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**A Rancièrian consideration of the formal and informal
learning and knowledge of grassroots community activists**

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Abstract

As inequality grows, with the gap between rich and poor widening, education is regularly proposed as a way to tackle this disparity and to offer people a way out of poverty. The more educated people are, the wealthier and happier they are expected to be. Education policies and practice aim to improve people and their lives in order to improve society, business and the economy. Societal problems tend to be seen as learning problems which individuals are expected to solve through their own learning. If individuals do not take action to gain qualifications, the disadvantages they face are considered justifiable. With the emphasis on formal education and qualifications, what we learn informally is not recognised and valued and nor, it seems, are the people who have learned most of what they know informally.

This research explored the value of informal learning, alongside formal learning, in a context in which people work towards a particular goal. Community activism was identified as a suitable context. Using a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach, nine community activists from around Scotland were interviewed. This methodology, along with the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Rancière, facilitated an investigation of the topic by encouraging an openness to what participants said in the interviews and also how they said it. Three research questions guided the generation and analysis of the data. These considered how people positioned themselves in relation to learning and knowledge, what they learned and the role of both formal and informal learning in bringing about change in communities.

While it is not unusual to find Foucault employed in such research, it is less common for Rancière to provide an analytical lens. Doing so here has proved very productive in highlighting the need to perceive people, education and equality differently. If we are to solve the problem of inequality through education, we need to be able to see that problem differently. The problem is often presented as a gap in attainment. Using Rancière, we can conceive instead of a dividing line. On one side of the line is that which can be counted as knowledge and those who are considered to know and think. On the other, there is nonsense and those who do not know or think – those who are excluded and whose knowledge is discounted. While policy reform after policy reform has not succeeded in reducing the gap, work which seeks to breach the dividing line might have more success in working towards a more equal world. The examples from the participants in this study indicate how this might be achieved through claiming the right to speak and be heard.

Table of Contents

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Author's declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

I have worked as an Adult Literacies Worker with a local authority in Scotland for several years. This work, along with personal experiences, raised a number of questions about the way education is structured. I was particularly interested in understanding why formal education did not seem to benefit some people in terms of improving life chances and so I decided to pursue this through doctoral studies alongside my work. Over the past five years, I have found that the roles of practitioner and doctoral student complement each other well. The combination of study and practice has allowed me to reflect on my work and the wider context in a new light. I have had the opportunity to critically consider current policies and practices. This has had an impact on my practice in ways similar to those discussed by Fox and Slade (2014) in that I am more confident about what I am doing and why. Those aspects of my practice that I was unsure of, I have either embraced more fully or have discarded. More importantly, I identify with the comment reported by Fox and Slade that doing a professional doctorate 'unsettles and disrupts' (Fox & Slade, 2014, p.553). I started my doctoral journey with a much more positive view of my context but the reading and thinking throughout my studies has disrupted and unsettled that perception. This unsettling, although uncomfortable, is welcome. It has prompted reflection and exploration to understand what we could be doing differently in practice. This dissertation continues that journey. As well as stemming from my studies over recent years, this research is influenced by my professional practice and the conversations that I have with learners, colleagues and managers, whether these be enlightening and inspiring or frustrating and confusing. It has also been influenced by personal experiences and those of family members, from my own community involvement and from discussions with colleagues in other contexts and other parts of the world. In this chapter, I discuss the motivation for and focus of this research and provide an overview of the scope and content of the dissertation.

Motivation and focus

Primarily, this research is motivated by the recognition that in a society which is experiencing growing inequality and a widening gap between rich and poor (Bradley, 2016), it is important to understand how learning and education can support us to tackle the problems we face. While seeking such understanding, it is important to resist the tendency highlighted by Biesta (2011, p.3) to 'reformulate policy issues into learning problems' in which individuals through their learning are expected to 'solve problems that actually should be solved at a collective level'.

This tendency suggests that people's problems, the inequalities or injustices they face, can be addressed through participation in further learning, whether this be improving their literacies, completing high school or progressing to higher education. But, as Kilgore (1999, p.192) points out, the 'focus on individual development in adult learning is incapable of allowing space for a vision of social justice'. The focus on the individual learning needs rather than on community needs may also inhibit more interesting learning. Coffield and Williamson suggest that,

> knowledge, learning and understanding emerge in a social process in which people discuss, write, and share ideas and expertise. They learn in the course of tackling a real problem together. (Coffield & Williamson, 2011, p.27)

It is through taking action with others that people learn to solve problems, rather than accumulating educational qualifications.

This research, then, aimed to further understand the learning of those involved in community action to more effectively support people to participate in creating a fairer and more equal society. It is motivated by a concern for social justice. Although social justice is a contested concept, with differing views on what constitutes justice (Coburn & Gormally, 2017), for the purposes of this study, it recognises that people should be treated fairly in terms of both redistribution and recognition (Fraser, 1997). This research focuses in particular on how formal and informal learning, expert and lay knowledge, all support the work of community activists. Community activists are people working in and with their communities towards particular ends. Community activism is about working to 'enact social transformation that contributes directly to improving living conditions, enhancing community environments, and eliminating health and social disparities' (Messias, 2015, p.651). The goals of community activists are very varied. In this study, participants talk about their aims to overturn legislation, change prescribing, protect children's play areas, establish local residential care facilities, improve housing, protect the environment and change attitudes and provision around periods.

I approached the research with a sense that, while much is learned informally and incidentally, such learning is not valued in the same way as formal learning. Those who have learned much of what they know informally are consequently not valued by society in the same way as those with more formal qualifications. When learning is seen as being either formal or informal, then the informal learning is predominantly recognised by what it is not (Billet, 2002). As Jacques Derrida (2004) has pointed out, binary oppositions are rarely neutral. One pole of a binary is generally dominant. In this example, formal learning is, in many contexts, seen as having more status than informal learning. However, this does not pertain in all contexts. In some contexts,

in community learning for example, the informal is held in higher regard and seen perhaps as more empowering than formal education (Malcolm et al., 2003). This categorisation of learning into formal or informal is not helpful. So, rather than aiming to determine which is better – either because it is more effective or more empowering – this research aims to understand how community activists' formal and informal learning and knowledge might come together in bringing about change.

This research will explore how learning for and through community activism combines to facilitate social action. It seeks to aid education professionals and practitioners in understanding the learning context and to encourage and promote a wider range of learning. As Mayo (2012, p.vii) argues in referring to social action learning, 'the case for this type of learning is becoming more and more urgent in the current economic, social, political, environmental and policy context'. The Community Empowerment Act (Scotland) 2015 is designed to support and encourage more people to participate in local decision making and community action. For this to be effective, however, it is important to understand how people become involved in community action and the role learning, knowledge and education play in people's participation. Better understanding will allow us to mitigate the situation where those already powerful individuals – the 'usual suspects' – become further empowered, widening inequalities rather than tackling them as the legislation intends.

By developing a better understanding of the learning landscape, this research aims to encourage greater appreciation and recognition of the variety and range of learning so that people without academic qualifications face less disadvantage. Through my own experiences, those of my family, in my work as an Adult Literacies Worker and through academic study, I have seen the ways in which people are judged, and judge themselves, based on what they believe they cannot do because of their level of formal education. Much of the knowledge, experience, skills and understanding which adults have acquired and developed throughout their lives goes unrecognised. This, as I have come to realise, is also the case in the context of adult literacies learning in Scotland even though a social practices approach – recognising that we learn through our interactions with the world around us – is purportedly espoused here (Ackland, 2014). People are often encouraged to compile Individual Learning Plans to identify their learning 'needs' so that these can be addressed and progress measured. This emphasis on addressing individual learning needs rather than the wider problems in society may inhibit the development of 'really useful knowledge' (Johnson, 1993) required to work towards real change for the people facing the worst effects of an unequal society. Foley (1999) argues that

we need 'to break out of the strait-jacket which identifies adult education and learning with institutionalised provision and course-taking' (p.6) and

> to study adult learning in all its variety, and to identify generally unrecognised (even sometimes to those involved in them) forms and traditions of adult learning and education. (Foley, 1999, p.3)

This is what I aim to do in this research.

Scope

In order to achieve this, the next chapter, chapter 2, considers the policy and practice context in which I work. In that chapter, I examine policy and practice around adult literacies in Scotland, expressing concern that the focus and emphasis in both may marginalise rather than empower people, restricting their participation and silencing their voices. In the wider context of community empowerment legislation, public bodies are required to encourage greater participation in local decision making. However, education policies may hinder the work to reduce inequalities through strengthening people's voices on issues that matter to them by focussing on individual deficits. Policies construct people as 'not yet' ready to take part in the discussions or decisions. This may limit opportunities for learning through participation if people need first to demonstrate a certain level of formal education – to themselves and to others – before they are considered able to take part. I suggest that it is better to understand how a person's existing knowledge from what they have already learned – both formally and informally – supports participation and action and how they continue to learn through being involved. Not recognising what people have learned and continue to learn informally, judging people primarily on their qualifications and experiences of formal education and seeing the gaps in attainment rather than the existing and growing strengths, means that we risk excluding voices and restricting learning for everyone involved in the processes designed to tackle inequality. A better understanding of how and what people learn both formally and informally and how that learning is useful in bringing about change may facilitate a better recognition of the contributions people can make and the learning opportunities available through greater involvement and participation.

Formal and informal learning, then, are a focus of this research. I review the literature around these in chapter 3, looking in particular at the relationship between the two, how formality or informality is understood, how learning is recognised and valued, what counts as learning and how it can be researched. The main purpose of that chapter is to understand how learning is currently perceived as either more formal or informal. It looks at the values assigned to these

perceptions and how learning, particularly the less visible informal learning, is recognised and researched. From the review of the literature, it becomes clear that despite the acknowledgement that we do learn informally, the value of such learning is much lower than formal learning. Informal learning is usually defined and positioned in opposition to formal learning. There are clear indicators of formality such as accredited qualifications and institutional settings which make formal learning considerably more visible. This allows people to be judged by their levels of education and for people who have not gained formal qualifications to be seen as not being as intelligent or knowledgeable as those who have. This, in my experience, is not an accurate assessment and is explored in this research.

I use the work of two French theorists, Michel Foucault and Jacques Rancière, to approach the research and to open up new ways of thinking about formal and informal learning to better understand how they interact and come together in social action. In chapter 4, I discuss the aspects of their work relevant to this research. Foucault's work is useful in that it encourages us to think about what we are doing and the possible impact of our work on how we position and work with people. It raises awareness of the ways in which power works through our relationships and our actions and also how, realising this, we can start to change. Rancière's work is particularly helpful in the consideration of formal and informal learning. His book, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Rancière, 1991), connects concerns and issues around education with the work of an educator in the eighteenth century, Joseph Jacotot. Jacotot suggested a different conception of equality, not as a goal to be attained through education but as a presupposition which starts from a recognition that people are equally intelligent. This perspective is relevant to this research which explores what people are already able to achieve from the learning that they have already done and how they build on that in working towards change in their communities. Rancière considers the effects of education on people's position in society and their understanding of what and how they are able to learn. Rancière conceives of a dividing line that distinguishes between that which makes sense and that which does not. This relates both to what we can know about our world but also to who we can hear and understand in our societies. On one side of the line is that which can be counted as knowledge and those who are considered to know and think. On the other, there is nonsense and those who do not know or think – those who are excluded and whose knowledge is discounted. These are useful concepts for this research which is motivated to better understand who is considered to be someone who knows and how knowledge is developed and used in making a difference in the lives of individuals and communities.

Within an interpretive paradigm, this research is exploratory and seeks to get a deeper understanding of how our learning (formal and informal) and knowledge (lay and specialist) are used in social action. In chapter 5, I explain why and how I use Constructivist Grounded Theory for this research to facilitate openness to unanticipated aspects which are grounded in the data rather than applied only from existing knowledge or theories. The research questions that guide this research look at the ways in which participants position themselves in relation to learning and knowledge, how and what people learn in grassroots community activism and the role that learning and knowledge play in that work. The data generated during interviews with people with experiences of grassroots community activism was audio recorded and transcribed. Analysis of the transcripts began with line-by-line coding to ensure a thorough exploration and to make aspects visible that may otherwise not have seemed relevant, interesting or worth coding. Using the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, I then manipulated the codes in ways that allowed for new connections and insights.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 bring together the discussion, analysis and findings, focusing in turn on formal education, informal learning and knowledge. This suggests a greater separation of these than is actually the case. We can determine important differences between them and so this distinction in discussing them seems justified. Nevertheless, it became clear that, in practice, they came together in the work of the activist to guide and support the change they wanted to see. Learning was a key element of the action and knowledge was power. The challenge was in how to use that power to best effect.

Chapter 6 looks at the ways in which formal education was discussed by the participants and how formal learning supported the work of the activists. Dominant discourses position people of working class backgrounds as not valuing formal education in the same way as do middle class groups. The data challenges that position. Here, those who identify as being working class or as coming from a poor or disadvantaged background show much greater appreciation for higher education, recognising its significance even when they have not yet gained any higher education qualifications. In contrast, those who do not identify as working class, and who can be understood as being from a middle class background, seem to take their higher education for granted, considering that it does not require explanation. There is evidence in the data to suggest that people are very aware of their position in relation to the level of education that they have attained and what this can mean for what they are able to do, or what they are considered able to do. Formal education could be seen to be important in that experts who were formally educated shared their knowledge with the activists. Other than this, formal education did not play a significant role in the activists' work. Two important roles of formal

education emerge. One is that it could be seen to limit community involvement by positioning people who have not achieved many formal qualifications as inferior to others. The other is that, for those who went on to university at a later stage, it was eye opening, allowing people to make sense of their world.

In chapter 7, I consider what the activists learned informally, either before they became involved with activism or as part of their activist work. In connecting activists' actions to experiences in their lives, it was possible to uncover learning that might have remained elusive in a differently designed study. This highlighted the value of learning at other points in time – learning that might not have been considered to be learning if judged at the time it occurred. People connected their recent actions to learning from experiences with grandparents, at football matches or at work. Learning was serendipitous, self-directed and dependent on the environment in which the activist lived and worked. Learning came from being with people, from conversations, from books, from unexpected or surprising events, from unanticipated consequences, and from a variety of experiences. According to the data generated in the interviews, community activists learned most of what they needed to know, and needed to be able to do, informally and that extended to the specialist knowledge they acquired. Learning was an essential aspect of the activists' work – learning about the issue, learning what to do, how to do it and with whom to do it.

Chapter 8 examines activists' relationship with knowledge and the role knowledge played in grassroots community activism. Considering both lay and specialist knowledge, this chapter looks at how activists gathered, generated and acquired knowledge. It distinguishes between lay and specialist knowledge. Activists talk about how they learned specialist knowledge from experts, through face-to-face encounters, from books or online and how it was important that they did this in order to be able to speak for themselves and to be in control of the process. Specialist knowledge, more easily commodified and packaged for transmission in formal learning contexts, was available for use by the activists in understanding their issues and communicating to others. Lay knowledge, in contrast, which was developed through lived experience, conversations and relationships, is not as easily transmitted. This could be because this knowledge is not recognised as valuable knowledge and the people not seen as people who know and think. It could also be that this knowledge is part of the person who has lived the experiences and relationships. What they know from their unique experiences – about being ignored and dismissed, about being unfairly treated, about what they have seen and where they have lived, about being ill, about being parents, about spending time with politically active grandparents, about having a sick child – is knowledge that is part of them. My data suggests

that it is easier for them to add specialist knowledge to their lay knowledge, than it would be for a specialist to incorporate their lay knowledge. This finding is significant for policy and practice concerned with including more people in decision making.

In the final concluding chapter, I discuss the implications of the findings for policy and practice. While the findings are presented by dealing separately with formal education, informal learning and knowledge, these three aspects are interrelated and not easily distinguished in the work of bringing about change. Nevertheless, it is clear that activists learned most of what they needed to do, and to know, informally. Activists pulled together learning from very different sources, learning serendipitously and purposefully, by making connections to past experiences, to people and to things. Where formal learning is often seen as being vertical and informal as horizontal learning, it is clear that it is more complex than that. Activists combine what they know and what they have learned in creative ways in order to reach a goal, filling in gaps and adding to it according to what they need. Using Rancière's work as a theoretical lens provides a new way to understand the data and to consider the problem of education and learning. The value of informal learning for social action is clear in the data. What emerges from an examination of the data, in light of the literature, policy and theory, is that it may not be learning that is differently valued depending on its formality, but rather the people are differently valued according to their socioeconomic status. This research highlights clear challenges for policy and practice which entail perceptual shifts around learning, education and people. As I will argue, the problem may be less about the attainment gap and more about the dividing line. Until we start to work on the latter, we are unlikely to make any progress on the former.

CHAPTER 2: POLICY AND PRACTICE CONTEXT

As discussed in the previous chapter, I work in a community learning and development (CLD) team in a local authority as an Adult Literacies Worker. In this role and the related secondment opportunities that I have had, my work is guided by Scottish Government policies, reports and guidance related to adult learning, adult literacies, ESOL and community development and empowerment. It is in the connections or, perhaps more accurately, the gaps between these policies that my research interest lies. From the opportunities I have had to work in and across different policy areas, I have noticed potential spaces and opportunities for learning that could be used to better effect. I discuss my positionality in greater detail in the methodology chapter but I mention my context here because it provided the motivation for this research to understand the learning that occurs in the connections and spaces between people, places and policies. In this chapter, I focus on the policies and discourses around adult literacies and community empowerment in Scotland. In my discussion, I relate a critique of the policies to a reflection on my practice to highlight some of the ways this research could start to fill the spaces and to facilitate connections between policies in ways that promote greater social justice while supporting and promoting government priorities. My research into how learning and knowledge is developed and used in community activism is driven by the sense that a better understanding of what is useful in social action is necessary to make connections between policies and to change perceptions of people. I begin in the following section by examining adult literacies policy and practice. Throughout, the terms *literacies* and *literacy* are used interchangeably. While I prefer the term *literacies* to reflect the plurality and social nature of literacy practices (Street, 2012), the use of both terms here facilitates discussion of policies where both terms are used with little, if any, distinction between them.

Adult Literacies in Scotland 2020: Strategic Guidance

The *Adult Literacies in Scotland 2020* (ALIS) document was published by the Scottish Government in 2011 to refresh their adult literacy policy at a time of reduced resources in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. In it, the government acknowledged the work that had been done since the publication of the Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland (ALNIS) report in 2001 but recognised that there was more to do, challenging those involved in adult literacies work 'to achieve more, often with fewer resources' (Scottish

Government, 2011, p.6). Where funding of adult literacies provision had previously been ringfenced, this was no longer the case at the time of ALIS's publication following changes made to the funding arrangements between Scottish local authorities and the Scottish Government (Galloway, 2016). Without assigning additional resources, the government acknowledged that it would not be possible for an individual organisation or sector to achieve the vision the document put forth and called on community planning partnerships to take a lead role in the implementation of the strategic guidance at a local level. The vision to be achieved for adults in Scotland is:

> *By 2020 Scotland's society and economy will be stronger because more of its adults are able to read, write and use numbers effectively in order to handle information, communicate with others, express ideas and opinions, make decisions and solve problems, as family members, workers, citizens and lifelong learners* (Scottish Government, 2011, p.4, italics in original).

Community planning partnerships were established in Scotland with the aim of improving local services through the coordination of the work of public service providers in the local authority areas around the country, by agreeing a strategic vision and incorporating community views (Sinclair, 2008). Community planning is, as the Scottish Government introduces on its website, 'about how public bodies work together, and with local communities, to design and deliver better services that make a real difference to people's lives' (Scottish Government, 2018). Through public bodies working together, along with the local community, the policy aims to promote equality of access, participation and opportunity 'to those who face persistent disadvantage' (Scottish Government, 2011, p.4). Participation is to be encouraged by reducing the stigma around literacies learning so that more people will be encouraged to access learning opportunities. The policy suggests that stakeholders will achieve this by continuing to promote literacies provision positively. However, this push for positive promotion is at odds with the negative way people are portrayed. While suggesting that the stigma be reduced, the document places much emphasis on the 'problems' caused by and for people with 'low literacies'. Rather than reducing stigma, the policy itself seems instead to reinforce it. For example, improved literacies levels are correlated with 'increases in productivity and efficiency, reductions in costs, improved staff loyalty and flexibility, lower wastage rates and reduced absenteeism' (Scottish Government, 2011, p.9). Correlations such as this suggest that people's literacies levels affect many aspects of their work, including how loyal, reliable and hardworking they are. It is not clear why this should be so. In this way, the adult literacies policy assesses people with low literacies unfavourably, contributing to, rather than reducing, the stigma around low literacies. The way groups of people are referred to in the document

furthers this stigmatisation. Those targeted by this policy are described as people with a criminal background or parents unable to provide their children with 'encouragement in relation to education' (Scottish Government, 2011, p.10). Making reference to the Scottish Survey of Adult Literacies 2009, the policy describes people as 'more likely to have health problems', 'more likely to smoke, consume more units of alcohol' (p.11), and to be 'marginalised' (p.15).

It is unlikely that the level of literacies will be the cause of these problems. The UK, under austerity policies and neoliberal governments, is experiencing greater and greater inequality with increasing numbers of people living in poverty (Alston, 2019). Rather than working towards structural changes, there is a growing tendency for government policy to address the issues as a learning problem, moving the responsibility from governments to people to solve their own problems through their individual learning (Biesta, 2011). ALIS provides an example of this with literacies learning being positioned as the solution to poverty and inequality. The policy emphasizes this point, linking literacy with income by stating that '14% of people with an income of less than £9,500 scored at the lowest skills' (Scottish Government, 2011, p.9). The document does not, however, explain why the remaining 86% were also on such a low income. Literacy, therefore, while very useful, may not be a reliable way out of poverty. As Street points out, 'the number of jobs in a country does not necessarily increase with literacy rates' (Street, 2013, p.18). Similarly, despite the claims that increases in education and training will result in increased income for individuals and countries, figures presented by Livingstone (2012) show that this may not actually be the case. He found that workers' higher skills had not consistently resulted in increased wages. Rather, the real hourly wage had declined for many workers despite skills development, while that of the top earners had increased, thus widening the pay gap. In contrast, wage levels were more likely to be protected in a unionised sector.

