responses to pre-numeracy workshop explain the reasons for positive engagement. Educators valued the opportunity to exchange ideas with colleagues across services, with one educator describing "talking to the other professionals" as "of huge help" for sharing and "communicating different ideas

and resources” (Participant A, Pre-numeracy Workshop). Another educator valued being able to “chat to people who work closely with the local children” (Participant B, Pre-numeracy Workshop). This suggests that peer learning and knowledge exchange were especially useful when grounded in shared local knowledge and context.

Theme 2: Reflection as Preparation for Pedagogical Confidence and Change

This theme shows how pre-numeracy workshops supported educators to reflect on their practice and prepare changes in numeracy delivery.

Quantitative findings showed that 99% reported that the workshops prompted reflection on practice and would contribute to improved work quality, while 97% of participants felt confident in making changes in their workplace following the training.

The qualitative responses to pre-numeracy workshop suggest that this confidence was built through facilitator support, planning tools and opportunities to connect workshop ideas with practical strategies, such as involving children in planning, using “simple questions” and identifying “practical ideas that will work with children” (Participant C, Pre-numeracy Workshop).

One respondent (Participant D, Pre-numeracy Workshop) stated: “I find the group discussion led by the facilitator very useful for sharing ideas and collaborating for planning”, while another described the facilitator as “open to discussion” and “informative”. Planning tools also helped move reflection toward action, offering “an opportunity to bounce ideas around and be more prepared” (Participant E, Pre-numeracy Workshop).

Theme 3: Embedding Numeracy in Everyday Routines

The Early Numeracy Week evaluation data show that educators reported embedding numeracy more consistently into daily routines and play-based activities. For example, one educator reported using “time and routine” to help children connect math concepts with familiar daily activities, such as “morning, lunchtime, evening and night time” (Participant F, Early Numeracy Week). Another described child learning about “sequences and patterns” through books and toys from the resources box provided (Participant G, Early Numeracy Week).

Theme 4: Responsive Practice through Children's Interests and Resources

This theme concerns educators' use of programme resources and observations of children's interests to adapt to numeracy activities.

Educators described books, toys and resources boxes as practical support for delivery and motivate children's learning interests by sharing, "The children loved reading the new books that they received along with the toys from the resource box that was provided. Great week was had" (Participant H, Early Numeracy Week).

One participant valued the "extra resources provided to support children's leaning" (Participant I, Early Numeracy Week), while another described using "teddy and the box" to support positional language such as "in, above, and under" (Participant J, Early Numeracy Week).

Theme 5: Extending Numeracy Learning through Family Participation

The final theme concerns educators' accounts of family participation in numeracy learning. Quantitative findings of early numeracy week showed high perceived value of Early Numeracy Week, with 98% of educators reporting benefits for children and 96% for parents and staff (*Figure 2*).

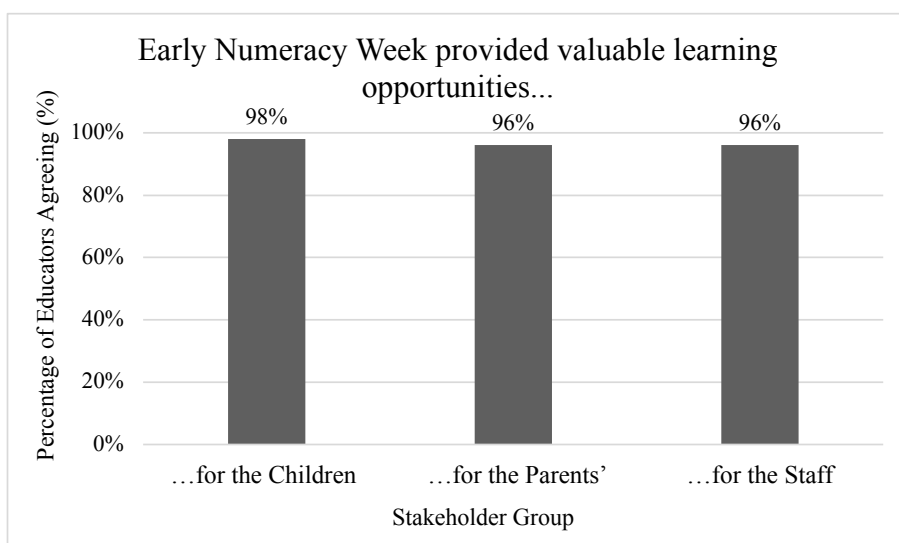


Figure 2. Educators Views on Value of the Early Numeracy Week (n=399)

Qualitative responses to Early Numeracy Week suggest that parental involvement was valued because it extended numeracy beyond the ECEC and school setting, and into children's home learning environment. One educator described children as "happy to play and work with their parents and siblings" (Participant K, Early Numeracy Week) during Early Numeracy Week. Another reflected, "I started realising the need [to] support parents required to deal with such subjects. I also could observe how it is around us daily" (Participant L, Early Numeracy Week).