The focus on the economy, business and wealth in the policy reflects an adherence to a form of human capital theory which sees people as an important factor for the economic success of a country. Associated with the work of Schultz (1961), this theory recognises that people, with 'all the acquired and useful abilities' (Schultz, 1961, p.1), can be considered a form of capital when analysing the economy. While Human Capital theorists conceive of education to be just one factor in economic success, knowledge capital theorists see 'levels of cognitive development as *the* key factor in economic success' (Komatsu & Rappleye, 2017, p.167, emphasis in original). Such understandings have had significant influence on policies of

governments around the world. For example, former UK prime minister, Tony Blair, promoted education as the

> 'best economic policy' explaining that the UK would 'succeed or fail on the basis of how it changes itself and gears up to this new economy, based on knowledge. Education therefore is now the centre of economic policy making for the future' (Ball, 2017, p.14)

Research by Hanushek and Woessmann (2007; 2015a; 2015b), relating PISA scores to GDP growth, strengthened the understanding of the importance of people's knowledge and skills for the economic growth of a country. With support from powerful global organisations, the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), this research which identified a strong relationship between education policies and economic performance (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2015b) has gained the status of an empirical fact. This leads to policy development to improve scores on standardised tests on the assumption that this is good for the economy (Komatsu & Rappleye, 2017). But what if, Komatsu and Rappleye asked recently, the statistical work of Hanushek and Woessmann that has become 'the empirical foundations that ground a new logic of educational policy formation and the accelerating confidence-cum-reach of the new global policy regime' was all wrong (2017, p.170). Indeed, two original studies carried out by Komatsu and Rappleye (2017) using the same sample, data and method refute the claims made by Hanushek and Woessmann with relationships between changes in test scores and subsequent economic growth found to be 'unclear at best, doubtful at worst' (Komatsu & Rappleye, 2017, p.170). In light of these findings, they argue that 'the certainty, confidence, and concrete policy conclusions underpinning the new policy regime are unfounded' (Komatsu & Rappleye, 2017, p.170). The correlation between economic performance and education is important for the context of this research because of the ways in which our current policies focus on the importance of education to tackle disadvantage and poverty. Where formal education is seen as being necessary to increase wealth and prosperity, the lack of it can be seen to explain and justify poverty. Coffield (1999) has argued that theories such as Human Capital Theory can be drawn on to explain people's poverty by highlighting individual deficits. This theory allows structural failures and injustices to be ignored while blaming individuals for being poor. The OECD's International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) has been particularly influential on discourses around adult literacy, prompting greater efforts towards improving the literacy and numeracy of more adults in the member states (Hamilton et al., 2001). In doing so, however, it 'fuelled a deficit view of people's existing capabilities' (Hamilton et al., 2006, p.6). While literacies are useful and valuable, they have gained a status that suggests that they are disproportionately more valuable than other forms of knowledge and abilities. Literacy campaigns, which often

follow the findings of surveys, have helped to construct a stigma of illiteracy (Street, 2013). People judged to have 'low' literacies, or not the right kind of literacies, are seen as problems to be fixed before they can participate fully in society. I discuss this further in the following section.

The impact of adult literacies policy and practice

As discussed above, issues of inequality and injustice become problems to be solved through learning and education. More specifically, individualised learning, rather than learning or action at a collective level, is seen as the solution. This individualisation is firmly embedded in adult literacies practice in Scotland through the use of Individual Learning Plans (ILPs). ILPs are seen as 'central to the literacies field in Scotland' (Scottish Government, 2009, p.1) and a key tool through which people's needs can be identified and addressed. According to the *Adult Literacy and Numeracy Curriculum Framework for Scotland* (Scottish Executive, 2005), ILPs should be produced jointly by the learner and the tutor, outlining the agreed learning goals, the steps to be taken, the activities and resources to be used, as well as how progress will be measured. Regular reviews of the ILP will look at the work done, the progress made and new goals to be set. The process of developing an ILP with a learner is intended to shift power from the tutor to the learner so that learners take responsibility for their learning and have more control over their lives. These individualising practices, in the context of policies which assign economic value to learning, can be understood as positioning learners as people who have a duty to keep learning. As they reach one goal, new ones are set. They are never good enough. They become caught in a never ending process of acknowledging their inadequacies and their learning needs – 'the self becomes objectified or commodified. It is targeted as a self that is lacking, one that has a duty to affirm and reaffirm its worth by perpetual learning' (Edwards, 2008, p.33). While we might consider our practice to be good because it is learner centred, ensuring learning is relevant and targeted, Fejes and Dahlstedt (2013, p.63) question whether such practice is necessarily 'more humane or more empowering' than more formally structured learning. Regulatory power is still present in the learning environment, working in different ways, 'through the desires and choices of each citizen' (Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2013, p.63). By working with learners in these ways, we support them to identify how they can act to remove the shame and stigma of low literacies. We keep the focus on the individual, on the ways in which they are lacking, rather than question the processes and the discourses that position people as deficient because of a particular skill not yet mastered.

Constructing people as lacking through such policies and practices 'ultimately silences or marginalises their voices in the public world' (Tett & Maclachlan, 2008, p.663). The *Adult Literacies in Scotland* guidance document suggests that low literacies are likely to adversely affect people's 'ability to participate in society' (Scottish Government, 2011, p.1) and literacies learning is seen as necessary before people can 'participate in society' (p.13). People are thus constructed as 'not-yets'. They are 'considered to be not-yets in respect to…democratic existence' (Olson, 2009, p.77). People who are articulate, thoughtful, with a lot of life experience 'enter the learning situation not as equal, capable adults, but as marked unequals who are positioned in the power hierarchies lower than "normal adult learners"' (Tett & Maclachlan, 2008, p.664). This deficit model of literacies learners can influence the way learners see themselves. It also affects how tutors work with learners, seeing them as vulnerable and in need of protection. In the course of a research project into adult literacy work in Scotland, Tett and Maclachlan (2008) found that researchers' access to learners was restricted by their tutors. Reasons for preventing researchers talking to learners included: 'This group doesn't like strangers coming in to it'; 'People in this course are very vulnerable and the research would disturb them'; 'These young people have enough problems without you adding to them by asking questions' (in Tett & Maclachlan, 2008, p.665). Where researchers were able to talk to learners, they found willing participants who expressed appreciation at being included: 'No-one has really wanted to hear what I had to say before'; 'I'm glad you want to hear my story about my life. I want to become something now – before I just thought I was a nobody'; '…we have the worst tutors because everybody thinks we're crap' (in Tett & Maclachlan, 2008, pp.668-9). This demonstrates the effect of being seen as not yet ready, as not equal to other citizens.

The above discussion considers a very specific context of education but it allows a closer look at what is often considered to be the lower rungs of the learning ladder as I will discuss further in the following chapter. People are seen as lacking. People who, if they succeed in moving up the ladder, risk being similarly judged in relation to those higher still. These elements are part of the institution of education that may, as Manish Jain discusses, effectively be 'branding millions and millions of innocent people as failures' (in Black, 2010). Through dominant discourses, people are positioned as 'not yet' ready to participate in society, to contribute to discussion or to take part in decisions. They are frequently portrayed as 'hard to reach' when in effect it may be more accurate to describe them as 'easy to ignore' (Lightbody, 2017). In this way people's voices are silenced and their experiences and learning beyond the formal skills and level of education rendered invisible. Considered not yet ready to participate, they can be excluded, and exclude themselves from actions and processes through which inequality might

be challenged more effectively as I discuss in the following section. In my personal and professional experience, I have observed how people are talked about and how they position themselves as not capable of making a contribution or of participating. Equally, however, I recognise that people's learning throughout their lives, formally and informally, contributes to their abilities to understand injustice, seek further information and to take action. This learning comes from the experiences they have, the people they meet, the conversations they take part in, the jobs they have done and the things they have read or listened to. A better understanding of the processes through which people use their existing learning and build on it in grassroots community activism could facilitate more openness to different ways of knowing and different ways of learning, and also what constitutes useful and effective learning and knowledge.

By arguing that the policy and practice of adult literacies in Scotland may serve to disadvantage and marginalise people, I do not intend to suggest that there is no value in literacies learning or that ILPs do not represent an effective way to structure an individual's learning. However, I believe that it is important to be aware of the impact of our practice on those it is intended to benefit. The closer examination of my practice that the Doctorate in Education programme encouraged brought aspects to light that I had not previously considered. I became less comfortable with what I was doing. I began to recognise that I was working in a 'conflicted and contested policy environment' which embraced 'both emancipatory pedagogy of adult literacy and adult literacy learning defined by a neoliberal economic agenda' (Swinney, 2014, p.262). I sought ways in which the social practices approach that underpins adult literacies practice in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2005) might be regained and fostered through the wider policy and practice context. I took up a seconded position to support the implementation of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. A social practices approach, although often watered down and neutralised in policy documents and in practice, understands a broader definition of literacies. It moves away from the narrow definitions of literacy which 'can shackle individuals and groups to a "deficit view" of themselves, limiting their ability to assert, communicate and act on their own interests' (Hamilton et al., 2012, p.9). Rather, literacy is seen as a social practice that varies with social context and the uses and meanings of literacy 'are always embedded in relations of power' (Street, 2012, pp.16-17). The social view recognises literacy as something people do rather than simply as a skill that people have learned (Papen, 2005). Within this broader conception it still tends to refer to 'those elements of social practices that refer directly to the use of written language' (Papen, 2005, p.30).

A social practice approach is also referred to in the wider context of community and adult learning. Within community-based adult learning in Scotland, a social practices approach is understood to 'recognise, value and validate the range of experiences and skills that people bring to any learning' and 'be open about the power dimensions of learning' (Education Scotland, 2011, p.9). The document, *Working and learning together to build stronger communities* (Scottish Executive, 2004) refers to literacy as a skill rather than a social practice but places it alongside other core skills of communication, working with others and problem solving. Communication and literacy are also seen as skills in more recent, *Adult Learning in Scotland: Statement of Ambition*, which states that 'adults in Scotland will be empowered and supported to…improve their communication skills – including literacy' (Scottish Government, 2014, p.8). In these documents, social practice is regarded more as a pedagogical approach 'where adults' life experiences are acknowledged and built on, to create a successful learning experience' by 'skilled adult learning practitioners' (Scottish Government, 2014, p.5). In the context of literacies learning then, social practice is both a way of conceiving of literacy and a pedagogical approach through which to develop literacy and foster wider learning. This approach to learning does not preclude a deficit view of people and their abilities. Nevertheless, it encourages a more positive view of people and an openness to the learning potential of other contexts and activities.

As I discuss in the following section, the policies around community empowerment potentially create a space in which learning through participation and involvement in decision making could be fostered and in which relations of power could be recognised and challenged. However, without a more explicit focus on informal learning, it is my experience that this potential is not realised. It is for this reason that I seek, through this research to add to our understanding and ability to see and make space for useful and important learning.

Community empowerment, fairness and inequalities

The Community Empowerment Act was given royal assent in July 2015 and is part of Scotland's 'ambitious agenda of community empowerment and democratic innovation' (Escobar et al., 2018, p.314). The act aims to foster greater community participation in decision making and achieve better outcomes through ownership of land and buildings, public service reform, community planning and by strengthening people's 'voices in the decisions that matter to them' (Scottish Government, 2015, p.1). It comprises twelve parts that have come into force at different times since 2015. These include the introduction of participation requests which aim to enable communities to have 'a more proactive role in having their

voices heard in how services are planned and delivered' (Scottish Government, 2015, p.1). Through this legislation, community groups can now ask to work with public service providers to improve outcomes around issues that are important to them. The act also amends the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 to extend the community right to buy to all of Scotland and it introduces the possibility for a community group to request that a public asset be transferred to them where they feel they could make better use of it for the benefit of their community (SCDC, 2017). It provides a power 'to promote or facilitate participation in public decision-making, including in decisions on the allocation of resources' (Scottish Government, 2015, p.2). It puts community planning partnerships on a statutory footing, requiring them to involve community bodies at all stages of community planning. In the explanatory notes that support the community empowerment legislation, there is no mention of learning, education, knowledge or skills as part of the process to facilitate wider participation in decisions and planning to tackle inequalities. The Fairer Scotland Action Plan published the following year (Scottish Government, 2016a) reiterated the need to tackle inequalities and to build a country with 'low levels of poverty and inequality, genuine equality of opportunity, stronger life chances, and support for all those who need it' (p.7). The action plan builds on the conversations and debates in the run up to the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014 where clear concerns about social justice were expressed and questions asked about whether or not an independent Scotland would be better placed to foster a more equal and open society (Mooney & Scott, 2015). In the ministerial foreword to the plan, the Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities, declares that 'It takes all of us to build a fairer Scotland. Government can't do it on its own, nor would we want to' (Scottish Government, 2016a, p.1). Scotland, with a population of 5.4 million, is considerably smaller than England which has a population of almost 55 million. The strong emphasis on social justice and equality in the policies around empowerment and fairness could be understood as an attempt to assert that Scotland is 'better' than its bigger and more powerful neighbour. Britton et al. (2019) argue that smaller states with relatively fewer resources can be more influenced by global policies and movements and they can, in reaction to this vulnerability to outside pressure, emphasize the ways in which they are distinct from their larger neighbours. Both global influences and assertions of independence of spirit are evident in the Scottish policy landscape and in the policies discussed here. These lead to an emphasis on community participation which, as Rolfe (2018) discusses, has recently been an important aspect of government policy globally. Increased community participation has been presented positively as a way to empower communities, enabling them to tackle difficult issues with the government. It has also been criticized as being an attempt to move responsibility for tackling complex social issues onto the communities and away from government (Rolfe, 2018). Indeed,

while the policy rhetoric is positive, its interpretation and implementation have yet to yield significant changes in democratic participation and the opportunities for people to influence issues that matter to them. I consider this in the following section.

Learning in the spaces between policies

When I had the opportunity to work in a role to, as it stated in the job description, 'support the Council's work to empower communities', I was optimistic about the potential of the community empowerment legislation to provide justification and legitimation of the need and spaces for learning through participation and greater involvement. This turned out to be frustratingly naïve. I was able to witness that, within a very hierarchical structure, the opportunities for genuine involvement and participation, let alone learning and change, did not appear to exist yet. Community and locality plans were written with minimal, if any, involvement or influence from community members. I observed that significant staff time is being spent meeting the requirements of the legislation within the timescales imposed. This takes resources away from community engagement and development activities. The requirements also mean that community activists can spend increasing amounts of time in partnership meetings leaving much less time for grass roots activities (Shaw, 2017). Shaw asks whether community planning means that more people are actively involved, whether it increases democratic participation or 'whether this is a danger that it actually does the opposite in silencing or even extinguishing local democracy' (Shaw, 2017, p.2). Where community members are involved it is often, as Skerratt and Steiner (2013, p.331) have discussed, the 'usual suspects' with the processes favouring the 'articulate, well networked and vocal' (p.322). Those who already participate, continue to participate, making the most of the new legislation to further their own advantage. Others, less advantaged, used to being ignored and excluded, recognise yet another consultation for what it is. There is still little space for the meaningful inclusion of those who lived with the effects of inequality and marginalisation.

While policy claims to encourage more space for people to have a voice in matters that are important to them, the structures and processes put in place to facilitate greater participation may serve to control what and how people contribute rather provide genuine space for a greater diversity of voices and ideas. It is important here to touch on the difference in meaning and effect between empowerment and emancipation. Inglis (1997) warns that without understanding the effects of power, there is a risk that processes 'instead of being emancipatory, could operate as a subtle form of self-control' (Inglis, 1997, p.5). Empowerment, Inglis describes, is the development of capacities to act successfully within the

current system, whereas emancipation is being able to critically analyse, resist and challenge structures of power (Inglis, 1997, p.4). Cruikshank (1999) suggests that 'empowerment is to act upon another's interest and desires in order to conduct their own actions towards an appropriate end' and warns that '"empowerment" is itself a power relationship deserving careful scrutiny' (in Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2013, p.63). Bearing this in mind, in assessing the potential of the community empowerment legislation, we need to ask 'what it's actually for and who benefits' (Shaw, 2017, p.2). We should also ask, who could benefit and how might we work to promote changes in democratic participation.

When, as Lightbody (2017, p.2) emphasizes, 'inequalities in health, wealth, income, education and so on, can be arguably seen as stemming from inequalities in power and influence', changes to the influence that marginalised groups can exert have the potential to bring about significant change in wider inequalities. Yet, the opportunity for influence seemed to be restricted to the chance to attend a consultation event to approve plans already devised, to complete a survey or to talk of their lived experience. People are not involved or expected to think or deliberate beyond this. Rather people are consulted and then the thinking and deliberating is done by others. As McGarvey, winner of the 2018 Orwell Prize for political writing with his book *Poverty Safari*, has experienced,

> Despite the constant talk of empowerment and giving voice to the voiceless, it was obvious that many of these people were only interested in my thoughts if they were about my experience as a 'poor' person. It was assumed that people like me had very little insight on anything else. (McGarvey, 2017, p.122)

People are seen as being fixed in what they know, often based on the label that is being used to evidence diversity – poor, young, unemployed, minority – and it is this knowledge that is mined in order to show that the community voice has been strengthened. There appears to be less openness to recognising the learning that people have already done, gaining varied knowledge, understanding and skills, or to acknowledging the possibility that learning and knowledge can be developed through the process of tackling complex issues. This may be because, as I discuss in the following chapter, that which a person has learned informally is much less visible and less valued than formal qualifications. In addition, because formal qualifications are so strongly associated with greater wealth and advantage, to be poor is to be assumed uneducated and, thus, it seems, less intelligent and knowledgeable. But if, as has been discussed, people learn from and with each other as they tackle problems, then we may be inhibiting learning by not recognising the potential of coming together and learning from and with each other. Consequently, we miss opportunities to realise the government's national outcomes of being better educated and skilled, having tackled inequalities and having 'strong,

resilient and supportive communities where people take responsibility for their own actions and how they affect others' (Scottish Government, 2016b). Failing to recognise potential learning opportunities and experiences and marginalising groups of people through positioning them as deficient and lacking, may contribute to structural inequalities being 'replicated, and perhaps reinforced' in the community engagement processes which aim to tackle inequalities as found by Lightbody (2017, p.11). In the Evidence Review of equality in community engagement, Lightbody (2017) identified education, confidence and language as key barriers preventing people from taking part in community engagement processes at all, with evidence suggesting that the well-educated young people and adults were more likely to take part. Roberts and Escobar (2015) found that people were more likely to participate if they had a university qualification. Lower levels of education were also thought to affect levels of confidence and equality within participative processes (Lightbody, 2017). Recognising this inequality, it is likely tempting to remedy it with education. But it is important to ask whether, if education is a barrier, we should look elsewhere or in new ways for the solution.

I have discussed how the adult literacies policy, and how the ways in which it can be interpreted and implemented can stigmatise, marginalise and silence. It seems necessary, then, to reflect on whether policies and discourses around learning and education may in some ways inhibit the realisation of a vision of a more socially just and equal country rather than being the solution to inequalities and injustices that it is often thought to be. This is not to argue, of course, that education is the main problem. It is, rather, to suggest that we would benefit from a deeper understanding of the role of education and learning, considering in particular what and how we learn informally or formally, in tackling injustices and bringing about change in the lives of people in Scotland. In doing so, we might be better able to uncover, appreciate and make space for the learning necessary to work towards the vision in many Scottish policies of tackling inequality. In the following chapter, I review the literature on the discussion of formal and informal learning.

CHAPTER 3: FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

While Visser asserts that learning is neither formal nor informal but that 'learning is just learning' (2012, p.166), there has been a substantial amount written about what is meant by formal and informal learning and how the two can be distinguished from each other. In this chapter, I begin by considering how informal and formal learning are defined and understood. From this, I discuss the ways in which learning is valued and recognised. This has implications both for the ways in which people are perceived and learning is researched. I explore these implications and outline how the challenges of researching informal learning are taken into account in this research, explaining how the research is designed to address some of the challenges.

Formality and informality in learning

Marsick and Watkins (2001) define informal learning as what it is not, contrasting it with formal learning. Formal learning is 'typically institutionally sponsored, classroom-based, and highly structured' (Marsick & Watkins, 2001, p.25). It 'occurs in schools that award credentials, is instructor led, covers an organized curriculum, and where knowledge is intentionally sought' (Van Noy et al., 2016, p.i). In contrast, informal learning is learning that does not meet these criteria. When referring to actual learning situations, however, it is not possible to accurately describe the learning which takes place as either formal or informal as there will be aspects of both. Distinguishing between formal and informal, warn Malcolm et al. (2003), can also lead to arguments that one is somehow superior to the other. The tendency to see informal and formal learning as separate 'often results in a polarisation between them, with advocates of the informal denigrating the formal, and vice versa' (Malcolm et al., 2003, p.314). Colley et al. (2003), in their review of the literature, found it very common for one form of learning to be judged inherently superior over the other. From a theoretical perspective, this tended to be in terms of how effective it was thought to be. From a political perspective, one was often judged as better in terms of its instrumental or emancipatory potential. But there are 'elements of formal learning in informal situations, and elements of informality in formal situations; the two are inextricably inter-related' (Malcolm et al., 2003, p.313). Learning situations may be understood by considering the different aspects of formality or informality. Colley et al. (2003) suggest that these be: process, location and setting, purposes, and content. These are now referred to regularly in the literature around formal and informal learning so I describe them briefly below.

Process: How formal or informal learning is perceived to be is related to the processes through which it takes place. When learning takes place as part of everyday activity it is informal; when it occurs in activities that are controlled by a teacher it is seen as more formal. The degree of formality of the learning processes will depend on who directs the learning – a teacher, a mentor or a friend and on whether the learning is to be summatively assessed, formatively or not at all.

Location and setting: Where learning takes place influences the way in which its formality is understood. That which takes place in the classroom of an educational institution is seen as being more formal than that which occurs at work or in the family. Setting also describes the extent to which the outcomes can be specified in advance which also has a bearing on how formal or informal learning is considered to be. Informal learning is seen as open ended, not following a pre-set curriculum and as not having to adhere to particular time scales. Such freedom is not a feature of learning that is considered to be more formal.

Content: Formality is determined according to the nature of what is learned and what outcomes are expected from the learning. Distinctions are made between the acquisition of expert and 'high status' knowledge at the formal end of the continuum and everyday practice and competence towards the informal end. The more formal learning will focus on propositional knowledge where the outcomes are very clear and fixed. Less formal learning will be characterised by more flexible outcomes that are negotiated with learners. Serendipitous learning would be much more informal.

Purpose: The purpose of the learning is also taken into account in describing learning as formal or informal. If learning is the intended outcome of the activity, it is more formal. If, however, the learning takes place during an activity which has a different purpose, where there is not a specific intention to learn something, it is more informal.

At one end of the continuum of informality/formality, then, is the most formal learning which is associated with educational institutions that are accredited to deliver qualifications and where learning takes place in instructor-led classrooms following pre-set curricula. Towards the other end of the continuum, the learning is increasingly informal, from organised informal learning – often referred to as non-formal learning – to everyday informal learning, encompassing yet more degrees of informality, such as self-directed learning, incidental learning and tacit learning.

The term non-formal learning is often used to refer to learning that is structured through learning objectives, where there is time dedicated to learning and support for that learning but that is not provided by an education or training institution such as a school, college or university and does not usually result in certification (UNESCO, 2009). This would cover, for example, much of the learning I support as an Adult Literacies and ESOL Worker. In Colley et al.'s (2003) investigation into the terms, they discovered that the term 'non-formal' tended to be used more frequently in the more political dimension of the discourse to describe the work 'to empower underprivileged learners' (Malcolm et al., 2003, p.314) than the term 'informal'. However, despite the different preferences among writers on this topic, Malcolm et al. found no discernible difference between the terms but that each was defined 'in opposition to the dominant formal education system' (Malcolm et al., 2003, p.314). It is this opposition that is of interest in this study. The focus changes, however, from considering distinctions to looking at how learning, whether formal, non-formal or informal, might come together in supporting activists to achieve their goals. Recognising that there may be degrees of formality and informality in all learning situations allows the research to be open to what has been experienced and how the participants discuss their actions and their learning. I discuss this further in the following section.

Valuing and recognising learning

While Colley et al. (2003) argue that it is better to take the stance that there are elements of both formal and informal in all learning situations, they nevertheless suggest a continuum from most formal to least formal. On this continuum, they found that knowledge associated with formal learning was accorded high status in relation to the low status of knowledge that develops through informal learning. Informal learning is often regarded as formal learning's 'poor cousin' (Golding et al., 2009, p.34) even though what we need to know cannot all be taught (Billet, 2010). Because of the privileged position of formal learning and the high status of the knowledge acquired through participation in highly structured courses that lead to certification, what we learn informally tends to be undervalued in comparison. As McGivney (2006, p.18) argues,

> [t]he overriding priority given to formal learning in policy and the stress on qualifications as a proxy for skills, lead to a significant undervaluing of the skills and knowledge people derive from other means.

People are positioned metaphorically on a 'ladder' of formal education (Eurostat, 2007). Surveys such as Eurostat's *Adult Education Survey* (AES) exclude the more informal learning from 'statistical observation, and therefore from the scope of the CLA [classification of

learning activities] and the AES, because it is not intentional' (Eurostat, 2007, p.22). Such surveys by international organisations are powerful ways through which our understanding of learning is shaped, rendering invisible the valuable, but low status, knowledge. For instance, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has had a significant impact in the context of Adult Literacies. The power and authority of the OECD (Ball, 2013), has made it possible to influence our understanding of what it means to be literate, which forms of literacy are valued, and the link between 'literacy and economic indicators of wealth and well-being' (Hamilton & Barton, 2000, p.10). Literacy learned formally in classrooms, using prescribed material, is valued over the literacy learned informally through social practices.

At the top of the 'ladder' of learning is higher education, and efforts are being made to widen participation in higher education. In Scotland, the government commissioned the report on widening access to higher education. This report describes the country's higher education system as 'perhaps the most powerful weapon there is to combat socioeconomic inequality', graduates of which are 'healthier, live longer and enjoy better employment outcomes' (Scottish Government, 2016a, p.3). While the commission makes clear that it does not think that all children should go to university, it believes they should have the opportunity if this is what they would choose. Despite this assurance, the choice is not neutral. The report makes strong links between participation in higher education and aspiration, recommending throughout the document that aspirations should be raised among people from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is, then, the right kind of literacy and the right kind of learning. If you aspire to do well, to be healthy and well off, then it is important that you take part in the more formal learning. As McGivney (2006, p.19) further argues, there is

> a hierarchy of what is valued as learning. People are generally considered to have little knowledge and skills outside of those gained in formal education and we are judged and rewarded more for our formal than for our actual learning.

There is little resistance to the idea that informal learning is important. What is perhaps less clear is how such an understanding is incorporated effectively into policy and practice. As Coffield suggests, 'the significance of informal learning is recognised, then promptly forgotten and then rediscovered some years later' with policy makers, researchers and practitioners admitting its importance and then proceeding 'to develop policy, theory and practice without further reference to it' (Coffield, 2000, p.2).

The difficulty may lie in the relative invisibility of informal learning in comparison to formal learning. The analogy of an iceberg (Tough, 1978) is frequently used in the literature to express the sense that only a small part of what people learn is visible. A much greater portion lies beneath the surface (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). This larger part represents the corresponding significance of informal learning (Coffield, 2000) constituted by various informal learning activities (Livingstone, 1999). While we may know that we learn both formally and informally, it is the most formal – the tip of the iceberg – which lends itself more easily to being measured by examination and testing and recognised through credentials awarded by institutions. Even then, as Gormally and Coburn discuss,

> aspects of what is actually learned may be rendered invisible by a smokescreen of learned outcomes that are more easily measured than, for example, quality of life or feelings of esteem. (Gormally & Coburn, 2014, p.875)

Because of the structured nature of formal learning, attempts to recognise informal learning seek to formalise the informal to translate it into value for the learner (Van Noy et al., 2016). The concept of prior learning assessment (PLA), for instance, emerged in the 1970s to widen access to higher education (Andersson et al., 2013). Recognition of prior learning (RPL) aims to recognise prior learning 'wherever and whenever learning has taken place' (Andersson et al., 2013, p.405). Two main contexts for RPL are the educational system and the workplace. RPL was initially more focused on issues of social justice and social change but is increasingly concerned with the 'benefits to society, especially in economic development' (Andersson et al., 2013, p.406). While informal learning is acknowledged and strategies are being developed to recognise it and value it, such learning is, nevertheless, positioned in relation to formal learning and defined by what it is not. It is not, for instance, as prestigious or as valued as formal learning. The knowledge acquired informally will have a similarly low status which can be reflected in the way people are perceived and treated as I discuss in the following section.

Epistemic injustice

People without formal qualifications may be more likely to experience what Fricker (2007) has termed *epistemic injustice* – 'a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower' (Fricker, 2007, p.1). More specifically, the wrong in this case is likely to be a form of *testimonial injustice* where 'prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word' (Fricker, 2007, p.1). This leads to the exclusion, not only of the people but also of their knowledge and experience, and the loss of potentially very valuable contributions in the work to tackle inequalities. For example, in February 2018, the 'first ever homeless hackathon' was announced. This was an event organised to bring people with an interest in

homelessness together in order to develop solutions. In the online media release the organisers specified who should participate:

> programmers and coders, event organisers, social workers, graphic designers, care workers, digital marketers, project managers, shop owners, journalists, accountants, PR professionals and those in transformational roles. (Digit, 2018)

People with experience of homelessness were not included in the list, despite the knowledge they have of the problem that the hackathon was intended to address. This knowledge was possibly overlooked because of the prejudice against homeless people as a social category. This Fricker explains is a form of testimonial injustice which is an 'injustice that a speaker suffers in receiving deflated credibility from the hearer owing to identity prejudice on the hearer's part' (2007, p.4).

There seems to be a strong tendency to treat people who are poor and disadvantaged, not only as if they are not educated, but also as if they as if they cannot think for themselves. To highlight the issue, Harley (2012, p.3) uses a quote by activist Ashfram Casiem in an email he wrote to a South African NGO (non-governmental organisation) in protest against the attempts by some NGOs to control the movements of poor people, 'we are poor, not stupid'. Darren McGarvey wrote of

> the phenomenon of affluent students on the campuses of elite western universities attempting to control how the rest of us think and discuss our own experiences, claiming to speak on our behalf while freezing us out of the conversation. (McGarvey, 2017, p.175)

It seems that formal learning may be so strongly linked with wealth and advantage that when we see or hear someone who is poor, we assume that they are not educated, and to not be educated is, it seems, to not be able to think or to be able to contribute. Despite informal learning often being seen as the poor cousin, as mentioned above, writers such as Coffield (2000) have argued for the significance of informal learning to be reassessed. To avoid approaching this research with assumptions about the relative value of different ways of learning, I start from what people have done and what has been achieved before exploring the learning that has supported that work. By looking at what people have been able to do, learning, whether formal or informal, can already be seen to have a value.

Researching informal learning

Informal learning is not easily researched because it often requires individuals being able to recognise that they have learned for the data to be generated. As Van Noy et al. (2016) discovered, data on the value of informal learning is sparse when compared with data available

on formal learning with few surveys having focused on the incidence of informal learning. Many writers hold the view that we learn all the time. Wenger (1998, p.3), for instance, suggests that learning is 'as much a part of our human nature as eating or sleeping' or as Rogers (2003) argues, it is as natural as breathing. However, the way in which learning is researched and reported can encourage the perception that this is not in fact the case but that only some people 'participate' in learning. Referring to learning in terms of participation suggests an understanding of it as an 'institutional rather than a personal process' (Billet, 2010, p.401) and places it at the formal end of the continuum. As Billet argues,

> [i]n an era of universal compulsory education in most developed countries, and with the provision of continuing education beyond schooling in different forms, it is often incorrectly assumed that learning arising from activities and interactions in educational institutions is privileged or constitutes the major source of our learning. (Billet, 2010, p.403)

Researching the most informal end of the learning continuum – the incidental and tacit learning – is challenging (Van Noy et al., 2016, p.51). Such learning is difficult to detect and it is likely that research participants will not be able to recall their learning consciously unless there was an unusually dramatic outcome (Eraut, 2000). For instance, Duguid et al. (2013, p.122) found some of their research techniques were unsuccessful because of 'the elusive and tacit nature of informal learning'. Similarly, some important learning may be missed because of biases about what constitutes learning and how it takes place. Livingstone (2001) discussed individualistic bias and dominant class bias. This can lead to studies that ask questions about online learning but fail to capture learning from grandparents (Van Noy et al., 2016).

In this research, I aim to understand the importance of informal learning, being open to its value, not in opposition to formal learning but alongside it. The intention is not to show that informal learning is better, but simply to understand the role it plays, alongside formal learning, in community action. This shifts the focus slightly from assessing what we have learned to understanding what our learning helps us to do. Looking at what we are able to do allows us to examine the learning that makes those actions possible. Doing this from the perspective of community activists also allows us to consider social justice as an aspect of learning. I hope thus to encourage greater visibility of learning that occurs beyond formal settings and better recognition of the contribution we can all make in addressing issues which matter to us and our communities. As we move towards ever greater emphasis on democratic participation in informed public decision making, it seems important to not only recognise what and how people have learned and can learn in different times and areas of their lives, both in and out of formal education, but also recognise the learning

potential of activities and opportunities of democratic participation. As will be discussed further in the following chapter, there seems to be a tendency, as Rancière (1991) highlights, to divide people into people who know and think and people who work and do. When people from the latter group are included, it is often only to allow them to talk about their 'lived experience'. They are not expected to think or deliberate beyond this. Rather, people are consulted, and the thinking and deliberating is then done by people on the other side of the dividing line. Returning to McGarvey's experiences to illustrate this:

> it was obvious that many of these people were only interested in my thoughts if they were about my experience as a 'poor' person. It was assumed that people like me had very little insight on anything else. (p.122) […] I don't write about myself because I think I'm important, it's because that's what I've been conditioned to do in order to be heard. That's the sort of window dressing that is required before the great and the good become willing to take lower class people seriously. (McGarvey, 2017, p.125)

What counts as learning

As I approach this research, I acknowledge the danger highlighted by Biesta and Leary (2012, p.8) of focusing on learning as 'a natural phenomenon…part of our biological and neurological 'make up'…something we cannot help but do'. While such an understanding may be uncontroversial, the tendency to naturalise learning in this way may also contribute to valuable learning going unnoticed. Saying that we learn all the time does not help us to understand what we regard as useful learning. Instead, recognising learning as 'an evaluative concept, not a descriptive one' (Biesta & Leary, 2012, p.8) may be more effective. When we identify something as learning we are making a judgement of the change that has occurred and recognising it as significant, either positively or negatively. Biesta and Leary (2012, p.9) suggest that such judgement is what 'constitutes change as learning'. De-naturalising learning in this way allows us to focus on understanding the judgements being made about what does or does not constitute learning, and who makes those judgments. If we conceive of learning as being as natural as breathing, it is difficult to identify learning that is useful in taking action to bring about change. In examining instances of people working to make a difference through community activism, I consider what might be judged as learning that has supported that work. To facilitate de-naturalisation of and openness to learning, I use the work of two theorists, Foucault and Rancière, as I discuss in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4: THEORY AND PRACTICE

Theory and practice are frequently understood as being in opposition to each other. It is common to hear practitioners deride theory, declaring that it is too removed from the day-to-day practice with real people. It is often the case that theory can be presented as being distinct from practice, as something that academics, rather than practitioners, do. However, it is also argued that theory should not be seen as an activity reserved for intellectuals, or those with a certain level of education since theories are 'produced and abandoned, refined and discarded, through everyday conversations' (Brookfield, 2005, p.3). It is important, therefore, to guard against seeing it as 'a high-status intellectual process restricted to a talented few' (Brookfield, 2005, pp.2-3). Rather, theory is better understood as being 'eminently practical' (Brookfield, 2005, p.3). Our understanding of how the world works influences how we act in our work and in our everyday lives. We use theory 'to make sense of the world, communicate that understanding to others, and … to take informed action' (Brookfield, 2005, p.3). Theory is useful. Theory can reassure us that our understanding of the world is shared with others and that there is a way to talk about things that concern or confuse us. It can also suggest ways to address our concerns. As hooks (1994, p.60) experienced, the practice of theorizing provided 'a place of sanctuary' where she could make sense of her childhood and where she could 'imagine possible futures'. It was a place where 'life could be lived differently' (hooks, 1994, p.60). In this chapter, I outline the theories that assist in making sense of the data and which also suggest how our lives could be lived differently. I begin in the next section with a brief discussion on how theory should be seen as useful in research before providing an overview of the theories that I put to use in thinking about the data in the sections which follow.

Lens grinding, cherry picking and thinking with theory

In research, social theory can be used to as a means to analyse the data (Murphy, 2013) but it is important not to choose a theory simply because it is currently in fashion. Allan (2013), for instance, wonders whether Deleuze is becoming a more popular choice than Foucault stating, 'where previously power was everywhere, now everything is a rhizome' (p.21). Allan's slightly dismissive attitude towards much work presented with a Foucauldian lens (2013, p.21) is echoed in Heaney's (2016) discussion of the problematic tendency towards 'lensification' of theory. Heaney, in an online post, warns against the veneration of big and important celebrity thinkers such as Bourdieu and Foucault.

> More often than not, some pre-packaged 'framework' or 'lens' is plucked from the proverbial shelf, half-heartedly de-cobwebbed, hastily assembled, and roughly

'slotted in' before the 'real' research – data collection/analysis – can occur. For many, theory is considered an inconvenient 'box' that requires quick 'ticking', and is ritualistically treated like the salt of the sumo wrestler – thrown in around the beginning of theses, papers, and books to ward off or confuse the 'evil spirits' of supervisor, examiner or peer reviewer. (Heaney, 2016)

Rather than conceiving of theory as a lens, Heaney (2016) proposes the more adaptable and dynamic metaphor of lens grinding to highlight the use of theory as a craft. The concept of lens grinding retains the metaphorical advantages of the lens as something through which we view our social world but emphasizes the constructed nature of such tools that must be worked on, through grinding and polishing, to be useful in particular situations. The concept highlights the process of research, of coming to new understanding, of being critical and open to 'the 'chinks' and 'blemishes' in existing conceptualizations' (Heaney, 2016). It can be intimidating to use the 'big' theorists like Foucault, Bourdieu or Habermas who have written and been written about prolifically. If, however, we approach theory as something to use rather than to demonstrate knowledge, its practical nature is more evident and reassuring. As Murphy (2013) points out, theorists do not have to be kept separate or applied in particular ways. There is not a right or wrong way of using theory. Indeed, theorists themselves would not necessarily prescribe how their ideas be used. Foucault, for example, explained, 'What I've written is never prescriptive either for me or for others – at most it's instrumental and tentative' (Foucault, 2000, cited in Jackson & Mazzei, 2018, p.717). Ideas and concepts from different thinkers can be brought together through processes of cherry picking and cross pollination. Doing so, Murphy argues, can be useful in developing 'original and innovative forms of knowledge' (Murphy, 2013, p.8). Jackson and Mazzei similarly emphasize the practical nature of theory and discuss putting it to work 'to open up previously *unthought* approaches to thinking about what is happening in our research sites and encounters' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2018, p.720, original emphasis). They assert the view that 'reading and using theory is necessary to shake us out of the complacency of seeing/hearing/thinking/feeling as we always have' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2018, p.720). In this research project, I find the work of two French writers – Foucault and Rancière – to be of particular use in facilitating different ways of thinking.

These thinkers are put to use in this research in slightly different ways. Foucault's work was instrumental in supporting a step back, to look at what was happening in policy and practice. Using Foucauldian ideas and concepts to reflect on practice had already helped me to understand aspects of my context that might reinforce current inequalities rather than tackle them. As Brookfield suggests, familiarity with Foucault's work, 'should unnerve

and unsettle any adult educator who feels she or he is clearly on the side of emancipatory goodness and truth' (Brookfield, 2005, p.122). Because the Foucauldian thought has been influential in developing my current perspective, I felt it important to continue to retain his ideas as tools to think through this research. Rancière, on the other hand, is mostly put to use in thinking through the relationship of formal education to informal learning and the distinctions between them. Foucault encourages us to take a step back and to consider the effects of our practice and our actions. Rancière adds to this reflection by echoing similar concerns as Foucault but focusing more explicitly on the effects of learning and education and is particularly useful in this research which looks at informal and formal learning from a social justice perspective. In this chapter, I discuss how we can take a step back with Foucault, before taking a new direction with the help of Rancière.

Taking a step back with Michel Foucault

Foucault was interested in the process of 'problematization', analysing why certain things become a problem, behaviours, phenomena and processes such as madness, crime and sexuality (Foucault, 1983). He argued that what we know and what we do about behaviours, phenomena or processes is linked with relations of power which work through our actions to shape how we understand the world at a particular point in time and in a particular place. Power does not only repress and exclude, it is also productive, producing reality (Foucault, 1979). It does this through discursive practices – the words we produce and the actions we perform – institutionalising and regulating 'ways of talking, thinking and acting' (Jager and Maier, 2009, p.35). From this perspective, what we say and what we do does not simply represent knowledge and reality but is constitutive of that knowledge and reality. Power and knowledge are so interrelated that Foucault conceived of the hybrid force of power/knowledge which 'determines what will be known' (Mills, 2003, p.70).

Order in our society is, according to Foucault, increasingly maintained through disciplinary power which, being much less costly than constant oversight and coercion, became the general method of domination through the 17th and 18th centuries (Foucault, 1979). This form of power makes people knowable through the use of 'simple instruments; hierarchical observation [and] normalizing judgement' (Foucault, 1979, p.170). These instruments come together in 'the examination' through which individuals are made visible. Once visible, disciplinary power

> measures in quantitative terms and hierarchizes in terms of value the abilities, the level, the 'nature' of individuals. It introduces, through this 'value-giving' measure, the constraint of a conformity that must be achieved'. (Foucault, 1979, p.183)

It 'compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes'* (Foucault, 1979, p.183, original emphasis).

While Foucault has a lot to say about the working of power, his aim was not to analyse power *per se* but more accurately 'to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects' through 'dividing practices' (Foucault, 2003, p.126). The possibilities of who we can be and how we can act are constrained. 'The exercise of power is a "conduct of conducts" and a management of possibilities' (Foucault, 2003, p.138). For instance, within the currently dominant discourses, we understand concepts such as globalisation, economic competitiveness and poverty as being important issues to address (Edwards, 2007). As discussed in chapter 2, learning is seen as a necessary response to such issues and, consequently, policies and practices around learning identify those in need of intervention. They identify the uneducated, the unskilled, and the incompetent such that people are motivated to work towards educating and training themselves and others so that they will have value in terms of global economic competitiveness for themselves and society. The discourses determine the 'truth' of our current situation – or a particular regime of truth – and this knowledge encourages us to act in particular ways. We become active subjects capable of working towards those ends that we 'know' to be worth pursuing and through our actions power circulates. We take the current discourses for granted and conduct ourselves accordingly and, in so doing, reinforce and promote current discourses. People, recognising that they are 'unskilled' or 'uneducated', for instance, either take steps to change or be prepared to accept that, because they have not acted appropriately, they are not as 'valuable' as others and so any disadvantages they face are their responsibility. In referring to the ways in which qualities were placed in a hierarchy, Foucault identified a 'shameful class' which, he wrote, 'existed only to disappear' (Foucault, 1979, p.182). People could take action to move out of this class and thus 'be recognized as having made themselves worthy of it by change in their conduct and by their progress' (Foucault, 1979, p.182).

Foucault helps us to recognise the relations of power in which we are implicated. For instance, as an Adult Literacies Worker, I believed that the work I did was important and necessary. It provided people with a 'second chance' to get on the ladder of learning, to make progress, to move up, to be more valuable, more equal, less poor. However, reflecting on policy and practice, through a Foucauldian theoretical lens, I recognise aspects of the discourses and practices that serve to enforce inequalities and disadvantage rather than to reduce them. As Foucault highlights, 'People know what they do; they

frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does' (Foucault 1978, cited in Nicoll & Fejes, 2008, p.4). From this perspective, it seems important, not simply to seek better or more effective ways to do what we do, or better reasons for doing it, but rather, to first take a step back and to better understand the impact of what we do, how we are implicated in relations of power and what effect this might have on people. Reflecting on my work and my context did, as mentioned above, 'unnerve and unsettle' me (Brookfield, 2005, p.122). I was no longer certain of the goodness of my work. I no longer saw our field as being an adequate nor an effective solution to the problems experienced in formal education. This came from the recognition of the relations of power and the roles that practitioner and learner usually play in the learning environment. Through our work as Adult Literacies Workers, we contribute to the deficit discourses that surround literacies learners. Our approaches can communicate the acceptance of a situation where people who have not yet developed literacies skills can be excluded and marginalised because they are not yet seen as people who think and know. We recognise the stigma and shame around low literacies. We are sensitive to what it must feel like to be in the 'shameful class' of people and we see our work as positive in allowing people to escape from that stigma and shame. Foucault's ideas allow us to see how this work may simply reinforce the status quo.

Foucault does not offer solutions of what should be done in particular situations, not because he thought nothing could be done but rather that

> there are a thousand things to do, to invent, to forge on the part of who, recognizing the relations of power in which they're implicated, have decided to resist or escape them. (Foucault, 1991b, p.174)

Although our current discursive practices determine what we know and how we act, such determinism does not mean that we need be resigned to the way things are, nor does it mean that change is not possible (Biesta, 2009). As Usher and Edwards point out, 'with a different discourse and a different set of practices, things could be otherwise' even though, they acknowledge, making things otherwise is not easy (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p.28). Because of the way discursive practices operate, it is 'virtually impossible to think outside of them; to be outside of them is, by definition, to be mad, to be beyond comprehension' (Ball, 2013, p.20). Fortunately, however, it is not completely impossible. Ball (2013) finds that Foucault's work provides effective tools to intervene in contemporary discourses and indeed Foucault has said that everything he did was so that it could be of use (Defert & Ewald, 2001). We know from Foucault's histories that 'what will be known' changes over time. Foucault traced the understanding and problematization of concepts through time and his histories encourage us to

recognise that since things 'weren't as necessary as all that' in the past, 'they are not as necessary as all that' now (Foucault, 1991a, p.76). As such, behaviours, phenomena and processes that we take for granted and perceive to be unquestionable today, may not actually be so. As the Nigerian poet, Ben Okri, writes, reminiscent of Foucault's concept of discourses, 'we live by stories, we also live in them…If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives' (Okri, 1997). As discussed in the previous chapter, dominant discourses prioritise formal learning and we take for granted that such learning is more valuable. People with more formal qualifications are similarly more valuable, being paid more money and attention. But what if, as Coffield (2000) and others have suggested, informal learning is at least as useful as formal learning, if not more? Recognition of this would change the stories we live in and through that, possibly, change lives.