Overall, these findings demonstrate clear links between professional development, enacted practice, and observed outcomes. The following images (*Image 1 and Image 2*) show how educators bring the learning from CPD Pre-Numeracy Workshops back to their setting.



Image 1. Numeracy Learning is Celebrated in an Early Years Setting in Dublin's NEIC (North East Inner City)



Image 2. Numeracy Learning is “Seen” in an Early Years Setting in Dublin Docklands

Discussion

The findings suggested that the main contribution of the numeracy programme is not only delivering early numeracy activities and CPD workshops, but also connecting professional learning with practice. This aligns with the study’s conceptual framework. The pre-numeracy workshops operated as a community

of practice, creating a space for educators to learn from each other, exchange ideas, and develop shared understanding of early numeracy. Reflective practice supported the translation of this learning into action, with educators reporting greater confidence, more intentional planning and increased readiness to adapt numeracy activities to children's interests. These findings also indicate that the programme moves beyond one-off training toward sustained, practice-based professional learning, which previous research identifies as more likely to improve pedagogical quality than isolated CPD (Vescio et al., 2008; Galea, 2012). Educators reported embedding numeracy in everyday routines, and drawing on provided resources to support play-based learning, suggesting that professional learning was repeatedly enacted in practice.

In addition, the programme puts policy priorities concerning workforce quality, continuous professional learning, and improvement in early childhood provision (Government of Ireland, 2018; Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2022; Department of Education and Skills, 2025) into action through a locally responsive approach. This includes cross-setting working groups that operate as communities of practice, professional learning workshops aligned with Aistear and Síolta, and the collaborative development of resources to support consistent implementation. In disadvantaged areas, these features are particularly significant, as they build collective capacity rather than placing responsibility on individual educators or families (Bleach, 2013).

It is worth acknowledging that the data were collected through routine evaluation forms and relied on educator self-reporting rather than using direct measures of observed practice or child outcomes. The findings are interpreted as evidence of perceived professional learning and reported changes in practice, and the consistency between quantitative ratings and qualitative comments suggests that sustained, collaborative, and reflective CPD can strengthen professional learning and early numeracy practice.

Conclusion

Guided by three research questions, this paper examined educators' CPD experiences, their reported application of CPD in early numeracy practice and perceived benefits for children, parents and staff. The findings indicate that educators experienced CPD as a collaborative and reflective process that supported professional learning. Educators also reported applying this learning by embedding numeracy more intentionally within everyday routines, using programme resources to support children's engagement and extending

learning through their parents' participation. These findings suggest that the programme's contribution lies not only in delivering CPD, but in creating sustained opportunities for educators to apply shared learning into practice. Although based on educator self-report, the consistency across quantitative and qualitative findings provides practice-based evidence that collaborative, reflective and locally embedded CPD can strengthen workforce capacity and create rich learning opportunities for the children and their families, supporting early numeracy provision in disadvantaged communities.

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SECTION THREE

Book and Policy Reviews

Book Review: *Radical Educators in Grassroots Contexts*

MAYSSOUN SUKARIEH AND STUART TANNOCK (EDS) 2026

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC

ISBN: 978-1-3505-8361-0

REVIEWED BY JOSÉ PEDRO AMORIM

This book brings together a carefully curated selection of radical educators—even when they do not use this label to describe themselves or their work—from different parts of the world. This aspect is significant from the outset. It reminds us that the world is far broader and more diverse than it is usually presented to us, and that knowledge and inspiring practices are not confined to a single language, culture, country, or region. In this sense, the editors have made a genuinely valuable contribution to epistemic justice.