Changing stories with Jacques Rancière

Similar to Foucault's concept of discursive practices that determine what we know, how we act and how we will be understood, Rancière (2010) conceives of a *partage du sensible. Partage du sensible* is usually translated as a distribution of the sensible, but also as a partition or sharing of the sensible. We can understand different things in this concept at the same time. The sensible refers both to that which makes sense and can be understood as well as that which can be sensed. It is at once a 'specific act of perception' and a knowledge of those 'objects deemed worthy of perception' as opposed to those which are 'insensible' – objects which are not noticeable, perceptible or taken into account (Panagia, 2014, p.96). *Partage* (sharing or distribution) refers both to the shared knowledge of society – of what is worth noticing, of what makes sense, and of how things should be – and also to the dividing line between that which makes sense and that which does not, between those worth noticing and those of no consequence, between those whose voices are heard and those who are incomprehensible, between those who are included and those who are excluded. It distinguishes between what counts as knowledge and what is nonsense. It separates those who know from those who do not know. This concept is useful in the context of participation in local decision making, for speaking up and being heard on issues that matter to individuals and communities.

This division, which assigns 'the privilege of thought to some and the tasks of production to others' (Rancière, 2003, p.219), has been the object of all Rancière's work. From his historical research into the archives of the labour movement in nineteenth century France (Rancière, 2012), Rancière recognised that working class emancipation was not a matter of valuing and affirming the values and culture of the working class but was rather to be found in their

'claiming the status of fully speaking and thinking beings' (Rancière, 2003, p.219). During this research, he came across the work of Joseph Jacotot which is the focus of his book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster.* Jacotot, exiled from France in the early nineteenth century, found himself as a lecturer in a class of students with whom he had no shared language. Jacotot told the students to work through a bilingual edition of a well known novel, instructing them through an interpreter to use the Flemish translation to learn the French text (Rancière, 1991). In doing so, he did not anticipate great results but rather 'expected horrendous barbarisms, or maybe a complete inability to perform' (Ratier & Ratier, 1838, cited in Rancière, 1991, p.2). He was, however, pleasantly surprised by his students' success with their task. This led him to question his belief, in line with

> what all conscientious professors believe: that the important business of the master is to transmit his knowledge to his students so as to bring them, by degrees, to his own level of expertise. (Rancière, 1991, pp.203)

This led to further experimentation and to the development of the concept of universal teaching and a radical understanding of equality. Universal teaching was not a new method to follow but entailed an understanding of how people 'learn something and … relate to it all the rest by this principle: all men have equal intelligence' (Rancière, 1991, p.18). Rancière revived Jacotot's work, not because it was an interesting piece of pedagogical history, but because of the way in which Jacotot conceived of equality – not as a goal but as a presupposition. Rancière (1991), with Jacotot, explores and critiques the idea of equality as a goal. 'To pose equality as a goal', he writes, 'is to hand it over to the pedagogues of progress, who widen endlessly the distance they promise that they will abolish' (Rancière, 2003, p.223).

Equality is currently most commonly understood as a goal, a goal that is proving difficult to reach through education. Despite this difficulty, we continue trying to understand the barriers to equality, how we might close the gap, and how we might improve education. According to Ball (2017, p.4), education is subject to 'policy overload' partly, Ball suggests, because governments need 'to be seen to be doing something' but also the acknowledgement that education is not yet succeeding in tackling inequalities prompts finding ever new ways to transmit knowledge so that it can be understood 'by those failing to take [it] in' (Rancière, 1991, p.6). As I have discussed in chapter 2, in Scotland, policies have been developed to tackle inequalities, to close the attainment gap, to widen participation, and to empower communities. A common theme runs through them all. The need to target the 'hard to reach', the poor, the disadvantaged and to solve the problems they experience, and cause, by educating them and including them in democratic processes. But, following Rancière, such reforms are unlikely to radically change anything. Rather, such practices continue to constitute equality

and inequality, inclusion and exclusion, in order to then attempt to abolish them. Seeing equality as a goal necessitates a current inequality. The need to include understands a current exclusion. A distance is 'invented and reinvented so that it may never be abolished. The poor stay in their place' (Ross, 1991, p.xix).

Education has long been seen as a route to enlightenment, equality and emancipation but, as Biesta and Leary (2012) suggest, neither Foucault nor Rancière see education and learning in this way. This is not because they consider learning to be unnecessary but rather that they challenge the taken for granted role of learning and education to bring about equality and emancipation. Rancière, in particular, argues that it is this very structure which produces inequality in the first place posing equality as a goal rather than a current presupposition. Foucault (1979) described how people are categorised and judged and Rancière (1991) identifies a similar process where people are divided into two groups – those who know and those who do not, those who think and those who work and do. Education, as it is most commonly understood, 'offers itself as a means to reduce the situation of inequality where those who know nothing are in relation to those who know' but, he argues, 'this reduction is, rather, a confirmation' (Rancière, 2010, p.3). The working of Foucault's concept of *disciplinary power* which 'differentiates individuals from one another' (Foucault, 1979, p.182) can be understood in Rancière's discussion of inequality as being constituted through the consensus around education. Rather than being an important way to reduce inequalities, education may actually produce them, dividing the world into 'knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid' (Rancière, 1991, p.6). Rancière introduces what can be understood as the distinction between informal and formal learning. Children, who have already learned 'what no master can explain: the mother tongue' (Rancière, 1991, p.5) find themselves in a situation where 'everything happens as though [they] could no longer learn with the same intelligence' (p.6). Where before they learned 'by observing and retaining, repeating and verifying, by relating what they were trying to know to what they already knew, by doing and reflecting about what they had done' (Rancière, 2010, p.5), they come to understand that they cannot learn what a teacher does not explain to them. Through this process, schooling does not simply add new learning opportunities, it establishes itself as the only way to learn what is valuable in contrast to that which is learned informally. As they begin their school journey, they move from a position of equality where their equal intelligence had already been demonstrated by 'succeeding, without a teacher, at the most difficult of apprenticeships' of learning their mother tongue (Rancière, 2010, p.3), to positions of greater and greater inequality 'through the whole technology of the learning environment as positioning machine' (Masschelein &

Simons, 2011, p.153). When Rancière talks of succeeding without a teacher, this does not mean that they learned without people or that they did not learn from people. Rather, it is the idea of a teacher who decides what will be taught, when and in which order that he finds problematic. Education, in this view, rather than being the necessary route to enlightenment and emancipation, may, as it is currently structured, create a social order that divides people into those who know and think and those who do not. It creates a hierarchy of intelligence and a place for everyone in it. Moving up through the levels, people are considered more intelligent and they also become aware of their own superiority in relation to those below them, while at the same time still conscious of their own inferiority to those above them. People judge their intelligence according to their level of education.

> This is the genius of the explicators: they attach the creature they have rendered inferior with the strongest of chains in the land of stultification—the child's consciousness of [their] own superiority. (Rancière, 2010, p.22)

Stultify is translated from the French *abrutir* which would be more directly translated as 'to render stupid' (Translator's note, in Rancière, 1991, p.7). This happens when 'one intelligence is subordinated to another', when one intelligence is seen as better than another (Rancière, 1991, p.13). What stultifies people, what renders them stupid, is not the lack of instruction but the belief that their intelligence is inferior (Rancière, 1991). So, Rancière does not believe that teachers or education are unnecessary. His, and Jacotot's, ideas were

> not meant to put all teachers out of a job: it tended only to recast them as Commanders instead of Explainers […] not to provide any specific content, but mainly to mobilize the learners' will. (Citton, 2014, p.27)

In his account of the teaching of Joseph Jacotot, he acknowledges that the 'students had learned without a master explicator, but not, for all that, without a master' (Rancière, 1991, p.12). It is a particular way of teaching – by means of explanation and instruction – and of organising education that Rancière believes to be stultifying. Scholarly progression is the 'art of limiting the transmission of knowledge, of organizing delay, of deferring equality' (Rancière, 2010, p.9). Rather than defer equality, Rancière argues, equality should be the starting point. 'Equality is a practice, not a reward in a distant future' and emancipation – the ability to speak, think and act – is the actualisation and realisation of this equality (Simons & Masschelein, 2011, p.3). Rancière does not, however, seek to prove that all intelligence is equal but rather urges us to see what can be done under that supposition (Rancière, 1991). He recognises that there are different manifestations of intelligence but this can be better understood as a difference in attention or in will.

> I will not say that he has done less well because he is less intelligent. I will say that he has perhaps produced a poorer work because he has worked more poorly,

that he has not seen well because he hasn't looked well. I will say that he has brought less attention to his work. (Rancière, 1991, p.50)

Teachers are necessary and important, particularly when their role is to set students on track and keep them there. Rancière distinguishes between *intelligence* and *will*. A teacher is needed when a person's will may not be strong enough. Rancière thus, in arguing for a presupposition of equality of intelligence, recognises that differences in will or motivation and in the attention someone gives to a task will result in differences in the outcome, that is, in the manifestations of intelligence. The method of equality, he writes, is 'above all a method of the will' (Rancière, 1991, p.12). People could learn by themselves and 'without a master explicator when one wanted to, propelled by one's own desire or by the constraint of the situation' (Rancière, 1991, p.12). Equality and emancipation do not come through further transmission of knowledge but through a person's own efforts and, importantly, a belief in their abilities to make the effort. In recounting Jacotot's and his students' experience, Rancière recognises that 'Jacotot had taught them something. And yet he had communicated nothing to them of his science' (Rancière, 1991, p.13). He had put in place the conditions for them to realise that they could learn without a teacher, without a master explicator. This idea of a will, and people's own desire to learn and to know, is a key feature of the accounts of the community activists in their work to bring about change as I discuss in the findings chapters.

As Foucault and Rancière highlight, it is difficult to make sense in, or of, that which is outside of our discursive practices or the distribution of the sensible. Hierarchization of learning and of intelligences is currently so normal, so sensible, that it is difficult to research what is not normally visible. As discussed above, informal learning is often unseen. But, as Foucault has pointed out, just because this is how things are now does not mean that they must always be so. Similarly, Rancière fights against the idea of historical necessity (Simons & Masschelein, 2011). Switching the focus, then, from the educational environment to that of community activism allows us to move away from an emphasis on pedagogy where the usual and dominant aim is to teach people what they do not know and to 'close the gap between the ignorant one and knowledge' (Rancière, 1991, p.3). Instead, in this study, the focus is on the 'practical means of reaching some end' (Rancière, 1991, p.3).

Rancière's work is relevant both to the research of community activism and of role and the value of informal learning, understanding why and how informal learning has been relegated to the position of poor cousin. It helps us to bring into view what he has described as 'instruction's first accomplishment' which is 'to consign to the everyday life of students the procedures by which their minds have heretofore learned everything they know' (Rancière,

2010, p.4). A distinction is made between the verticality of formal learning and 'the horizontal ways of the self-taught who move from proximity to proximity, comparing what they don't know to what they do know' (Rancière, 2010, p.4). Essentially, Rancière highlights what we already know about informal learning – that we do it all the time – but which has become less visible because of the emphasis on the necessity of formal education. The 'method' proposed by Joseph Jacotot in the *Ignorant Schoolmaster* is, according to Rancière, 'the oldest in the world…There is no one on earth who hasn't learned something by himself and without a master explicator' (Rancière, 1991, p.16).

Rancière did not see equality or emancipation as requiring a more knowledgeable person to transmit knowledge or demystify the conditions of a person's domination. Rather, he recognised, from his research on the nineteenth century French labour movement and from Jacotot's experiences, that equality was not attained, it was verified through 'a process of subjectification through which all participating agents are empowered to find out for themselves how their conditions of living can be improved' (Citton, 2014, p.33). Rancière presents this process of subjectification as 'politics'. This is distinct from the way things are currently organised – our governments, our laws, our elections – which he referred to as the 'police'. The police is a distribution of the sensible that sets out the proper 'ways of being, ways of doing and ways of saying' (Rancière, 2010, p.7). It guides who gets to speak and who gets to act, about what and how. It 'sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task' (Rancière, 1999, p.29). Politics, for Rancière, is 'the verification of the presupposition of the equality of intelligence' (Citton, 2014, p.29). Politics is action. It is the stepping out of the places assigned to us and it is 'the mode of acting that perturbs' the distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2003, p.226). Politics is dissensus and it is aesthetic 'in that it makes visible what had been excluded from a perceptual field, and in that it makes audible what used to be inaudible' (Rancière, 2003, p.226). This is, as I will discuss in the findings chapters, the essence of community action as talked about by the participants in this study. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Lightbody (2017) argues that those often perceived as 'hard to reach' may be more accurately understood as 'easy to ignore'. Rancière argues that a problem of perception lies at the root of inequality and Deranty (2014, p.11) suggests that the causes of inequality can be understood in terms of 'which activities, and whose activities, can literally be seen and heard'. The struggle for equality 'can never be merely a demand upon the other' but must always simultaneously be 'a proof given to oneself' (Rancière, 2007, p.48). It is about emerging from a minority status and

> proving that they truly belong to the society, that they truly communicate with all in a common space; that they are not merely creatures of need, of complaint and protest, but

creatures of discourse and reasons, that they are capable of opposing reason with reason and of giving their action a demonstrative form'. (Rancière, 2007, p.48)

In sum, I turned to both Rancière and Foucault because their concepts outlined above offer an approach that is useful in this exploratory research project, encouraging openness to new ways of understanding and seeing people and processes. Rather than approaching the data expecting to find the powerless and the powerful, the oppressed and the oppressors, we can be more open to understanding who does and says what. Their work opens up a different understanding of power, particularly of that which divides, categorises and excludes. Researching the learning of community activists provides an opportunity to consider how power relations change, how categories change and how people who had no part, are heard and bring about change. How this research was approached, designed and carried out is discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I provide details of the research questions asked and the methodology with which I sought to answer those questions. For an exploratory research project located in a constructivist paradigm reflecting my ontological, epistemological and axiological perspectives, I chose Constructivist Grounded Theory as the most appropriate methodology with which to approach the data collection and analysis. I briefly discuss this methodology, highlighting its usefulness in this study and explain why the other possible methodologies of narrative inquiry and case study research were considered, but ultimately rejected. I outline how the research was designed, providing an overview of how I sampled, recruited and interviewed participants, audio recording and transcribing the interviews. I outline the ways in which I worked to ensure the quality of the research and the importance of being reflexive at all stages and of recognising researcher positionality. Finally, in this chapter, I explain how I approached the analysis, starting with initial line-by-line coding, using sensitizing concepts and the role of literature and theory in the process. I begin in the next section by presenting the research questions.

Research questions

Rather than see informal and formal learning as being in opposition to each other, with one often being considered more valuable than the other, this research sought to understand the ways in which they interact and complement each other in useful and productive ways. This did not constitute an attempt to measure learning or knowledge in order to ascertain how much has been accumulated through social action. Rather, I explored the ways in which learning and knowledge were used or developed for and through action. The kind of action that I considered is that which is intended to bring about positive change for people and communities and which works towards greater social or environmental justice. In my investigation, considering both formal and informal learning, I was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do research participants talk about and position themselves in relation to learning and knowledge?
2. How and what do people learn through grassroots community activism and how is knowledge accessed and developed?
3. What role do learning (formal and informal) and knowledge (lay and specialist) play in grassroots activism?

These questions assume that knowledge is accessed, developed, valued, used and shared and that learning does occur through activism.

Research paradigm

The exploratory nature of this research situates it in an interpretive paradigm and more specifically in critical and constructivist paradigms (Lincoln et al., 2018). Since features commonly associated with each particular paradigm will not necessarily apply to this project, I will outline here my position in relation to ontology, epistemology and axiology. Importantly, locating my research in these paradigms does not constitute a judgement that one approach is superior to the other possibilities, but simply that it best reflects my position and approach to this particular topic and what I want to learn and achieve with this research. Postpositivist and quantitative approaches may be better suited to research that aims to produce objective statistical analysis and could highlight areas and questions to be investigated qualitatively (Lincoln et al., 2018). In turn, qualitative research may illuminate areas where a postpositivist approach could then produce further information and knowledge more effectively. So, while research paradigms have previously been understood as being in opposition or as contrasting one with the other, it seems preferable to consider them as complementary since no one approach will help us to find out all we would like to know. Indeed, as Lincoln et al. (2018) suggest, arguing that paradigms are in contention is less useful than identifying how and where they are similar and how and where they diverge.

Nevertheless, a researcher's understanding about the nature of reality, what it is and what we can know about it will influence what and how they research. Researchers working within a postpositivist paradigm will be more likely to believe in a single and fixed reality, even though they recognise that we might not be able to fully access it or understand it (Lincoln et al., 2018, p.114). More in line with a constructivist approach, I understand reality not as stable and fixed, somehow 'out there', distinct from us, waiting to be discovered, but as a process, or a set of processes that produce the reality that we experience at a given point in time or place. Acknowledging that reality is not fixed requires that we accept that we cannot know and understand reality once and for all. This does not mean, however, that we cannot know it at all. We can seek to understand reality at specific points in time, for certain groups of people, in particular situations. Reality is, reflecting Foucault's (2002) concept of discursive practices, in what we do and in what we say. According to this concept, power works through our discursive practices constructing

our reality in the ways that 'they institutionalize and regulate ways of talking, thinking and acting' (Jager & Maier, 2009, p.35). Knowledge, from this perspective then, is 'conditional … its validity depends on people's location in history, geography, class relations' (Jager & Maier, 2009, p.34). This perspective does not prevent us from studying or understanding social reality. Rather, my position is that it is important to understand what effects our current knowledge and practices have on people's lives and how people experience their reality. As discussed in the previous chapter, Foucault understood power and knowledge as being very closely connected, representing it with the hybrid term *power/knowledge* (Foucault, 1980). What we 'know' at particular points in time or in particular places is 'linked to power [and] not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to make itself true' (Hall, 2001, p.76, original emphasis). So, while there may or may not be a fixed reality or an ultimate 'Truth' to be discovered, what we know about the world and how we act in it nevertheless has real effects on people's lives. For some people, this means that they face disadvantage. Recognising reality and knowledge in these ways, as fluid and changing, provides us with the hope necessary to work for social justice. Foucault was able to show, through his work, that things change. Conceiving not of a fixed reality but of a 'regime of truth' sustained by actions and discourses suggests that we can change and that society can change by us 'intervening in contemporary discourses of power' (Ball, 2013, p.4). By researching reality as a process and as action, there is the possibility that people recognising the implications of their actions decide to change what they do. I seek, in this research, then, not to discover the or a 'Truth' or to understand a reality beyond discourse or actions but rather to explore practices and discourses around learning and education through the experiences and talk of people involved in grassroots activism. Understanding reality as constructed through our actions, rather than as something fixed and stable but elusive, then we can study reality by studying actions and discourse. A methodology suited to help us do this is Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014) as I describe in the following section.

Methodology

Constructivist Grounded Theory is a methodology that can be used to research processes (Charmaz, 2014). It also works well with the ontology and epistemology outlined above. Constructivist Grounded Theory provides us with guidelines and techniques to explore a topic where we hope to see and to understand that which is not easily seen or understood. These techniques allow for a systematic collection, examination and analysis of data on the topic of learning and knowledge in grassroots activism. Constructivist Grounded Theory

has its roots in the work of Barry Glaser and Anselm Strauss who introduced Grounded Theory in their book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). At the time of the book's publication, the credibility of qualitative research in the social sciences was low. Not being able to match the requirements for quantitative research in terms of validity and reliability, it was often dismissed as anecdotal and unfocussed. Glaser and Strauss developed Grounded Theory to offer a credible alternative. They also believed that there had been too much focus in social sciences research on the 'verification of theory' and not enough on 'the prior step of discovering what concepts and hypotheses are relevant for the area that one wishes to research' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp.1-2). They encouraged the use of empirical data to generate theory rather than simply to 'example' theory.

> A researcher can easily find examples for dreamed-up, speculative, or logically deduced theory after the idea has occurred. But since the idea has not been derived from the example, seldom can the example correct or change it (even if the author is willing), since the example was selectively chosen for its confirming power. Therefore, one receives the image of a proof when there is none, and the theory obtains a richness of detail that it did not earn. (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.5)

This sentiment will be familiar to those who work in contexts where evidence is required to show 'good practice'. For example, in seeking to confirm that a community engagement process was effective, it will be possible to find comments from one or two individuals to confirm this, even though nothing much may have changed for the community as a whole. It is important to examine the data for what it actually contains, and to be open to what it might contain, rather than to select those elements that say what we expect it to. In the years that followed the publication of the seminal text, what people understood Grounded Theory to be changed and evolved. Dey (1999) writes how even Glaser and Strauss soon disagreed about what the methodology entailed, with developments by Strauss and Corbin rejected by Glaser as 'surely not grounded theory' (Glaser 1992, cited in Dey, 1999, p.21). Dey (1999, p.2) suggests, perhaps flippantly, that there are 'as many versions of grounded theory as there are grounded theorists'. However, this could have been the original intention of Glaser and Strauss who stated a wish to 'keep the discussion open-minded, to stimulate rather than freeze thinking about the topic' (1967, p.9). Although Glaser and Strauss intended to provide a credible alternative to the positivist quantitative research that dominant during the 1960s, their methodology was also considered to be based on positivist assumptions (Charmaz, 2014). Nevertheless, the basic strategies developed to support the use of grounded theory proved useful to researchers of different epistemological and ontological stances. That grounded theory can thus be adopted in the pursuit of research 'across epistemological and ontological gulfs' (Charmaz, 2014, p.12)

may explain the popularity it now enjoys as a qualitative methodology and how it can, as Mattoni (2014, p.23) argues, 'work as a flexible source of guidelines in developing research on grassroots political participation'.

From its positivist roots, grounded theory has evolved around the constructivist turn with the work of Charmaz which recognises the multiple, processual and constructed nature of social reality (Charmaz, 2014, p.13). Building on the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967), Constructivist Grounded Theory provides a systematic method for conducting this research by means of flexible strategies useful for exploring the topic. Constructivist Grounded Theory is particularly suitable for this research for several reasons. In contrast to the earlier versions that attempted to retain the position of an objective and neutral researcher, Constructivist Grounded Theory recognises the researcher's position and the importance of context in the research – context being understood as comprising the historical, social, situational and interactional aspects (Charmaz & Bryant, 2016, p.350). Constructivist Grounded Theory allows for the research process to be seen, not as an attempt to access and learn about a reality beyond the talk, but as a reality in and of itself including 'what researchers and participants bring to it and do within it' (Charmaz, 2014, p.13). This allows us to construct and analyse reality through research, by acknowledging the very particular nature of the interview interaction, who is involved, the purpose and the topics. This then strengthens the grounding of the analysis in the data, because the data, in the form of audio recording and transcripts, constitutes a representation of reality. It allows us to look at what people do through talk when discussing their involvement in community activism and their experiences of learning and education.

As discussed in the previous section, understanding reality as constructed offers hope for change. If we approach the research as a construction, we can examine the ways in which it is constructed by the participants and reflect on how different constructions might be possible. Constructivist Grounded Theory provides tools and strategies to examine what people are doing in the interviews and encourages focusing on what is happening in and emerging from the data, rather than looking for preconceived themes and theories. This research is exploratory, seeking to understand learning and knowledge in social action through individuals' accounts of their experiences. Constructivist Grounded Theory can be useful at an exploratory stage. As Charmaz et al. (2018, p.433) discuss, Constructivist Grounded Theory can be used in 'exploratory sequential mixed-method designs, where grounded theory is employed initially, and findings from the first phase inform the second phase, whether it is quantitative or qualitative in nature'.

Other approaches considered

Constructivist Grounded Theory is, of course, not the only way to research this topic and other methodologies were considered as suitable approaches, in particular Narrative Inquiry and Case Study Research. These were both considered because of the ways in which they allow an in-depth exploration of a topic. Case studies, for example, have been used to gain understanding of learning in social movements. Researchers use case studies to develop an in-depth understanding of situations (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017) and Foley (1999) used case studies to understand learning in social action. Choosing to do case study research, however, would mean that it would be necessary to focus on one or two cases of community action to allow a thorough investigation through the collection of multiple sources of evidence such as, direct observations, interviews and documents (Yin, 2012). This, while it would likely generate very interesting data and insights, would only do so for the particular cases. It would also require greater commitment from community activists in terms of time and in allowing access to their activities and documents. Interviewing participants from a wider range of contexts, as I did in this study, allowed patterns to emerge that might not have been possible in the context of just one or two case studies where similarities between participants might be attributed to the similar experiences and contexts.

Narrative Inquiry, being case centred research (Riessman, 2016), was also considered. Taking a narrative approach, understanding people's stories as the ways in which they interpret and find meaning in their experiences (Clandinin, 2013) is relevant and useful to this research. The methodology is described as fluid, relational and 'open to where the stories of participants' experience' take the research (Clandinin, 2013, p.33). The approach conceives of three dimensions in the inquiry space, those of time, place and sociality (Clandindin, 2013) and, following Dewey's (1938) theory of experience, the approach emphasizes continuity of experience. The open approach through the process of 'a search, a 're-search', a search again…a sense of continual reformulation' (Clandinin, 2013, p.42) is particularly useful in an exploratory study such as this. Despite the value Narrative Inquiry offers in its conception of people as storied selves and the open, multi-dimensional research space, there were still aspects that prevented this approach from being a comfortable fit for this research project. Grounded theory is considered 'transportable across epistemological and ontological gulfs' (Charmaz, 2014, p.12), allowing, for instance, a constructivist turn (Charmaz, 2014) and then a postmodern turn (Clarke, 2005).

In contrast, to be considered Narrative Inquiry research, it is important to have a 'clear sense of the epistemological and ontological commitments of those who work in the field' (Clandinin, 2013, p.11) and there now exists criteria that determine 'what counts, or what fits within the field of narrative inquiry' (Clandinin, 2013, p.12). It is not simply a matter of including 'narrative' or 'stories' in the research design for it to be Narrative Inquiry. Given the more restrictive nature that identifying a study as Narrative Inquiry entailed, there did not seem to be sufficient reason to adopt this as a methodology here.

Sampling

While random sampling for representativeness and generalisability are important considerations for quantitative research, it is not suitable for a qualitative study such as this which seeks to understand the experiences of individuals in very specific and unique situations. The purpose of random sampling is to be able to generalise from the sample and to correct for selectivity errors (Patton, 2002). The purpose of this study, however, is not to generalise and reduce bias, but to explore differences in experiences and to make connections from information-rich encounters which can shed light on the research questions (Patton, 2002). It is these connections that are 'the interviewer's alternative to generalizability' (Seidman, 2013, p.55). Connections within the data and also those made by readers who

> may not learn how to control or predict the experience being studied or their own, but they will understand better their complexities. They will appreciate more the intricate ways in which individual lives interact with social and structural forces. (Seidman, 2013, p.55)

To collect data to facilitate such connections, it is important then not to sample randomly but purposefully (Patton, 2002) seeking out people whose experiences can illuminate the topic. Random selection assumes that all possible participants will have something to say about the area of interest. That is not my assumption in this research. Therefore, as Morse (2007, p.232) suggests, my sampling began 'by recruiting participants solely based on whether they have experienced the research topic in question'.

I had initially considered the possibility of focusing on one or two community activist groups as case studies but subsequently decided that a better understanding of people's experiences in a range of activities would be more useful in identifying ways in which the findings could be applied to other adult learning situations. Given the constraints of time and resources, the variation of experiences may be seen as a problem but, as Patton (2002) points out, heterogeneity sampling, or maximum variation sampling such as this can be a

strength when it is recognised that 'patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon' (Patton, 2002, p.235). Variation is also considered important to determine the scope of the topic and identify the boundaries (Morse, 2007).

As I was interested in the experiences of grassroots community activists, I sought to interview people who had been actively involved in work to bring about positive changes or resist what they considered negative changes in their communities. Using a range of approaches to access participants, I recruited people who had different experiences, priorities, backgrounds, ages and genders and who had been active in different parts of Scotland. Recruitment was not simply a matter of asking someone to participate in the research. Community activists are often busy people, with their activism being a voluntary role alongside work and family commitments. In addition, many, particularly those involved in well-known campaigns, are of interest to other researchers and receive a lot of requests to participate in studies. One of those approached answered to say that, because of a high number of similar requests, they were not able to participate. Others did not respond. Two expressed interest and willingness to take part but then were unable to set a date to meet. Most of those who participated were contacted through mutual acquaintances with an element of snowball sampling (Morgan, 2012) to locate others. While it took time to identify and recruit participants, this allowed time to transcribe, to start analysing and to start to focus on particular areas and concepts as the data generation progressed.

Participants

Identifying and recruiting participants in this way provided greater variety of projects and experiences than would have been possible had I simply selected campaigns that were of interest or that were already known to me and this was in line with the exploratory nature of the research. The heterogeneity sampling meant that there was space in the interviews for concepts and information that were relevant and important to the participants in the context of activism and learning rather decisions made in advance about what would be relevant.

Nine grassroots community activists were interviewed – four women and five men. They had all been involved in a variety of actions to bring about change that they believed were important from social and environmental justice perspectives and which would benefit (or prevent harm to) them and people in their communities. Their activist work had taken

place in both rural and urban locations around Scotland. Two of the women fought against the closure of local play parks in different regions. Another campaigned for better housing to protect the health of children in the area. One man campaigned against the trials of genetically modified crops, while another was working to bring about equality in prescribing of diabetic monitors. I also talked to two people who had been involved in different ways to fight for the repeal of legislation and one woman worked to tackle period poverty locally. One man worked in his rural community to establish a care home for elderly residents and another was involved in getting a wind turbine in his area to support local projects.

Interviews

Data from a range of sources can be used in Grounded Theory (Mattoni, 2014) although interviewing is the most common method for collecting data (Charmaz & Bryant, 2016, p.351). This method of collecting data is not without its critics but from a constructivist epistemological stance interviewing 'people whose experiences can illuminate the topic' (Charmaz, 2014, p.55) offers opportunities to build knowledge about the role of learning in community activism through talk.

Interviews are commonly used in collecting data on social movements (Blee, 2013) and much of the research on social action features conversations with those involved. For the purposes of this research, where I approached the topic with a view to learn more, intensive interviews were used to explore and discuss learning and knowledge in social action from those who have experience of it. Openness to what people said, as well as what they did not say, was an important element of my approach to interviewing. In trying to understand more about that which is not as easily seen, it was important not to close down thoughts and possibilities too quickly. Foucault (1979, 1980) pointed out that our discursive practices determine what can be seen and known. Learning in social action is often 'tacit, embedded in action and is often not recognized as learning' (Foley, 1999, p.3) and so the interviews were not approached as a 'data excavation procedure' where researchers 'prospect' for the 'true facts and feelings residing within the respondent' (Holstein & Gubrium, 2016, pp.69-70). I was interested in better understanding the complexity of learning and knowledge development and their use in social action. I wanted to be open to what the participants might want to tell me about this and did not want to anticipate any particular answers. However, I did not wish to be so open to what the interviewees talked about that I did not focus on the topic of interest. The interviews were

thus semi-structured and in line with the methods of grounded theory and intensive interviewing which, according to Charmaz (2014, p.85), are 'open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted'. This guided me as I talked to people.

Given that the interviewees were providing their time and energy to facilitate my research, the principle of equity required that I did all I could to accommodate them (Seidman, 2013), holding interviews at times and places convenient to them. The interviews were therefore held close to their home or place of work, at times that fitted with their existing commitments. These were arranged by email or text messaging prior to the interview. Locations were safe for all. Most of the interviews took place face-to-face in public locations, in cafés, in a community building and at a university. Two of the interviewees lived in a remote location on an island and it was not practical financially or logistically to travel to interview them. As I had trialled Skype interviews during a previous research project, I proposed to interview these two participants this way. However, since internet connection was not reliable on the islands, telephone interviews were conducted instead. In contrast to face-to-face interviews, which were on average 60-90 minutes long, these interviews were shorter, taking approximately half the time of the other interviews. I found it more difficult to establish the same rapport and sense of ease with the participants when it was not possible to see their face and to use facial expressions, eye contact and gestures as part of the interaction. It was instead important to be very attentive to tone of voice, pauses and breathing in order to guide the interview in productive ways. Pauses which can be used to better effect face-to-face, allowing the participants time to think and build on what they have said, were less comfortable and sustainable on the telephone. While these interviews were still interesting in terms of the research, adding new perspectives and confirming others, I was less able to probe and explore their experiences in the same way as I felt I could in a face-to-face situation.

Interview questions

Prior to talking to anyone, I developed an interview guide (see appendix 4). This was an important early step that allowed me to think through some of the things I wanted to find out about but also how I might ask about them or prompt discussion around them. While it could be argued that an interview guide directs the interviewee in particular ways, it also provides time to reflect on whether the questions might hide assumptions that will shut down possible avenues of exploration. As Charmaz warns,

> The wrong questions fail to explore pivotal issues or to elicit participants' experiences in their own language. Such questions may also foist the researcher's concepts, concerns, and discourse upon the research participant's reality – from the start. (Charmaz, 2014, p.63)

In both the data collection and the analysis, I paid close attention to the language used drawing on insights from discourse analysis – Conversation Analysis (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2001) in particular. Understanding that what we say and how we say it does not merely reflect or represent knowledge and reality but constitutes knowledge and reality (Jager & Maier, 2009, p.35) leads us to recognise the importance not only of what our research participants say but also of our role as researchers in the interaction. Ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1984) and Conversation Analysis show that language is a place where action takes place and not, as was previously thought, 'a colourless, odourless, frictionless substrate' through which social dynamics work (Heritage, 2001, p.49). Talk is action governed by a syntax that directs the sequential ordering of actions and allows participants to assess the actions of all those taking part in an interaction and to arrive at conclusions about each other's motivation and identity (Heritage, 2001). Bearing in mind that it was important to present a suitable image by looking 'appropriate for the setting, participant *and* situation' (Charmaz, 2014, p.62; original emphasis), I was also aware that what is said and how it is said will also affect the nature of the conversation and the data generated through it. Contributions to an interaction are both 'context-shaped' and 'context-renewing' (Seedhouse, 2004, p.14) and therefore drawing on findings from conversation analytic research and previous interview experiences helps to guard against 'asking awkward, poorly timed, intrusive questions … [filled] with unexamined preconceptions' (Charmaz, 2014, p.63).

The interview guide was also important as it focused the topic, making it more likely that the time spent in the interview was efficiently and effectively used. In researching learning that is not easily seen or recognised, it did not make sense to approach the interviews hoping that what I wanted to know would emerge spontaneously in the time that I had with each participant. The guide meant that I was better prepared to pursue leads and follow up questions sensitively. Rather than preventing spontaneity, planning questions helped me 'to improvise in a smoother, less confrontational way' (Charmaz, 2014, p.64) in exploring the topic. The value of the interview guide was mostly in the planning and reflection that I did in developing it, rather than as a prompt to refer to in the interviews.

The interview guide included questions for opening up topics, for exploring them and for ending the interview. The open-ended questions at the beginning of the interview allowed space for 'unanticipated statements and stories to emerge' (Charmaz, 2014, p.64). As my data collection and analysis progressed, I adapted the guide to focus more specifically on particular areas of interest. I started the interviews by asking the participants to tell me how they got involved with community activism and what they had done. During the interviews, I took notes of things that research participants said that struck me as interesting. This allowed me to use their own terms and their own experiences to explore particular aspects in more depth. If school or formal education was not mentioned, I asked about their experiences of this.

Transcription

With the consent of each of the participants, the interviews were audio recorded using a digital recorder. Following each interview, I transcribed the conversation. While 'a transcript is a text that "re"-presents an event [and] it is not the event itself' (Green et al., 1997, p.172) both the process and product of transcription facilitate the analysis of that event. From a constructivist perspective, I was interested in both the *whats* and the *hows* of the interviews (Holstein & Gubrium, 2016). Riessman points out that, even though oral narratives develop in dynamic conversations, attention is often not paid to the 'interactional contexts that shaped that particular version' (2016, p.368). How people structure their talk in interviews can draw our attention to particular aspects of what they say and there is growing recognition that 'interviews are not merely the product of *what* the participants talk about but *how* they talk' (Richards, 2011, p.95). From this perspective then, in representing the oral interview interaction in writing, it was important to be clear which features of the conversation were to be recorded in the transcription and which details were not considered necessary for the purposes of this study. Given the open and exploratory nature of the research, it was necessary to retain as much information as possible for initial analysis so as not to eliminate potentially interesting aspects at an early stage of analysis. As Hutchby and Wooffitt discuss, 'transcription is, first of all, an attempt to capture talk as it actually occurs, in all its apparent messiness' (1998, p.75). However, it was also important to be realistic in terms of the time and resources available. It is not always considered necessary to transcribe recordings in full. Ten Have (2007, p.110), for example, urges researchers to 'carefully consider which parts of the recordings should be transcribed and in what kind of detail'. Seeing transcription as an integral part of the analysis (Mann, 2016), I transcribed the interviews in full, keeping in mind the research

questions to decide which details were unlikely to be useful. So, features that would be included in a transcript for conversation analysis, such as timed gaps and pauses, overlapping speech, and changes in pitch and intonation were not recorded in the transcript. Insights from conversation analysis about the significance of hesitations, pauses, false starts and laughter also informed the decisions around what to include. Noticeable gaps and pauses were noted on the transcript but were not timed. Similarly, hesitations and repairs were noted. These become relevant as analysis progressed and are discussed in the following chapters. Therefore, while it was considered too time consuming and unnecessary to accurately record overlapping speech, it was considered relevant to include all words spoken, whether these formed complete thoughts or not, laughter, and gaps. These drew attention to areas that might warrant closer consideration and also helped to retain the 'flavor of the interview' (Bosi & Reiter, 2014, p.135). Since the audio recordings of the interview were considered to be the data with the transcript produced to facilitate the analysis, the recordings could be referred to when it was important to attend in finer detail to some aspects.

The production of a transcript from audio recording entails translating speech into writing, representing what participants have said in written form. In so doing, it is important to keep in mind the ways in which spoken and written language are different, as well the similarities between them. Halliday (1994) highlighted how both written and spoken language are complex but that they display different kinds of complexity. Written language is more likely to be lexically dense, with a higher proportion of content words in a piece of text, than spoken language. Spoken language tends to be more grammatically intricate than written language. Importantly, however, one form is not more correct than another but decisions have to be made as to how to represent speech in writing. As Brinkmann and Kvale point out, transcription is not simply a matter of typing what is on the recording, rather 'transcription is an interpretative process' (2015, p.203). Different transcribers will produce different transcriptions. It is important to reflect on the purpose, the process and the impact of the transcription.

Transcriptions can be naturalised or denaturalised, or somewhere in between these two extremes (Oliver et al., 2005). Naturalised transcripts retain as much detail from the spoken interaction as possible, as described above in reference to Conversation Analysis. Denaturalised transcriptions are more likely to be used when the research is concerned only with the informational content. This transcription still produces a verbatim depiction of what was said but leaves out information about such things as accents, involuntary

vocalization and hesitations. Whether naturalised or denaturalised, or somewhere in between, transcripts of spoken language represented in written form can appear disorganised and rambling because we are more likely to judge them by the standards we would apply to writing. This has caused problems for researchers when they have sent transcripts to interviewees to be checked. Mero-Jaffe (2011), for instance, describes how interviewees expressed discomfort and even disbelief about what they had said in an interview when they were asked to review the transcript. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015, p.213) suggest that 'oral language transcribed verbatim may appear as incoherent and confused speech, even as indicating a lower level of intellectual functioning'. This interpretation, they discuss, has elicited angry responses from research participants when sent a transcript. While we may disagree with this interpretation, it is important to be aware of this tendency and to consider the how this might affect our participants. I did not share the transcripts with my participants as it was not considered necessary for this research project. Despite this, it is still possible that some of the interview participants will read their words in the finished dissertation or in future publications and so this was something I needed to consider. Wanting to make available as many details as possible for analysis, transcription included the details described above. If, however, details were not necessary to the analysis, some of them were removed from any excerpts used in the discussion of the findings. This, along with added punctuation, is intended to make it easier to read but also to limit possible discomfort of participants who might judge their contributions negatively.

Deciding how to depict the accents and the varieties of English used by the participants was not straightforward. Initially, I had thought to use conventional spelling to represent the utterances. This was based in the perception that despite the variety of pronunciation of English, there is usually one way to portray a word in written English. To change the spelling to represent a different pronunciation was fraught with difficulties around why a change in spelling was thought to be required and what judgements were involved. For instance, if I heard the word 'house' as 'hoose', would representing it as I heard it entail a judgement about a nonstandard pronunciation, and what would the connotations and implications of such a judgement be? Standard English is associated with educated and middle class speakers and it is the variety of English which is codified in dictionaries, used in the media and taught in schools (Thomas, 1996). As such, it has come to be seen as the 'correct' variety, with all other varieties featuring 'errors' of pronunciation or grammar. Because of this, there can be the tendency to look down on other varieties of English and see the speakers of other varieties negatively. This is discussed by Oliver et al. (2005) who

found that in a research project involving a community-based research team, transcriptions from which knowledge of ethnicity and class could be gleaned opened up the possibility to 'make assumptions about the participant that were not conducive to collaborative data analysis' (Oliver et al., 2005, p.1274). Jaffe and Walton (2000) found that people connect orthography to social identities, reading 'non-standard orthographies as indices of low socioeconomic status' (Jaffe & Walton, 2000, p.561).

There is an argument, then, that the speech should be represented using standard orthography to avoid stigmatizing the participants. I do not, however, agree with such a stance and ultimately made the decision to represent the participants according to how they chose to speak in the interview. As Oliver et al. paraphrase Schegloff, 'when we attempt to stay true to the actual speech, we privilege the participant's words […] the participants are allowed to speak for themselves' (Oliver et al., 2005, p.1279). Furthermore, to change the language to a more standard version would be to represent the participants as they have not chosen to represent themselves. This would suggest that nonstandard accents are not to be taken seriously but that only speakers of standard language can, or should, be heard. In addition to this, there was evidence of codeswitching in the transcripts, where people chose to draw more strongly on their regional varieties of English to particular effect, when quoting themselves or others and when expressing feelings, for example. Therefore, the more naturalistic transcription employed in this study should not be seen as 'linguacentric' or for 'shock folk status' (Preston, 1982, p.306) as it could easily be, but rather as a conscious decision not to hide legitimate ways of speaking from view.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the College of Social Sciences of the University of Glasgow before data collection began. A participant information sheet was provided to each interviewee outlining the research and how the data would be stored, used and disposed of. Participants signed a consent form indicating their understanding and their willingness to take part. It was made clear that participants could withdraw at any point without giving a reason. Copies of these documents are in the appendices.

One of the main concerns from an ethical point of view was that if people did not feel that they had learned in the process of their involvement in community activism, they might experience negative feelings that could affect their self-esteem and confidence. If the way in which I conducted the interview or framed the questions suggested to the participants

that they had not learned something and had nothing to offer my research, then this might represent harm for the participant. It was important for me to ensure that the experience was a positive one for the interviewees and I took this into consideration as I prepared for and as I conducted the interviews. In each case, following the interviews, the participants said that they had enjoyed the experience.

Another important concern was that since some of the experiences of the participants were unique and some of the campaigns they were involved in were well known, there was the possibility of individuals being recognised through details of the campaigns they were involved in or by their associations and interactions with specific organisations. It became clear that it would be important not to include all details of their activism in the discussion and analysis of findings. This ethical concern has resulted in some relevant aspects of the data being omitted from the discussion to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. The uniqueness of the experiences of community activists in Scotland, particularly those with social media presence, also means that it would not be possible to share full transcripts as changing names of individuals, places and organisations may not be sufficient and it is possible that people could be identified from their actions.

The audio recordings and transcripts were stored on a password protected computer. Participants' names and other details that could be used to identify them, such as names of other people and place names, were removed during the transcription process and pseudonyms are used when discussing their contributions here. When an interviewee asked for a bit to be taken out, it was removed from the transcript and not used in the analysis.