Such enriching diversity invites countless different readings. Two main aims guided my own reading: first, to engage as fully as possible with what the book has to offer; and second, more specifically and personally, to explore the role that Paulo Freire may have played in the experiences described, as well as the possibilities and limitations of the university as a locus of radical education.

Thus, the interviews with these educators reveal numerous initiatives and projects I was previously unaware of, despite my deep interest in this field. To paraphrase the authors in their conclusion, this book “can offer vital opportunities for many [people, namely at universities] to encounter new ideas and perspectives they wouldn’t learn elsewhere” (p.268). These ideas and perspectives clearly demonstrate that praxis—as a dialectical relationship between theory and practice—is difficult to achieve, especially within the university context, as aptly portrayed in the pages of this book. Nonetheless, it is indeed possible. Moreover, it is necessary if we aim to contribute in any meaningful way to reducing inequalities and promoting social and environmental justice.

Regarding the “selection” of cases, I must say it is unusually diverse in terms of gender, age, geographical and cultural context, mother tongue, and, last but not least, perspectives. Indeed, there are markedly different—at times, tense

and even contradictory—ways of understanding radical education, formal education (especially at the university level), and the world itself.

Yet these remarkably diverse and distinctive initiatives also share important common features. I identify at least six, while recognising that other readers may find many more. First, each initiative is deeply rooted in a specific socio-historical and geographical context; in other words, each is profoundly local. Second, all demonstrate genuine respect for the communities to which they belong, rather than establishing relationships based on an extractivist opportunism, which we witness too often. Third, education is understood throughout as a genuinely collective process. None of the interviewees works in isolation: they are part of teams of educators, and the communities with whom they communicate (in Freire's sense, as opposed to extension) are collective subjects rather than groups of individuals assembled in classrooms for the sake of greater "efficiency" and "effectiveness". Fourth, all recognise that knowledges, cultures, and wisdom are extraordinarily complex and have multiple roots, namely popular—and not only formal, school-based, or academic roots—, in the Global South—not only in the Global North—, and in every language—not only in English or any other dominant language. Fifth, all embrace a critical perspective, and Paulo Freire provides an important intellectual foundation for many of these initiatives. Sixth, time. The time required for life to take root. Yet constantly accelerated in the insane and voracious world of capitalism.

The interviews constitute, therefore, an extraordinary collection of testimonies, a record of often untold stories and of a heritage that remains largely unacknowledged yet is of great significance. Recognising the co-authorship of the interviewees is very democratic and fair—and, unfortunately, still an uncommon practice.

Bringing these experiences to light is also a considerable achievement on the part of the editors. Their careful identification of the cases, the thoughtful way they conduct the interviews, and their contributions throughout the volume deserve particular recognition. Especially valuable is the theoretical and conceptual clarification they provide, helping readers to understand what radical education in grassroots contexts entails, the challenges it faces, and how it relates to neighbouring concepts such as "non-formal education", "community education", "popular education", and "grassroots".

In sum, this book shows that there are always alternatives, even to the alternative. It constitutes both an act of awareness—of radical education initiatives and fascinating people—and a call to transform our own contexts, towards the creation of a better (meaning more just) world.

Book Review: *Understanding the Experiences of Adult Educators: Narrative Lessons for Professional Knowledge, Values and Practice*

CAITLIN FAHY, MARIA N. GRAVANI, STEPHEN O'BRIEN AND GEORGE K. ZARIFIS (EDS) 2026

ROUTLEDGE

ISBN: 978-1-032-88870-5

REVIEWED BY CHELSEA WHITTAKER

This edited volume encompasses a collection of narratives from adult education practitioners, exploring how professional knowledge, values, and practice are shaped through lived experience. The book adopts a narrative approach to investigate the journeys of adult educators, positioning personal experience as both a source of knowledge and a site of critical reflection. In doing so, it seeks to demonstrate the value of narrative inquiry within the adult and community education field.

A key strength of the book lies in its commitment to centring the voices of practitioners. By foregrounding lived experience, the editors provide a textured and humanised account of adult education, encouraging readers to engage in reflective practice. This approach fosters a sense of connection and shared understanding across the sector. While the emphasis on narrative is compelling, the balance between personal storytelling and theoretical engagement varies across chapters, with some placing a stronger focus on reflection than analysis.