Quality

While it is important to aim for good and worthwhile research, the conventional benchmarks of validity, reliability and objectivity associated with positivist and postpositivist paradigms (Lincoln & Guba, 2000) are not useful in a qualitative research study located in a constructivist paradigm. These concepts are often referred to by qualitative researchers who offer interviewers advice about how 'to minimize the distortion that can occur because of their role in the interview' (Seidman, 2013, p.26) or to conduct a series of three interviews so that interviewees 'account for their idiosyncratic days' (p.27). Within a constructivist paradigm, where the situated nature of reality is acknowledged, and the role of the researcher recognised as being part of the research situation, these concepts do not make sense. Not being able to draw on these benchmarks does not mean, however,

that we cannot work to assure good quality research. For the professional and practical aims of this research, the question posed by Lincoln and Guba (2000) is more useful. They ask, are the findings 'sufficiently authentic … that I may trust myself in acting on their implications?' (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p.178). This question is important in this research because, while I want to *know* more about our social world, I also want to be able to *take action* and support others to act. As alternatives to the standards of validity, reliability and objectivity associated with positivism, Lincoln and Guba propose the standards of authenticity and trustworthiness which include aspects such educative authenticity, tactical authenticity and fairness (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Fairness refers to balance and to ensuring that we consider and represent the views and contributions of all participants. This includes reflecting on whether or why one participant is being quoted more than another in reporting and interpreting the research (Mann, 2016). In this research, I recognise that two of the interviewees are quoted more than the others – Anne and Ella. This is because the stories of learning and activism that emerged during their interviews represent comprehensive examples of what, in Rancièrian terms, can be seen as the transformation from inequality to equality. This comes from, I believe, their openness and their reflection during the interviews on their thinking, their emotions and their actions. Two of the interviewees – Mark and Graham, who were interviewed by telephone – are quoted less than the others. The mode of communication, as discussed above, did not facilitate the same exploration of themes but this could also coincide with very different experiences and motivations in relation to the others. The authenticities argued for by Lincoln and Guba (2000) also consider the awareness raising and emancipatory potential of the research which is very relevant for this study.

Reflexivity and positionality of the researcher

As mentioned above, the explicit acknowledgement in constructivist grounded theory of the researcher's position in the research situation requires reflexivity about the decisions a researcher makes and the actions they take (Charmaz, 2014). A reflexive stance to the research requires 'a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality' (Berger, 2015, p.220). This was an important aspect at all stages of this study. Evaluation of my own positionality, for instance, helped me to resist focusing only on and promoting informal learning over formal learning in deciding on the research topic and questions. The practice of reflexivity encouraged me to be open to what the participants were expressing, particularly when what they said challenged my preconceptions or the theoretical framework. This practice prompted me to grapple with

findings that did not quite fit what I expected and so enabled 'fuller engagement with the data and more in-depth comprehensive analysis of it' (Berger, 2015, p.222) than would have been possible had I not been aware of some of my biases. However, despite taking a reflexive stance, I recognise that I am likely to have overlooked biases. It is not always possible to see the ways in which our own position, values and experiences influence how we understand and make sense of what we see and hear. I found that talking through emerging thoughts with critical friends (Costantino, 2010) was useful in exploring ideas and testing findings. Talking to someone who I knew supported me and wanted me to succeed, but who was also open and ready to disagree with an idea or a conclusion, often encouraged me to return to the data or the theory to reconsider or strengthen my arguments. I also allowed the voices of those around me, including those on social media, to prompt me to reflect on the findings and to ask questions of it. This all helped to open up the data and to understand it in different ways.

A researcher is positioned by many personal, social and ideological aspects, encompassing age to political stances, family circumstances to religious beliefs and personal and professional experiences (Berger, 2015). I discussed some of this in the first chapter. Here I will be open about the fact that, possibly because of my family background and the experiences of members of my family as well as experiences with adult literacies learners, the way in which people are looked down on and talked about in ways that position them as inferior, stupid or as a problem to be fixed, can provoke an emotional response in me, even when I recognise such actions to be well meaning. I have seen the ways in which such attitudes and approaches can exclude and silence people and it is this, as discussed above, that provides the main motivation for this research. I acknowledge the emotion I feel, not in an attempt to neutralise it or to pretend objectivity, but in order to examine it critically in light of the data and the literature and to be aware of the ease with which an emotional response can lead to assumptions rather than findings grounded in data. Taking a grounded approach with an open questioning mentality focused me on what is actually in the data, and not what I expect to be there.

Other relevant aspects of my positionality relate to my own experiences of learning and education. During my high school years in Ireland, I was aware of being capable but, because of the ways in which academic success led to being set apart from the groups I wanted to associate with, I soon learned to downplay these capabilities. Not having a clear idea of what I wanted to do on leaving school, I was more focused on the social rather than the academic aspects of school, leaving with, as one of the participants described in an

interview, 'nothing to write home about'. I went to France as an Au Pair for a year and learned French through interaction with the family and the community. I returned to Ireland, did a bilingual secretarial course before returning to France to work in a series of international companies. About five years later, living in a university town in Belgium and surrounded by people who had degrees, I felt somehow lacking. I contemplated going back to school to complete my high school education but then discovered the Open University which was, as its name suggests, open to students who do not have formal qualifications. I started at the foundation level, learning about culture, music, art history, literature, religion and philosophy. It was eye-opening and challenging and I loved it. I continued studying, eventually gaining a BA degree and a love for language. I completed the degree after moving to Scotland. Still working in administrative roles, I became involved in volunteering with literacies and ESOL learners in the community. I also became involved in community activism. I was conscious of how much I learned and developed through the activism and this raised my awareness of what we do and learn outside of formal education. The experience sensitized me to the experiences of others, appreciating their knowledge and understanding, even when they might not. As I progressed in my education, and experienced what it meant to be 'in the head' of someone with a Master's degree and then as a doctoral student, I recognised new perspectives and understandings but also encountered similar ones being expressed by friends, family and colleagues who had not participated in higher education.

In my work as an Adult Literacies and ESOL worker with a local authority, I noticed the emotion and shame that people displayed when admitting low literacies and how this affected their self-esteem in all aspects of their lives, hiding from view all the many things they could do and had learned. I heard how adults described their experiences of school and how young people still experienced it. I witnessed how learning to communicate was only valued if it conformed with curricular and exam requirements. Literacy was developed through close reading of disconnected texts and not through texting friends and family. Where the former was not engaged with, the latter was discounted and no credit given by educational professionals. I saw the effects on a person's perception of their abilities to learn in the ways in which my son and my brother's school experiences had positioned them as not as clever as other people, both of whom I knew, from discussions and arguments, to be intelligent and thoughtful people. As I began to research my context and my role during my doctoral studies, I found that this positioning of people as lacking and as not as clever also occurs in Adult Literacies practice. This is what drives this research – my perception that informal learning is undervalued alongside the recognition

that formal learning, and in particular, higher education has been very valuable for me. Being aware of my particular experiences, I aim to take care to be open to alternative positions and stories in the research and to be reflexive in my analysis of the data.

Analysis

Analysis can begin during data collection where ideas can occur to the researcher (Charmaz, 2014). Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) suggest that the first three steps of analysis take place during the interview. People start in step one by describing their experiences, feelings and actions relevant to the research topic. They then proceed to step two where they discover new relationships and see 'new meanings in what they experience and do on the basis of their spontaneous descriptions' (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p.221). Step three involves the researcher interpreting what the interviewee says and checking and developing this interpretation with them in the course of the interview. Recognising the participant as collaborating in the analysis is useful and there is evidence in the data for this project that this was an important element in the construction of the data during the interviews. However, there is also evidence that, if we are to understand the analytic process as Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) suggest, analysis started prior to the interviews in the period between being invited to participate and the time of the interview. When invited, participants were told that the research would focus on learning journeys of grassroots community activists and that they would be asked to talk about their activism and their learning. That they had been thinking about it in preparation for the interview was evident.

> *so I'm learning a lot about social media and I've been thinking a lot about this since you got in touch and I think I'm learning that it has got advantages but it's got an awful lot of disadvantages* (John)

> *I was trying to think about that because I knew you were going to be asking me this* (Brian)

> *and it taught me at a level I never realised until actually you were starting to make me think about it* (John)

> *And another thing we learned, because we were speaking about this, like what did we learn from this* (Ela)

The participants were thus active in the analysis before and during the interview. I will now discuss how I approached the data analysis.

As Charmaz (2014) describes happening, analytic ideas occurred to me during interviews. However, in the early stages of the research, I did not recognise them as such. Rather, as a

novice researcher, I was inclined to interpret such thoughts as doubts about my practice or preparation, concerned that unexpected contributions by interviewees called into question what I was trying to research. I came to realise that writing a memo about these thoughts and doubts helped me to capture them, explore them, and relate them to the research aims and questions. Writing memos, or 'informal analytic notes' (Charmaz, 2014, p.162) was a useful practice that helped me to capture and explore analytic and methodological thoughts that came to mind. These came to mind during transcription, while reading literature and theory, as well as when I went about everyday activities, including lying awake at night. After abandoning the use of a notebook because I did not have it with me at all times, I started to use the Pages app to record the memos in one place, accessible from both my phone and my computer. As I progressed with coding, however, I also used the memo function on NVivo to record ideas relating to codes and themes.

Grounded Theory, as it was originally developed, discouraged the use of the literature or theories related to the field of study prior to and during the collection and analysis of data (Thornberg, 2012). The reason for this delay was

> (a) to keep the researcher as free and open as possible to discover, and (b) to avoid contamination, e.g. forcing data into pre-existing concepts which distort or do not fit with data. (Thornberg, 2012, p.244)

This stance has been criticized as not being realistic as researchers would either not be able to research in their own field or they would have to pretend not to know the literature and theories of their fields (Thornberg, 2012). The originators of the approach, Glaser and Strauss, allowed for resources outside of the field of study to be consulted to encourage theoretical sensitivity (Dey, 1999) but warned against the 'conceptual straitjacket supplied by the discipline itself' (Dey, 1999, p.250). Dey (1999) questions the choice between knowing nothing about a field and being restricted to only applying preconceived ideas to the data, arguing that there is no space for flexibility – 'conceptual frameworks can act as guides rather than as prison guards' (Dey, 1999, p.251). Dey uses the metaphor of a light cast by a lamppost or a torch to compare the fixed and flexible ideas 'for when it comes [to] examining data, the torch will certainly prove better than searching in the dark' (Dey, 1999, p.251). In this study, the literature around formal and informal learning and the theoretical framework combining Foucault and Rancière provide the light to guide the analysis as I discuss below.

With Holstein and Gubrium's (2016) emphasis on the *hows* and *whats* in mind, I approached the analysis of the data in terms of what participants had said and also how

they said it. In considering the *how*, I drew on insights of Conversation Analysis (CA) and Fairclough's (2001) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to focus on the positioning of people in relation to the interaction, the topic and the wider society and to consider how learning is uncovered and recognised through such interactions. I considered, in particular, the 'epistemic positioning' of the interview participants. As Heritage argues, in conveying information, people often

> position themselves with respect to the epistemic order: what they know relative to others, what they are entitled to know, and what they are entitled to describe or communicate. (Heritage, 2009, p.309)

This aspect is relevant to this research exploring the idea that only some kinds of learning are valued and that people who have fewer qualifications may be considered less valuable or less deserving of respect and credibility – a concept, as mentioned above, which has been described as 'epistemic injustice' (Fricker, 2007). This is also relevant in terms of research into social action. It may be readily accepted that people learn in informal contexts such as community action. Choudry argues, however, that

> voices, ideas – and, indeed, theories – produced by those actually engaged in social struggles are often ignored, rendered invisible, or overwritten with accounts by professionalized or academic experts. (Choudry, 2009)

Considering the how in this way opens up the data to examine people's relationship to various forms of knowledge and learning.

In the initial stages, analysis was approached using Karen Barad's concept of diffraction as a methodology which 'spreads thought in unpredictable patterns producing different knowledge' (Mazzei, 2014, p.742). The metaphor of refraction, rather than reflection, is employed because in contrast to 'reflection' connoting 'the themes of mirroring and sameness, diffraction is marked by patterns of difference' (Barad, 2007, p.71). Such an approach draws on the work of Deleuze and Guattari and rather than 'coding or thematizing according to a theorist or concept', it is a matter of 'reading-the-data-while-thinking-the-theory, of entering the assemblage, of making new connectives' (Mazzei, 2014, p.743). Analysis in this way 'leads the analyst in different directions' (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014, p.717). This approach recognises the importance of theory and the value that theory can bring to research, without committing to any one theory at the early stages. Rather, it allows the researcher to 'read and study theory carefully and then put it to work' (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014, p.717). Therefore, as I collected the data, I explored the literature and the theory. Themes and concepts that emerged in the data were explored through literature searches and through reading theory before returning to the data.

Rancière's work, as I have introduced above, became useful in probing particular aspects more thoroughly and concepts from his work were used as sensitizing concepts, along with those from the literature review and research questions. The idea of *sensitizing concepts* was suggested by Blumer (1954) in contrast to *definitive concepts.* A sensitizing concept, Blumer wrote,

> gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look. (1954, cited in Bowen, 2006, p.2)

Sensitizing concepts for social justice research such as this can include concepts of inequality, power and control or concepts from one or more critical social theories. These concepts provide a place to start an enquiry and to suggest directions to explore. Rather than uncritically applying the concepts, however, their usefulness is evaluated and specified (Charmaz et al., 2018). Sensitizing concepts for this research came from the theories of Foucault and Rancière as I discussed in the previous chapter. These include the concepts of dividing practices and the distribution of the sensible, of categorisation and hierarchies, and of visibility. Sensitizing concepts 'provide a place to *start* inquiry, not to *end* it' (Charmaz, 2014, p.31, original emphasis). Using these concepts from my theoretical framework as starting points allowed me to develop ideas from data. The iterative approach of grounded theory requires that such concepts do not limit or force data into pre-determined themes or codes. Theories are treated in grounded theory as 'provisional, disputable, fallible, and modifiable' and theoretical concepts are tried out in 'new, innovative, creative, and unorthodox ways' while '*staying grounded* in the data' (Charmaz et al., 2018, p.419, original emphasis). When using Rancière and Foucault in this research, I used their concepts critically and reflexively in analysing the data. Theories help us to make sense of the data but the data also helps us to deepen or modify our understanding of the theories. In this study, the activists' experiences challenged some interpretations of Rancière's as I discuss further in chapter 8.

As I began to work on the transcripts, I followed Charmaz (2014) and coded the first few interviews line-by-line, defining what was happening and coding for actions rather than states. This stage of initial coding encourages close attention to very small pieces of data, studying words, lines and segments for their 'analytic import' (Charmaz, 2014, p.109). While time consuming, this process allowed me to explore the data more thoroughly than might have been possible through simply reading it through several times. It helped to make visible and available for further analysis aspects which I might not otherwise have

considered. In line with Charmaz, for some aspects, I adopted terms used by the participants as codes. I used the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, for this process (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). This allowed me to easily assign several codes to the same pieces of data before I knew which I would use. I could also view all the data under a particular code and to rename codes. NVivo facilitated the subsequent stage of focused coding (Charmaz, 2014) making it easy to identify the most promising codes or to group together codes under a new code. According to Charmaz, focused coding 'helps us to evaluate the directions we take without embarking on a path of no return' (2014, p.138). This process was very useful in bringing to light aspects from some interviews that I had not noticed in the first stages of coding through the practice of returning to the data with these more focused codes.

Discussion of findings

Listening to the activists talk about their experiences and reflect on their learning, and subsequently, analysing the transcripts of those accounts, the interrelated nature of different forms and ways of learning became clear. In analysing the data, connections emerged as an important feature of learning. Learning in and for community activism is not linear but is better understood more organically as an intricate web of experiences, events, surroundings, ideas, thoughts, knowledge and people. Learning often seemed to happen in the connections between different aspects of a person's life across space and time. People made connections to experiences in childhood which influenced their community activist role, many discussing what they had learned from grandparents (being given a book, being taken to rallies and demos, listening in to political discussions, having to make a good argument to take part in discussion). In their descriptions of their actions, people described the connections they made that allowed them to learn from other people and groups doing similar things, and how they shared their experiences to support others to do the same. Connecting with other people was also a very important source of learning, comparing experiences and opinions with that of others, working with people from different backgrounds, and accessing specialist knowledge through connecting with and getting support from experts.

Recognising the interrelated and entangled nature of learning for and in community activism, I aimed to disentangle some of the threads identified in the data. I begin in the following chapter by looking at how participants positioned themselves in relation to formal education and the role this education played in the work of the community activists.

CHAPTER 6: FORMAL EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY ACTIVISM

As discussed, this study aims to understand the role of both informal and formal learning in the context of community activism, how people positioned themselves and how they talked about learning and education. The interviews generated rich data through which to explore these aspects. Using a grounded theory approach – paying attention to both how and what the participants talked about in the interviews – brought to light many aspects that I had not anticipated would be relevant. One of these aspects was around the issue of class and formal education. As I discuss in this chapter, the data challenges the dominant understanding that working class people do not value education. Indeed, those identifying as coming from a poor or working class background either express a real appreciation of educational opportunities or a regret at a lack of such opportunities. In contrast, those of a 'higher' socioeconomic background appear to take education for granted. I also examine the ways in which people position themselves in relation to others in terms of their levels of education, or in terms of what they assume those levels to be. I show how this positioning changes, not necessarily through further education but through reflecting on what people do regardless of their formal education. Finally, I note that while formal education did not appear to play an explicitly prominent role in community activism, participants recognised the importance of formal education for fostering a better understanding of their own lives and of the world around them.

Positioning in relation to formal education and learning

Formal education and class

As discussed in the methodology chapter, participants were not selected on the basis of class, level of education or background. However, since the research focused on learning and knowledge, people were asked about their formal education if they had not already talked about it. People were not asked about class or socioeconomic background. Where people made their background explicit it was to identify themselves as 'working class' or 'poor' rather than as 'middle class' or 'well off'. Six participants – John, Karen, Anne, Ella, Sharon and Mike – categorised themselves in this way as in the examples below.

> *Because it was a very working class family, you know* (Karen)

> *It's all working class football fans […] that's probably how I got involved as well because I could relate to them* (Ella)

> *We wouldnae have known that we were poor cause everybody was the same, everybody was in the same boat* (Anne)

Objective measures of social class or socioeconomic status were not used as part of this research but, as Rubin et al. (2014) argue, subjective self-definitions can be useful in education research. Indeed, as Kraus et al. (2009) point out, using objective indicators – an individual's financial resources, educational opportunities and participation in social opportunities – can be problematic in determining class differences. The subjective component of class is particularly useful and relevant in understanding 'an individual's perceived rank within the social hierarchy' (Krauss et al., 2009, p.992). This ranking of oneself in relation to others has been shown to influence health outcomes (Krauss et al., 2009). Similarly, Rubin et al. (2014, p.199) suggest that 'subjective measures are stronger predictors than objective measures in the field of higher education'. By not explicitly asking about class or socioeconomics, we can also get a sense of what such categorisation means to the participants – whether it is worth mentioning or not, for example – and how such meanings relate to education. Given the Foucauldian and Rancièrian theoretical framework outlined earlier, and the research questions, the ways in which people positioned themselves and categorised themselves was a sensitizing concept for the analysis.

Since information to determine class or socioeconomic status was not explicitly collected from the research participants, its inclusion by those of a working class background is particularly interesting when considered alongside the ways in which they talk about education in comparison to those who did not include information about class. Early experiences of school by those who had identified themselves as working class were generally negative in terms of achievement and qualifications.

> *I left school at sixteen with very little to write home about in terms of qualifications* (Anne)

> *I absolutely hated school, right. I just did not do well in school at all…I rebelled a wee bit at school. I used to dog it all the time and had, like, a behaviour card* (Ella)

> *I hated school…I just had kind of a complete feeling of alienation…and I thought I was a total failure, right* (John)

> *for the first three years at secondary school, aye, I just went and did it, didn't think much of it, didn't get into trouble or anything, fourth year was completely different, oh I discovered boys and cigarettes and skiving ((laughs)). Oh I had a ball ((laughs)) so I didn't leave with anything* (Sharon)

There is a wealth of literature that focuses on working class relationships to school and education which, as Reay (2001) pointed out, have always been problematic and are more likely to be focused on as one of failure than academic success. Working class identity and success in education are often portrayed as being at odds with each other. To be educated appears to require a move away from a working class identity (Ingram, 2011). Researchers frequently draw on the work of Pierre Bourdieu's (1992) concepts of habitus and field to explain why working class young people experience difficulties in education. Bourdieu saw education, much like Rancière does, as a 'sorting institution' (Rawolle & Lingard, 2013, p.120). Education, according to Bourdieu, divides people according to how cultural capital is valued. Schools thus reproduce inequalities because differences in cultural capital are seen as differences in individual ability (Rawolle & Lingard, 2013). Where Rancière most differs and disagrees with the work of Bourdieu, however, is on this very focus on inequality. Rancière (2010) presents Bourdieu's thought in relation to schooling and education. I present Rancière's perspective here to highlight his take on the issues which offers a different way of seeing and understanding the cause of inequality. Bourdieu, Rancière (2010) explains, argues that in failing to recognise the ways in which inequalities work, schools fail to reduce those inequalities. By seeking to promote equality by making knowledge equally available to all, allowing students and their individual abilities to benefit from them, schools overlook the inequalities of cultural privileges of children from wealthier backgrounds. In order to tackle inequalities, there is a need for further knowledge of inequalities. The teachers, in working to reduce inequalities, however, are part of the system of inequalities and therefore, in their positions, continue to reproduce them. 'It is the logic of inequality', Rancière (2010, p.10) argues, 'that is reproduced by the very act of its own reduction'. In seeking to learn from Bourdieu's insights about the causes of inequality in education, reformers in France adapted curricula so that they were more appropriate for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with less emphasis on high culture and less cerebral. These 'methods of the poor' (Rancière, 2010, p.11) emphasized inequality, further limiting the access to knowledge to what people were considered to need. These were denounced by opponents who asserted that equality could only be achieved through the 'universality of knowledge equally distributed to all, without consideration of social origin, in a school well-removed from society' (Rancière, 2010, p.11). However, both approaches, Rancière points out, start with the presupposition of inequality, seeing equality as an end. School, in both approaches, is 'a never-ending explanation of the reasons why inequality must lead to equality and yet never leads there' (Rancière, 2010, p.11). This can be seen in the data where schooling is concerned, and I

discuss below how schooling can function as a 'postioning machine' (Masschelein & Simons, 2011, p.153).

While participants who identified as working class in the interviews talked about their less than successful time at school, it was more difficult to elicit any information about experiences of formal education from those who had not identified as working class. Graham, for instance, when asked about his experiences of formal education, responded that,

> *your whole life experience feeds into you and it's hard to identify one particular thing* (Graham)

Similarly, Mark touched on his formal education very briefly,

> *I trained as a marine engineer and then went straight into fishing* (Mark).

> and

> *I did sort of my student bit and lived for two year in Aberdeen and then came straight home* (Mark)

Brian, stated simply,

> *so then I went to university* (Brian)

He had only mentioned secondary school briefly to explain that

> *in the school there was a Natural History Society and that was led by a most whacky teacher who was a real- ,you know, he let us do all sorts of things that nobody else would let us do* (Brian)

University education is talked about differently by those who have identified as working class. For them, it does not seem to have been taken for granted as it appears to have been for those not identifying in this way. The working class participants who eventually attended university, after leaving school early, spend a lot of time in the interviews explaining the circumstances that led them to higher education and talking about what they got out of it. Karen, for instance, who had first got involved in community activism to fight for a local play park, mentioned doing a Master's course a couple of times early in the interview, relating it, in the first mention, to her activism.

> *It was really through when I was studying my Master's [that I got involved in activism]* (Karen)

> *Where we live is a huge area of deprivation and it's stuff like that and I was invited onto the Master's course and I thought, 'yeah, I'll give that a go, why not'* (Karen)

For Karen, doing a Master's was foregrounded and made relevant, rather than seen as an unremarkable detail. When asked to expand on her postgraduate study later in the

interview, Karen chose to start the story quite a few steps back to explain how she came to be doing a Master's degree course.

> *Well what happened was, I was doing… em, right, so my journey in education… basically I was… when I came out of school, I became a home help…* (Karen)

Karen then describes her journey from being a home help, listening to the people she helped, learning from and being influenced by their experiences, most notably in her account, their expressions of regret

> *the recurring thing I heard all the time was I wish I had a…, I wish I had a… I wish I had a…so there was this constant reinforcement of 'I wish I had went out with that boy', 'I wish I had did this' and 'I wish I had that job' and it was all you heard all the time and I just thought 'I don't want to be a I-wish-I-had-a…'* (Karen)

Karen expresses here her realisation of what could happen if she did not seek out or grasp opportunities now. Karen's colleagues saw potential in her and she reports them as saying

> *'why don't you apply to go to college and try to get your Highers and then you can think about going to university'* (Karen).

Bringing together what she was hearing from both her clients and her colleagues, Karen decided to go to college, starting when she was twenty. One of the Highers she did was Modern Studies which she says

> *got me kind of quite engaged in the kind of political side and stuff* (Karen)

She was also in bands and involved in 'music things'. Although her careers teacher at school had laughed when she expressed a desire to be a music teacher, her Modern Studies lecturer at college revived this possibility suggesting, based on her extracurricular interests in college, 'why don't you apply to do music?'

> *And I was like, 'oh that's a bit funny, who does music?' I was like, 'what's that all about?' I was like, 'I would love to do music' and he was like, 'there's actually courses here you can do' and I was like, 'alright then'. So, I looked in to courses and eh… at that time the music courses were quite young, like, they weren't very established, emmm, but when I applied to go for the course, went for the interview and got in and there was only ten places and I felt really privileged and I was like 'wow, that's quite amazing'* (Karen)

Karen interrupted her education when she got a job because, she explained, that is why she had been studying, finishing her HND by distance learning. Following a series of events and opportunities, she returned to finish her degree on a part time basis before doing a full time Master's, something she is clearly very proud of and which is an important part of her identity in the context of the interview. She positions herself as both working class and as educationally successful and it is this education that she credits with getting her involved in community activism. Without being asked, Karen also accounts for why she might not have gone directly to university from school.

I was one of the people that kind of came from a deprived turbulent family. I might have been quite bright but they don't engage with you because they think, 'oh well, they've just…', you know, 'they've got stuff going on' or whatever it is, you're not classed as one of the bright kids that have that support network em so when it came to university and things like that it was never ever mentioned eh when I had my careers interview em we sat down and I think that's a kind of pivotal time as well where the careers teacher said to me, 'so, what do you want to do?' and I was like, 'ah maybe a music teacher?' and she physically burst out laughing. I would love to meet her now ((laughs)) (Karen)

Karen's experience is similar to those reported by adult literacies learners I have worked with, young people working with colleagues in youth services and my own family members. These are people who are 'not classed as one of the bright kids'. There can be different reasons for this, but if someone can be labelled as 'not bright', then this label can be used to justify different treatment and different expectations as Karen describes here. In Karen's interpretation of the situation, it is because of her family situation. Others may not be aware of why they are classed as not being worth engaging with. Not being classed as bright, university was not mentioned to her. Aspirations were quashed.

In line with much current policy and research, those identifying as working class, expressed negative experiences of school, leaving as soon as they could with 'nothing to write home about'. They would, at that stage, have been considered to be low-educated. Low-educated adults, according to the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, are 'those with, at most, a lower secondary qualification' (Cedefop, 2018). Low education is seen, in policy, as the cause of problems for individuals, communities and the economy. *The Final Report of the Commissioning on Widening Access*, for instance, argues that university graduates are 'healthier, live longer and enjoy better employment outcomes' and that 'the key economic asset of any nation is the talent and skills of its people' (Scottish Government, 2016a). As already discussed in chapter 2, however, research by Komatsu and Rappleye (2017) has cast doubt on the assertion that education is a route to a country's economic success. Inequality in education is also seen as one of the key barriers preventing people from participating in community engagement processes. People with lower levels of education are known to be less likely to take part in civic activities and as a consequence of this, their needs and desires are less likely to be heard and reflected (Lightbody, 2017).

Education reforms and policies are developed to tackle inequalities and to provide equality of opportunity to all, but such policies can reinforce the stigma and stereotypes that they attempt to remedy. Despite significant efforts by governments across Europe to address the

associations of poverty with educational achievement, inequalities in educational outcomes persist (Thompson et al., 2016). *Teaching Scotland's Future* identifies the 'widening achievement gap', 'marked social differences in basic achievement' and the 'growing underachievement relating to social background' (Donaldson, 2011, p.18) for teachers to address. While disparity in outcomes for people of different social backgrounds is not acceptable, negative stereotypes relating to underachievement based on assumptions of deficit of a particular social class may perpetuate inequality (Ellis et al., 2016; Gorski, 2012). Research suggests that teachers often rely on a deficit model to understand poverty in the classroom from a middle class perspective (Thompson et al., 2016). Although, poverty is seen to negatively impact educational outcomes, education is still promoted as the solution to poverty in a potentially self-defeating cycle. As discussed, the *Adult Literacies in Scotland 2020: Strategic Guidance* aims 'to promote equality of opportunity to those who face persistent disadvantage' so that more people will be 'economically active' (Scottish Government, 2011, p.4), but yet economic activity is currently no guarantee of moving out of poverty. Zero hours contracts, earnings that are well below a living wage, and precarity mean that in-work poverty is now a common experience (Congreve & McCormick, 2018). Further up the scale, the opportunity to succeed seems to be restricted 'those who have the potential' and it is the 'talented young people' who will have the 'opportunity to realise their full potential' by entering higher education (Scottish Government, 2016a, p.10). Despite education 'policy overload' (Ball, 2017, p.4), where governments can be seen to be doing something, inequalities are growing. Reay (2017, p.25) argues that 'educational policies often work to reinforce and entrench the low esteem in which the working classes are held, rather than to modify and alleviate class prejudices and discriminations'.

Karen reports later in the interview that the children in her sons' school have a similar experience as she did with careers being suggested that do not require many qualifications.

> And even in my own children's experience, I still find that children are being talked to eh in their class environment so when they get careers talks or they talk about their careers- my son who was two years ahead in his maths em and was actually- he was going to get academy level maths at primary because he was so advanced and when they asked him what he wanted to be and he said a scientist and they turned round and said do you not think you should try and do something that's more realistic because he comes from an area and they expect, you know, certain things and whenever they would do career talks they would have the dinner lady, the lollipop lady […] you know there's nothing wrong with being a postman, there's nothing wron-, of course there's not, there's nothing wrong with aspiration either if you've got dreams and aspirations. (Karen)

Such actions position people in very particular ways. They learn at an early stage in their life that they are not the people who will go to university; they are not the clever ones. According to the division identified by Rancière, they are not the ones who will know and think. Rather, they are the people who will work and do. This is also expressed by Laura Bambrick when she describes how she was born into poverty and how she is one of the few people from her area to have a PhD. She explains that what made this possible was getting a job as a shop assistant in Trinity University, Dublin. She says, it 'opened my eyes to a world I'd never have known otherwise. You can't be what you can't see' (Irish Times, 2019).

While the four from working class backgrounds who had gone on to get degrees spent a lot of time describing how that came about and how they felt about it, the other two highlighted their lack of higher education. When Ella was asked about school and formal education she starts her answer with

> *so I never went to uni or done any…* (Ella)

repeating a bit later after describing some of her work experience,

> *so I never went to university and I've never done any sort of, like, additional education or anything like that at all* (Ella).

John had mentioned not having a degree very soon after meeting me and before the recorded interview started, apparently keen to make it clear from the outset. He confirmed this during the interview when asked about what he had said

> *I don't have a degree, no, never been to university* (John)

From these conversations, it seems that the value of education was recognised or, at least, education was considered significant. This is evident in the ways in which participants either show that they notice its absence or are very aware and proud of their journeys to gain a university qualification. Its absence, however, does not mean they themselves are necessarily less able as I discuss in the following section.

Assumptions about abilities relating to formal qualifications and class

In the course of the interview, Ella reflected on her and her colleagues' abilities in relation to formal qualifications.

> *and it's funny because, see, looking at that sort of role, I just kind of moved up, progressed in work to that role, but looking at that role, most people do have a lot of qualifications to do that, they've mostly been to uni or they've mostly maybe got like additional ones like project management qualifications and I don't have any of them at all so it's quite an interesting kind of time […] because I don't have that*

> *background at all and a lot of people in my work do actually have degrees and different things and I work alongside them so it's- it's interesting to see that* (Ella)

Ella shows in this reflection that she has recognised that most of her colleagues have been to university while she has not and that they have qualifications that she does not have. Nevertheless, she works alongside them in a similar role. Ella appears to recognise this in the course of the interview. As she discusses it, she uses the phrases 'it's funny because…' and 'so it's quite an interesting kind of time…'. These phrases suggest that she is evaluating and reflecting as she talks. Ella contrasts 'just kind of moving up' with 'having a lot of qualifications'. She recognises that although her colleagues 'do actually have degrees', she works alongside them. Formal education here is talked about more as a state, in terms of possession, of having qualifications and degrees. Whereas, Ella describes her situation in more active terms as moving up, progressing and working alongside but downplays this process in relation to formal qualifications through her use of the word 'just'.

Ella's reflection on her abilities in relation to her university qualified colleagues may represent an insight arrived at through the discussion where her informal and formal learning come together in the context of what she had been able to achieve in community activism or it may be something that she had thought about previously. It is not possible to say with certainty which is the case. Whenever she came to this realisation, however, her expression of it, and the fact that she feels it is worth mentioning, suggests a changing understanding about what it means to have or not to have university qualifications for a person's abilities to do a job and a change in how she might describe her learning journey following this.

This changing understanding displays the assumptions that qualifications are associated with abilities and that these can be challenged by reflecting on and understanding other ways to learn and gain skills. Ella recognised that while she and her colleagues have different educational backgrounds, they do the same work. Anne described an exchange with a community worker who was supporting her and her group's campaign,

> *Community workers supported us all through our campaign and, you know, they would be saying, 'well yous could be doing this job' and I'd say, 'don't be so stupid yous went to uni and yous done that and that'* (Anne)

This shows the way in which people can judge themselves as less able with reference to university and thus deny their own abilities and potential.

Assumptions about university qualifications appear to be made on assessments of a person's socioeconomic background. As suggested in the discussion of formal and informal learning in chapter 3, formal learning may be so strongly associated with wealth and advantage that those who are less well off are assumed to be less educated and, consequently, less capable, even by those who are themselves of a similar socioeconomic background. A striking and illuminating example of this assumption, and of how new understanding emerges, is Ella's evaluation of the work of a campaign group she had worked alongside.

> *it's all working class football fans who people associate as they've not… who you kind of associate to say aren't… but they done so much work so that alone shows you… Like all those people and all the work that they done. They got a song into the charts. All the action they took was great! So, stuff like that definitely inspired me and that's like a huge case to look at to say actually people decided 'this isn't right' and like took the government on and won. Like the law was actually repealed. It is huge. The stuff that happened in that was just amazing and I think a lot of the people wouldn't have had degrees and a lot of the people… That's probably how I got involved as well because I could relate to them* (Ella)

This excerpt is interesting for several reasons, looking at both the *whats* and the *hows* of the interaction (Holstein & Gubrium, 2016). What Ella says here is that working class people are unlikely to have degrees and so for them to have done what they have is amazing. This not only displays the view that university qualifications are important to be able to do good work and to have an impact but also the opinion that working class people do not generally have university qualifications. How Ella says this is also worth noting. It takes her a while to express that people would not have degrees. She starts by saying 'it's all working class football fans who people associate as they've not…' but she does not finish this thought, retracing her steps slightly to try again 'who you kind of associate to say aren't…' and again she leaves this thought hanging. Towards the end of the excerpt she says 'a lot of the people wouldn't have had degrees' and from this we can understand that she what she was trying to express earlier related to formal education of some sort. That it was difficult to express suggests shame or stigma associated with the lack of formal qualifications. Whether or not people in that campaign group actually had qualifications, the recognition of what is possible even though people might not have degrees encouraged Ella to get involved. The realisation that people she could relate to – people with similar backgrounds to her, working class and without formal qualifications – were equal to people in government suggested that she too might be able to do something, to be heard, and to work for change. As she said,

> *I think for me that kind of said 'do you know, these are people I know who are doing all this, so actually if you want to do some…' it kind of was a wee bit of like an inspiration to say 'actually like if you want to do something you can just do it,*

> *you don't need to justify yourself to anybody, you can just ask questions and you can do all this'* (Ella)

This demonstrates both the common sense way of understanding our place in society and the changes that take place as people recognise and verify their equality through their own actions and the actions of 'people like them'. As Rancière (1991) would argue people emancipate themselves through this verification of equality.

Karen also discusses the ways in which educational qualifications, which are seen to position you higher up in a hierarchy, can make others feel relatively inferior and can influence how they interact and participate in conversations.

> *Me and my partner he ha- has trouble sometimes because he finds it quite intimidating sometimes because if we get into an argument he's like 'I've lost' ((laughs)) 'I've lost before I've started' right because obviously you learn to debate and things em but for me it's like so he's went through school, em he dropped out really early, he went into the family business and doing bricklaying and stuff like that em and em suspected dyslexic all the rest of it now he'll have huge pangs of 'aye but I'm a bit daft' but for me when I talk to him we're on the same level so I might have a masters and I might have- I might have- got a good education and stuff like that and I do a completely different line of work from him but we're on the same level and it's when we're talking about things it's the same depth of understanding there em so for me it's like yeah we're completely different people but at the same time he's no daft* (Karen)

Movement 'up' the educational ladder affects the lives of individuals who have gained the qualification as well as the lives of others around them. People can rank themselves, and be ranked, according to their level of qualifications that they have achieved, in relation to others. This common sense understanding can be disrupted by evidence to the contrary. Karen, in discussion with her partner, recognises that they are equals. Related to this is the way in which Brian assessed his university degree as a 'wrong turn'

> *[I] realised that you know I'd almost taken a wrong turn at that stage because a degree in forestry was actually going to be leading me down the path of you know getting more and more office bound and less involved outdoors. What I should have done is a… em a lower level qualification in forestry to become a forester hands on but, em, you know, em, yeah well that… so I almost went in to too high a level of education to… to do what I wanted to do fo… follow my you know inner, eh, sort of calling as it were* (Brian)

Brian found himself, through taking the traditional route to university, following a career path that would position him as someone who thinks and not someone who does, although doing is what he preferred to do. Indeed, as Brian describes the different jobs he has had, it is the hands-on ones that he refers to with most pleasure. This serves as a reminder that it is important to bear in mind, in questioning the tendency to divide people into those who

think and those who do, that we do not necessarily assign more prestige to *thinking*, relegating *doing* to a less valued activity.

Changing educational identities

We see in the data how people's sense of who they are, and who other people are, in relation to education changes in response to social factors. Karen and Anne, for example, both talk about the encouragement they got from those around them which helped them to see themselves as people who would go to college or university. For example, as mentioned earlier, Karen explicitly refers to her learning journey and describes how her colleagues guided her along her path. Anne, who remembered asking university lecturers, very tentatively

> '*do you think they would let someone like me in here?*' (Anne)

She received a very positive response, being told.

> '*Absolutely! It's people like you we want, community activists we want to come and do the course*' (Anne)

This experience of being talked to and about as someone who is capable seems to be extremely important in recognising that options are open to us. Applied linguist, Roz Ivanič, wrote about how identities are constructed:

> by 'address' – the way we are talked **to** by others
> by 'attribution' – the way we are talked **about** by others
> by 'affiliation' – the way we talk **like** others
> (Ivanič, 2006, p.13; original emphasis)

The activists attribute how they see themselves to the actions of someone who saw their worth and encouraged them to consider other paths. Similarly, John identifies an individual who was instrumental in his decision to go to college.

> *she saw that I was... what I was and she encouraged me. And the next thing was... and she started to tell me that people were paid for it and quite seriously it was a revelation to me that I could get paid to do that so I went to college (John)*

It is not necessarily the new learning they undertake that had the greatest impact on the ways in which the interviewees positioned themselves in relation to education. Rather the stories they were told and told themselves about their education and the education of others made more of a difference. John, who had thought he was a failure following his experiences of school, changed this opinion of himself following a discussion with an adult learning worker.

> *I said to him 'och, I was a bit of a failure at school' and he explained to me that it wisnae me that was like an idiot, it was the way I was taught and I'm no being funny but even as a cocky thirty year old, you know, and I'm no bad ((laughs)) at*

throwing my weight about, that was a revelation – the first time in my life that I'd thought that I'm alright, you know, up until then I was a failed eleven plus, failed that, couldn't cope with some of the stresses at school (John)

The stories of learning changed and with that change, who the activists were in their stories changed too. They were no longer a failure, no longer someone who was less capable than someone from a middle class background, no longer a person who was not able for university. As Okri (1997) writes,

> one way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted – knowingly or unknowingly – in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives. (Okri, 1997)

Participants in this research show how the stories they live by can change and how that then can change their lives. This change was often prompted by people who helped them see themselves and the opportunities available to them differently.

Valuing education

Like Karen, having left school early, many of the interviewees eventually attended university and the experience was described in extremely positive terms by the participants.

> *I loved it! I loved it! It made sense. My world made sense so I just loved it.* (Anne)

> *that's when I decided 'I'm going to go and get a degree, I'm no stopping this anywhere, I'm going to go and get a degree and I'm no stopping till I've done that eh'* (Sharon)

> *I totally appreciated it […] I was in there all day, all night […] it's like you sook it up like a big hoover* (Karen)

Sharon's experience of attending university influenced her partner's pursuit of a higher education. Sharon had been angry at him looking for jobs for her, thinking he was suggesting she should stop studying and go back to work. They would fight about it until he explained,

> *'I'm no meaning to be bad' he says 'that's no what it is' he says 'I look at they jobs and think, she can apply for them' he says 'and I'm jealous'* (Sharon)

Understanding this, Sharon told him, 'well, you need to go then' and so the next time he was made redundant, he too went to university. For both Sharon and her partner it was out of the ordinary to go to university, particularly for a manual worker. As Sharon explained,

I think after you've worked in heavy labouring, I mean, he was down the pit for eight years, eh and then going up there to university, he says… he says 'that's amazing' ((laughs)) he says… because it was never in our psyche, it was never ever, nobody from our village really went to university em so it was a big… and he said 'man' he said 'I wish I'd discovered that when I was eighteen eh' (Sharon)

The participants also recognise the career opportunities that formal education can bring, even though they might not have been aware of them when they first started in higher education. Sharon described her initially modest ambition,

as I say my ambition was to get a job in an office with clean feet so that was the critera 'will my feet be clean!?' ((laughs)) (Sharon).

Like John, Anne expresses surprise at the new opportunities for interesting work.

getting like paid for something you enjoyed you know, it didn't seem right ((laughs)) (Anne)

It is clear from the enthusiasm with which people described their higher education that they valued it, even while aspects of it came as a shock. For example, as Anne described her first weeks,

we were to write an essay em and it was something around discrimination and it had to be fifteen hundred words long and I remember going home and saying to Alan like "that woman's af her fucking heid. Fifteen hundred words? I don't even know fifteen hundred words and she wants me to write it. There is no way" (Anne)

The dominant discourses and understanding around the relationship between class and education frequently suggest that education is not valued as much in working class communities as it is with people perceived as being further 'up' the social scale. Gorski (2012, p.305), for example, writes of how pre- and in-service teachers when asked 'Why are poor people poor?', they recognise the structural barriers responsible for poverty, but still stereotype poor people, expressing the belief that poor people 'don't care about education'. The participants in this research challenge this stereotype. A formal education and their 'lack' of it, seemed to feature heavily in the minds of participants. It was a significant part of who they were, or who they had been. Where it seems to have been taken for granted by the others who did not identify as working class, it seems to be very important to those from poorer backgrounds.

Positioning in relation to formal education and learning

The findings here provide useful information in answer to the research question about how activists position themselves and talk about learning and knowledge. In particular, we see here how they position themselves in relation to formal education and learning and how

that positioning is associated with their socioeconomic status. It is commonly suggested in the literature and in policy documents that those of lower socioeconomic status do not value education as much as wealthier groups of people do. As has been discussed, that understanding is contradicted by the data collected here. Those who identify explicitly as coming from working class or poor backgrounds spend significantly more time discussing their education or a lack of it. They show an awareness of their level of formal education and that of those around them. They express a real appreciation of the opportunity to continue their education. In contrast, those who do not explicitly categorise themselves in socioeconomic terms spend very little time discussing education. This, of course, does not necessarily mean that they value formal education less. It suggests, however, that education is more likely to be taken for granted by those from a more privileged background. People from such backgrounds expect to go to university and therefore, the fact that this happened does not require explanation or elaboration. Where it is less usual, an explanation is more likely. Similarly, if people left school early, this also was worth noting by the participants in the course of the interviews.

We can understand from the data, then, that the 'normal', in Foucauldian terms, is to be middle class and to have gone directly into higher education from school. Where this is the case, very little needs to be said. This is what we would expect to happen, what is readily recognisable as 'normal' and so it does not need to be explained. It is enough to mention it for it to be understood as intended. To be from a working class, poor background, or to not be well educated, on the other hand, needs to be clarified, as does a working class person becoming educated. Foucault discusses the working of disciplinary power which works through the normalizing gaze of the examination, combining both the processes of hierarchical observation and normalizing judgement to 'establish over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them' (Foucault, 1979, p.184). Where traditionally, power would have been visible, reminding everyone that they needed to conform and to obey laws or be punished, power is now invisible and it is the individuals and their actions that are visible. That visibility allows comparison between individuals to be made, differentiating them one from the other, specifying a 'minimum threshold, as an average to be respected or as an optimum towards which one must move' (Foucault, 1979, p.182). It is not what people do that is differentiated but the people themselves 'their nature, their potentialities, their level or their value' (Foucault, 1979, p.181) and we can see this differentiation at work in the accounts of the research participants. It is not what they did, or were able to do, by which they were predominantly

judged and judged themselves, but in their nature (working class) and their level (of education).