The volume acknowledges the diversity and intersectional nature of adult education, encompassing further education and training (FET), higher education, and community contexts. A consistent social justice orientation is evident, often underpinned by elements of critical pedagogy. The style and tone of writing are accessible, while still engaging with key academic concepts in a way that remains clear and approachable for practitioners.

Part one highlights the value of narrative methodology as a useful tool in the social sciences, particularly in education. Chapter two provides a clear

introduction to narrative inquiry as a methodology and will be especially useful to adult educators interested in writing about their own personal and professional experiences, as well as to researchers seeking to apply this approach more broadly. This chapter would also be a valuable addition to research methods modules across academic programmes.

The subsequent chapters (part two) explore the narrative experiences of a range of adult education practitioners. Chapter three, by Nuala Glanton, offers a nuanced account of providing adult literacy instruction within Ireland's FET sector, highlighting how lived experiences of practitioners and learners can differ from policy intentions. In chapter four, Maria N. Gravani reflects on gender dynamics within higher education, considering the challenges of balancing professional and personal roles, and how these experiences shape professional identity.

Chapter five, by Paula Guimarães and Jarinívia Souza, explores transformative learning through the lens of critical incidents, highlighting the importance of reflection in professional practice. In chapter six, Barry J. Hake considers how personal and professional experiences are embedded within wider economic, political, social, and cultural contexts, emphasising the broader influences shaping adult education.

In chapter seven, Bénédicte Halba reflects on a significant learning experience through an international programme, offering insight into both personal and professional development. Chapter eight, by Clare Hatcher, provides a particularly insightful reflection on adult literacy education, highlighting the impact of unmet literacy and numeracy needs, and offering thoughtful commentary on the Irish FET sector, emphasising the need for continued recognition of adult literacy at a societal level.

Chapter nine, by Milica Marušić Jablanović, explores the intersection of activism and adult education within a Serbian context, reflecting on civic participation, media freedom, and the evolving role of the educator. In chapter ten, Gaia del Negro adopts a creative narrative style, using the metaphor of the "couscous approach" to illustrate the varied and multifaceted nature of work within the adult education sector.

Chapter 11, by Markus Weil, reflects on the methodological considerations of sharing experiential knowledge, offering insight into the tensions and possibilities of narrative research. In chapter twelve, Ivor Goodson, in collaboration with Stephen O'Brien, presents a reflective dialogue on narrative

theory and practice. The conversational format provides an engaging perspective and highlights the flexibility and creativity associated with narrative approaches.

In the concluding chapter (part three), the editors draw together key themes identified across the volume, including identity formation, agency, emotional labour, and vulnerability as some examples. While these themes are well articulated, introducing them earlier in the volume might have further strengthened the connections between chapters and enhanced the coherence of the collection as a whole.

Collectively, the volume serves a dual function: it allows readers to engage with the personal, in-depth experiences of individuals whilst simultaneously offering insights informing and inspiring professional practice. Although chapters vary in structure and focus, common themes such as migration, non-traditional educational pathways, and professional identity emerge throughout. The honesty, openness, and vulnerability of contributors make this a particularly engaging read, offering a refreshing contrast to more conventional academic texts.

The book offers valuable insights into the personal and professional experiences of adult educators, an important perspective within a sector of the education system that is often underrepresented in academic discourse, particularly in Ireland. Overall, this edited volume successfully demonstrates the value of narrative inquiry as both a methodological approach and a means of understanding the lived experiences of adult educators. It will be of particular interest to practitioners and researchers seeking to reflect on their own practice and to explore the role of narrative within adult and community education.

Policy Review: *Creating Futures – Further Education and Training Strategy 2026-2030*

REVIEWED BY NUALA GLANTON

The third Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy, *Creating Futures – Further Education and Training Strategy 2026-2030*, builds on the work of the two previous FET strategies (SOLAS, 2014; 2020) with four strategic objectives:

- (i) equipping people with future-ready knowledge and skills; (ii) creating prosperity and social cohesion through inclusion; (iii) ensuring quality alongside innovation; and (iv) collaborating for impact. (SOLAS, 2026, p.4)

While these objectives appear to make common sense, when viewed through an adult and community education (ACE) lens, the focus comes across as much more on the economic than on the social objectives of FET. This review will look at each objective in turn.

Supporting adults in preparing for substantial societal and workplace changes has been a cornerstone of FET and ACE provision in Ireland since the 1960s. However, the first strategic objective is narrowly focused on “providing future-ready knowledge and skills that support priority enterprise sectors and drive innovation” (SOLAS, 2026, p.16). All the listed goals are enterprise and skills focused rather than people and community focused. While goals like “upskilling”, “agile training”, and “workplace innovation” are vital, the strategy lacks a corresponding emphasis on democracy, personal development and community engagement.

The ambition for goal two is very positive, from an ACE perspective: “Learning opportunities will be accessible to all, with universal design principles fully embedded and learner feedback ensuring ongoing improvement and impact” (SOLAS, 2026, p. 20). The emphasis on universal design is a positive extension of long-standing ACE practices. It is also welcome to see the value placed on learners’ voices: “The needs of learners and graduates are at the heart of the strategy and learner voices will continue to shape and improve the system”

(SOLAS, 2026, p.4). However, this requires meaningful representation rather than consumer-type consultation and surveys, which constitute tokenism on Arnstein's (2019) ladder of participation. The proposal for "student-union style structures" needs to do more than "identify opportunities" if the strategy is to be true to its aim of encouraging active citizenship (SOLAS, 2026, p.21). FET is ideally placed to model good practice and promote democracy and active citizenship through local, regional and national learner representation networks.

The objective of ensuring quality alongside innovation has the ambitious aim of "exceptional learning experiences that inspire and empower every learner" (SOLAS, 2026, p.15). The "FET College" (rather than "College of the Future" in the 2020 strategy) remains a central reform, and this strategy seeks to accelerate its development. However, many, particularly in ACE, remain unclear about what the concept actually means. The Teachers' Union of Ireland, for example, has viewed it as a nebulous concept due to varying interpretations (Waters, 2025) and emphasises that it needs to be more than a rebranding exercise (Quinn, 2026). Staffing reforms are focused on meeting future skills needs rather than on the holistic, learner-centred quality of provision, which is key to empowering every learner. Like the previous two strategies, *Creating Futures* emphasises an outcomes-linked funding model, which on the surface appears to be a fair approach. However, this model has proved problematic in practice; for instance, Education and Training Boards were recently faced with job losses and funding reductions (Breathnach, 2026), despite surpassing all targets and providing flexible support to over 40,000 Ukrainian refugees (SOLAS, 2024).

It is very welcome to see a refocus on collaboration, like the Vocational Education Committee approach to education through partnership. A whole-of-government approach has worked well in the *Adult Literacy for Life* strategy (Government of Ireland, 2021), but the focus in *Creating Futures* is only on a "whole-of-Government response on knowledge and skills" (SOLAS, 2026, p.27), i.e., the economic objectives of FET rather than the social objectives of community, social justice, or active citizenship. There is a strong emphasis on establishing a new tertiary education system ahead of the publication of a new *Tertiary Education Strategy*, raising concerns within the ACE sector that it will become further marginalised. There is little reassurance in *Creating Futures*.

Overall, *Creating Futures* continues the trend of previous strategies, prioritising economic over social objectives. There is a notable absence of values and reflection on the type of society we want to live in, apart from a market economy. For example, the purpose of the strategy is to "upskill Ireland's people

in the core competencies needed for an innovative and inclusive economy and society and progressing towards [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)] best-in-class levels” (SOLAS, 2026, p.13). However, the metrics referred to here are the *OECD Skills Strategy Dashboard* (OECD, 2020), which measures only skills performance, not inclusion in society.

In conclusion, there are some very positive goals and ambitions set out in *Creating Futures*. How they are interpreted, through a social or economic lens, and how they are measured will make all the difference. As seen with the previous FET strategies, it is not the goals, actions, or ambitions that drive change in FET; it is the Strategic Performance Agreement targets. These metrics will determine the priorities and focus of FET delivery for the next four years.

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Notes

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The Adult Learner is the Irish journal for adult and community education founded in the mid 1980s and is published by AONTAS, The National Adult Learning Organisation.

Its aim is to serve the needs of the adult education and lifelong learning community both in Ireland and internationally by providing a forum for critical discussion and reflection. The journal seeks to make new knowledge easily accessible to the widest possible audience through emphasising the importance of describing and critiquing practice and through publishing the results of research. The journal gives priority to subject matter that addresses issues of community, citizenship and learning and which focus on disadvantage, literacy and equality. It also includes contributions on how adults learn in formal, non-formal and informal settings including life and work contexts.

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