This understanding of what is normal and the tendency to judge and differentiate people is relevant to the debates and policies around widening participation – both in higher education and in society. Concepts such as low aspiration and apathy are often referred to in accounting for lower levels of participation in higher education or local decision making. Escobar (2014, p.32) discusses what he refers to as a 'myth of apathy'. Apathy, he explains, is used to justify a lack of participation in politics. Apathy, however, 'is not simply a natural occurrence but actually takes considerable work to produce' (Escobar 2014, p.32). When people appear apathetic towards participation in particular processes, it is important to ask how the apathy is being generated and who benefits from it. These are also important questions to ask of education. How is low aspiration being generated and who benefits? We see in the stories of some of the activists that higher education was not an option that was taken for granted by people like them. They express this in different ways. Karen, for example, explicitly points out that university was not suggested to her in school and it continues not to be an obvious choice at her children's school. Sharon recognises that it was unusual for someone who had worked in heavy labouring to go to university. Anne notes a similar incongruence in her, as a cleaner, going to do a university course.

The council paid for the cleaner to go to university (Anne)

The so-called 'low aspiration' may be in fact generated through effectively hiding higher education from view, as Karen discussed in relation to her experience and that of her children. The perception of low aspiration benefits those who continue to require low paid manual workers. It benefits those who wish to justify their higher earnings for work that is not necessarily any harder than that of a mine worker, a ship painter, a home help or a cleaner. Thus, in the same way as we can identify a 'myth of apathy', there may also be a 'myth of low aspiration'. This myth is challenged in the data generated for this research. The pleasure of attending university and the appreciation of the opportunity shone through in the working class activists' stories of their journey to and through higher education.

The interviewees who spent time talking about their experiences of formal education, position themselves according to the level of education they have completed. They recognise where they or others have had more education and what this might mean. Their position tells them something about themselves, their abilities and their options in life.

These positions are not fixed but seem to be determined by and changed through people's experiences and their interactions with other people. Such change does not necessarily require an increase in the level of education relative to others but can also occur through a change of perception of who a person is and what they can do. We can see in the data that the activists' understanding and assumptions about education, class and abilities change as they reflect on their own experiences and those of people around them.

What people learn formally in grassroots community activism

There was little mention of formal education being significant in grassroots community activism. Nevertheless, the activists, in the context of community activism, talked about what they found valuable in their formal education experiences. Political and philosophical understanding of the world gained through school or university courses was most often referred to as being valuable. The feeling of making sense of the world, as Anne expressed above, comes out of the data as a particularly important aspect. Ella discussed doing some Higher Art and Higher Modern Studies before leaving school as soon as she was old enough. These were, she explained, the only two she really liked. Karen too, after returning to college to do her Highers, did Modern Studies which she says got her

> *kind of quite engaged in the kind of political side and stuff like that* (Karen)

Sharon discusses how learning about new theories and reflecting on experiences brought a different understanding.

> *I think as well when you start to read all the theorists and doing the essays and looking at your experiences, especially with the strike stuff as well, you start to… I never ever questioned who I was or what I believed or anything like that, it kind of confirmed all that for me if you like eh […] 'that's why I think that' or 'that's why my dad said that' or whatever eh, aye, it just made you look at the… aye, but I think feminism as well… I had never heard of feminism, never read about it, nothing like that and when that comes along as well you're just thinking 'My God' […] it kind of… I think that maybe changes you a bit… I mean, I'm no saying that the other stuff doesn't change you, it probably does change you a bit but also it confirms, 'aye that is who I am and that is why…' but aye feminism you start to kind of look at your relationship and that a bit differently as well, aye, which was maybe a bit more challenging for Andy than me ((laughs))* (Sharon)

People have more opportunities to engage with courses in which social theories are introduced and in which political understanding is fostered at the higher levels of school and higher education. Where people leave school at sixteen, they are less likely to have the opportunity to be exposed to ideas through which they can understand and critically engage with their experiences and their society. Because the more practical subjects of maths, English and science are privileged at earlier stages, those leaving school earlier do

not have the same opportunities in education to make sense of their world, to have their perceptions verified or changed, or to interact with the world around them with more confidence. This is, according to Rancière (2010), one way in which pedagogical logic orchestrates inequality, by supposing a certain temporal order, through which 'the veil is lifted progressively, according to the ability attributed to the infantile mind, or to the one who knows nothing at this or that stage' (Rancière, 2010, p.4). Sharon highlights how it was illuminating to read theorists alongside a consideration of her experiences. From these accounts we get a sense of how formal education can complement informal learning introducing new perspectives and ideas with which to understand and interrogate lived experience.

The role of formal learning in community activism

The discussion of formal learning above gives a sense of people's experiences of formal education at school and university. Three of the participants, Anne, Ella and Sharon, would have been considered low-educated at the time that they each got involved in community activism. One, John, having left school and spending 'many years of just doing things like labouring', had gone on to do a two-year college course. Karen, as we saw earlier, had been doing a Master's degree when she got involved. Mike, having left school and done various things before a voluntary job with disabled people led him to do a degree in primary school teaching and he has been working as a school teacher since then. Anne and Sharon both entered higher education following their early experiences of activism, both stating that they were only ever going to do the one year, initially, but went on to get a degree, with Anne now working in higher education and Sharon in community education. Brian, Graham and Mark, none of whom had identified as working class in the interview, all had university qualifications. There was thus a wide range of formal qualifications in this group of participants, in a variety of subjects, including forestry, primary education, music business and marine engineering. Brian believed that his degree in forestry had meant that he was better able to understand scientific information related to genetically modified crops. Karen identified that it was while doing research as part of her degree that she became more aware and very frustrated with local politics.

> so when I was doing my research I kind of found out certain things that maybe the local councillors were doing and stuff and th- it just kind of built up a huge frustration in me where I like 'what the actual hell was going on here?' (Karen)

Karen, echoing Sharon's comments above, also indicated that formal education was useful in helping her put words to her thoughts and ideas.

*so like there's maybe ideas that I had before, em, but when you start getting educ-
you go 'oh, that's what that is! I've always thought that but I didn't know what that
was called', right so, 'oh right, I get that' and it's like, 'yeah I did think that but I
just didn't think that every- everybody else thought like that and that's an actual
thing'* (Karen)

This supported her being involved in community activism because it gave her a confidence
and also because she had been able to 'spend time questioning things'. This is similar to
the experience Anne had when she went to university later, finding through her studies that
her 'world made sense'.

There were no other explicit connections made between what people had learned formally
and their community activism. It is likely that, as Graham observed, 'your whole life
experience feeds into you', and people's experiences of formal learning had been useful,
whether or not the subject of their degree was relevant to their activist work. Brian did
identify getting involved in a Friends of the Earth group at university as being a significant
part of his learning journey to activism. This, however, although it took place at university
may be better understood, in light of the earlier discussion, as informal learning.

Chapter summary

Thinking of the community activists' accounts of formal education in light of the theories
of Foucault and Rancière, then, we can see how people position themselves in terms of
their level of education. They also judge themselves and those like them in terms of the
formal qualifications they have or are assumed to have. They further assume abilities based
on education, even when those abilities can be developed informally. Inequality could thus
be seen to be established or confirmed through education as Rancière suggests. This can be
seen in the data to potentially inhibit action as people judge themselves as not as able
based on assumptions around university qualifications.

People who identify as coming from a working class or poor background spend more time
talking about their experiences of formal education and by doing so appear to signal their
recognition of the 'normal', that is, finishing school and proceeding to university. They
clarify and justify leaving school early. They explain their lack of university qualification
or they explain in detail how they eventually managed to get to university. They express
pleasure and pride in their university qualifications. This is in contrast to those not
identifying as working class who do not spend time talking about their route to university
or experience at school.

The subjects most often identified as enjoyable or useful were modern studies at school or college and learning about theories at university. These are the topics which supported the activists in understanding their world, helping them to make sense of it as well as encouraging new perspectives. We can get a sense, through this, of the value of formal education in the experiences of the activists as a way to make sense of their informal learning and their lay knowledge. Bringing the two together, rather than privileging one over the other, seems to produce a powerful resource for people. Karen for instance shows the effectiveness of this in sparking her activism when she describes how her university learning came together with personal experiences to develop insight and confidence. Other than this, however, activists did not draw connections between their experiences of formal education and their activism. From the data, much of the more apparently significant and useful learning was done informally as I discuss in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 7: INFORMAL LEARNING

Involvement in activism was sparked by a realisation that something was not right or needed to change and that it was necessary to act. The research participants became involved in community activism for a range of reasons and to work towards very different goals. At the time of interviewing, some of them had been involved in a number of campaigns and projects. Some, like Mark and Graham, got involved to help improve their local area. Mark was active in bringing renewable energy to the local area for the benefit of the community. Graham was part of a group who worked to establish a care home on their island.

It was just an attempt to do something positive for our local area (Mark)

Most, however, were motivated to get involved from a realisation that what was happening was not right, such as, unfair legislation, inequality in prescribing, period poverty, the removal of play parks, damage to the environment, the plight of refugees, bridge tolls, or damp housing. These were people who became aware of a situation and said,

Hold on a wee second, that's no right! (Mike)

and decided to do something about it. To do something about it, they needed to be heard by the wider community and by those in power. It is clear from all the interviews that people did not get involved in community activism because they already knew how to solve a problem or to bring about change. Rather, they identified something that needed to change and set about working out how to do it. Expertise did not lead to action. Activists were not experts who used their expertise to effect change. Rather community action led to further learning and increased knowledge. In contrast to the linear nature of formal learning, where we gradually move through the stages and levels to be considered competent and equal, learning was done and knowledge gathered together in response to a specific community issue by people verifying their equality and asserting their right to participate and be included. Their learning could be described as being 'out of order' (Figlan et al., 2009, p.27).

As I will discuss in this chapter, the activists' environment, both before and during their activism, was an important aspect of their learning and the actions they were able to take. There is significant variety of knowledge discussed by the community activists. Where they accessed knowledge and how they produced it was not only related to their particular campaign, but also to the context in which they found themselves. Surrounding them were a large number of elements with, from and through which they developed knowledge,

skills and understanding that was useful in their work to bring about change. Learning occurred through interaction with aspects of their environment such as people, places, media, technology, books, funding, legislation, and experience. Activists learned from their own lived experiences, their relationships with their friends, family and the wider community and from expert knowledge acquired from books, from online publications, discussions and from the input of professionals and academics. The learning that emerged as important in their decisions or abilities to act, in the actions they took or in their successes came thus from their experiences and relationships, through self-directed learning, serendipity and by making connections. I consider these in this chapter.

What and how people learn for and through grassroots community activism

Family learning

The format of the interviews allowed, as was hoped, connections to be made between activism and what the participants had learned at other times, in other places and contexts, as well as in the course of their activism. The open approach to interviewing, not asking specifically about particular kinds of informal learning allowed aspects of learning to emerge that might not generally be considered in investigations of informal learning. Childhood experiences were frequently highlighted as important. As mentioned in chapter 3 in the discussion on recognising informal learning, researcher biases can sometimes lead to questions being asked about some kinds of learning but not others. For example, people can be asked about their online learning but not about what they learned from grandparents (Van Noy et al., 2016). In these interviews, learning from grandparents was identified as being a significant element in people's involvement in community activism. In one of the more vivid accounts, Mike, who in the interviews focused on his experiences of campaigning to have the Offensive Behaviour at Football Act repealed, describes learning from the conversations that took place in his grandparents' second hand shops.

> *we used to go into the shop and it was tables and it was just mounds and mounds and mounds of clothes and you just… I always remember as a wee boy the hustle and bustle of a Saturday, you know, and often an awful lot of the talk was political talk, you know, em so and my dad… although my dad was never involved really in politics or anything like that, he was really really interested in it, you know, so I probably got it from that. I used to love listening to the… I suppose it's like any young child, you know, but as I got slightly older, I started learning and there were councillors and people like that, believe it or not, that used to come into my gran and grandad's shop and em listening to them…* (Mike)

Ella too connects her involvement in community activism to her experiences with her grandmother.

> *like I kind of had past experience, like, my gran was, like, really political, like, when we were young, like, we've kind of laughed about this before, like, me and my cousins, about how she would drag us all to George Square and there would always be demos on. We never as kids knew what's going on ((laughs)) there, like, but we just knew, like, that was something she was into and we went to different meetings and things and we'd all sit and play while she was, like, involved in different stuff so I think like she still, like, my gran's really, she's, like, seventy odds now but she's still really, like, active* (Ella)

Although both Mike and Ella were passive participants, they learned about politics and activism from the actions and discussions of those around them. It is not possible to know exactly what they learned, as could also the said of formal learning (Bingham & Biesta, 2010). Nevertheless, the participants appear to consider these to be important learning experiences that influenced their involvement in community activism. Other family activities described by participants also offered important opportunities to learn to be more actively and effectively involved. John, who at the time of the interview was involved in a campaign fighting for equality in prescribing of diabetic monitors, recounted that his family had been similarly political and it was necessary for him to develop skills to be able to participate in their discussions.

> *in my family… I'm just trying to explain it, right, we still get together at my granny's on a Saturday, right, and we'd all be in this… it's a wee room in a two-bedroom flat and eh we'd all go there on a Saturday and there would be my dad who's a bit of an intellectual Marxist, my uncle Joe who was the leader of the National Union of Mineworkers, my uncle Mark who was the chairman ((laughs)) of ABC Engineering but a Marxist right, granddad and all these people. I was always around people who could put an argument together and I was encouraged. If you want to take part in the discussion, come up with an argument. If you couldn't, they'd ignore you. That was it* (John)

Mike also described how his dad would foster debating skills.

> *so my dad would say 'that cup's black', honestly, sometimes that was how bad it got, but it's great, it's an education- in terms of an education for me, it was great, you know, because you then developed those debating skills and all the rest of it you know* (Mike)

Debating skills are more usually associated, not only with formal education but with private and more prestigious education and is seen as important to social mobility. A *Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission* report on the non-educational barriers to the elite professions found that 'social mobility candidates', despite intensive support before applying to a firm, 'were not considered by partner interviewers to have sufficiently strong communication and debating skills' (Ashley et al., 2015, p.58). The report recognises the

value of social inclusion programmes but argues that they 'can rarely replicate twenty years of socialisation enjoyed by more privileged peers' (Ashley et al., 2015, p.59). It then includes a comment from a research participant to illuminate this argument,

> *... people who are from middle class and more wealthy backgrounds they have the dinner table conversation. So, someone has read something somewhere and the family talk about it, you formulate opinions and you know how to structure an argument. But from someone who is from a disadvantaged background, there might not even be a dinner table* (Ashley et al., 2015, p.59, italics in original)

This stereotype of people from a 'disadvantaged' background, in contrast to the middle class and the wealthy is unfair and it is strongly challenged by the examples above where there appears to have been ample opportunities for socialisation, learning how to formulate an opinion and structure an argument for working class or 'disadvantaged' people. What is more likely to be the case is that the ways in which arguments are structured are different, or the language and accent in which an opinion is expressed is not the way which is privileged by those in power. This deficit approach to 'social mobility candidates', which assumes that because people do not speak 'like us' means that they do not speak or think at all may in itself disadvantage and marginalise people. It may not be a matter of 'trying to get them to realise they need to be having conversations' and 'listening to people debating with each other' (Ashley et al., 2015, p.59), because this already happens in working class communities and families.

These examples of learning in families challenge the deficit models that appeal to governments keen to be seen to be doing things to tackle inequalities and to shift the blame from the structural problems to problems of individuals and families. Sime and Sheridan (2014) describe the focus on the role of parents in the development of their children by successive UK governments pointing out that 'the idea that families need "support" to be successful at parenting are underlined by assumptions of deficiency among socially disadvantaged families' (Sime & Sheridan, 2014, p.328). Again, the literature points to a deficit view of working class parents who are positioned as incompetent and in need of support in relation to the competent middle classes, with the perceived deficit being addressed through attempts to impose 'middle class values and approaches' (Sime & Sheridan, 2014, p.329). In these excerpts from the data, however, we see how early childhood experiences and family are thought to have influenced the participants in their decisions to get involved in their activist work. Other participants also talked about their parents being involved in local associations (Anne) or the miners' strike (Sharon). Brian describes the importance of his grandmother in serendipitous learning that he pinpoints as the start of his journey to activism as discussed in the following section.

Serendipitous learning and action

There was an element of chance in the ways in which opportunities presented themselves and either prompted new learning or recalled prior learning. Serendipity, discovering things by chance, prompted determined self-directed learning, with activists seeking out and making use of what was available to them in particular locations or times. The themes of serendipity and chance came through in many of the accounts of learning for community activism. The word serendipity was coined by Horace Walpole in 1754 in a letter to Horace Mann to describe a discovery arrived at by accident. He explains its derivation by referring to a fairy tale about *The Three Princes of Serendip* who on their travels, he claimed, made 'discoveries by accidents and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of' (Merton & Barber, 2006, p.2). It is defined today in the Oxford English Dictionary as 'the faculty of making happy and unexpected discoveries by accident'. Walpole, in his letter, emphasized the accidental nature of serendipity 'for you must observe that no discovery of a thing you are looking for comes under this description' by providing an example of a discovery made by Lord Shaftsbury while 'happening to dine at Lord Chancellor Clarendon's' (Merton & Barber, 2006, p.2). Happy and unexpected discoveries are an important element in the community activists' stories of learning even though not all discoveries would have been recognised as happy when they first occurred. Instead learning serendipitously about injustices or harm, provoked anger and frustration. Nevertheless, the consequence of the knowledge gained was advantageous in prompting involvement in community activism and to bring about positive, or prevent negative, change. Serendipity, chance, fortune and luck were referred to by the activists.

> *a lot of this happened by chance* (Anne)

> *I was very fortunate in that…* (Brian)

> *But this was another sort of bit of serendipity…* (Brian)

> *I don't know whether it's just a coincidence…* (Karen)

> *I'm really lucky that when I…* (Karen)

> *I was lucky…* (Mike)

Brian, as a particular example, when asked about how he first got involved in activism, starts his story at the farm on which he grew up and where his father was a farmer,

> *my first encounter with the horrors of environmental damage was when I was about twelve. My grandmother gave me the book Silent Spring… Rachel Carson… em, well it's about the horrors of chemical agriculture in America and just about the*

same time Dad was using this new-fangled seed treatment, em, on barley to make it, you know, pest proof and grow well and he sowed a field of the barley and I went down to the field one day to see whether it was sprouted or not and the field was covered in dead birds and I just wooh… (Brian)

Brian later reflects on the fact that had any of these events happened at a different time, he might not have become involved in activism later in his life. Had he, for instance, read the book from his grandmother when she gave it to him two years earlier, the sight of the dead birds would not have resonated so strongly and he may not have encountered 'the horrors of environmental damage'.

it's serendipity because, you know, I read it just at the time that Dad was using this chemical and if there had been a gap between the two, I'd probably have drifted away from it and it not have the same- but it just all gelled together in terms of what she was saying about the wrong turn that agriculture was taking in America and you know what we then picked up from American boffins and applied on a wee farm in Ireland and saying this is not right ((laughs)) so that's really the start of it all (Brian)

It was a few years before this experience was brought back to Brian's mind, providing the catalyst to start a successful campaign against a GM trial in Scotland at a local farm near where he was then living.

Serendipity, along with the idea of things, as Brian describes, gelling together are important concepts in learning for activism. Anne's story provides a further example of this. Anne grew up in a damp house but she explains,

It was something that my mammy and my daddy dealt with (Anne)

There was a lot of decorating and a lot of washing the walls but it was not something that affected her and her siblings very much. It was not until Anne was married, in a house of her own bringing her first-born child home that she noticed that her son, who had been very healthy in the hospital, was unwell when at home.

I brought this bouncing baby boy home from a hospital and very quickly he became ill and he became ill because he lived in a cold damp hoose (Anne)

As I will discuss further below, when Anne reported the dampness, she was told it was her fault and she felt she was to blame for her child's ill health. During this time, a new community hall was built and Anne was persuaded by her mother to volunteer at it. She started volunteering with other local residents

and then in talking to them and […] listening to other people talking about their damp hooses and the things that was being said to them and also the amount of time that kids was actually losing fae school because of chronic bronchitis an- an- and other stuff like that. So I realised that other people were being told the same shit that I'd been told about and there's also… there was a stigma about being in a

damp hoose as well because damp hooses inevitably were smelly hooses and smelly hooses had another connotation so there- so there was a shame- there was a certain amount of shame attached to that em so anyway that's the story, that's how I got kind of connected (Anne)

Again, these were different events coming together at the same time which facilitated Anne's further learning about the conditions she was living in. It was a combination of her childhood experiences, of her experiences of living in her own house, of her son being born and being ill, of the new community hall, of volunteering and being at the hall at the same time as others talking about similar experiences. Had she not volunteered, had she not been in a situation to talk to and listen to other people's experiences, she might have continued to be blamed and to blame herself for her son's poor health. As she said,

People in suits convinced me it was my fault and I internalised that into being 'there must be something wrang with me that I cannae prevent my child fae being unhealthy' (Anne)

Talking to others, Anne realised that there was not something wrong with her. It was the housing that was not right. Learning happened in the connections between people, places and times to develop knowledge and understanding of a wrong and an injustice.

Serendipitous learning is not a part of formal learning. As discussed in chapter 3, serendipitous learning is seen as being very informal. It cannot be planned for or controlled and it does not sit well within a structured curriculum. Serendipity has been used to describe informal learning alongside adjectives such as *haphazard* and *idiosyncratic* (Le Clus, 2011) which, through such associations, suggest that it is seen more as a negative aspect than a positive one. But serendipity is also associated positively with the work of humanities and science scholars (Foster & Ford, 2003) and many scientific discoveries are attributed to serendipity (Roberts, 1989). Just as family learning is valued if it takes place in a middle class family, serendipity may be more visible and more valuable in the right contexts.

Self-directed, but unplanned, learning

While serendipity played a significant role in the activists' learning, self-directed learning was also important. Activists sought out and gathered the knowledge they needed to bring about change. It is important to note, however, that self-direction did not necessarily entail much planning.

I hate making plans. I mean, if I'm forced to make a plan it just feels I'm being constrained. I can't nip off and do something else because the plan says I should be doing this (Brian)

and so we visited them and took a lot of notes and they came up and gave us advice and we then- well we just kind of pushed on in that line em we didn't have a clue where to start (Graham)

This is interesting to consider in relation to the emphasis on Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) in many contexts of adult learning, including the contexts of literacies and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in which I work. ILPs are purportedly used to encourage self-direction and individuals' responsibility for their learning, but the requirements for their use does not take into account whether people are already considered to be self-directing in their learning or whether or not they already show signs of taking responsibility for their own learning. They are in many contexts required paperwork which seem to serve more to provide evidence to inspectors and funders rather than to support learning. While the need to be accountable is understandable, it seems important to consider whether current practices may constrain people and inhibit interesting and useful learning. Considering ILPs in light of the experiences of the community activists' learning could lead us to question their current use and the role they are expected to play in supporting an individual's learning. An important reason for this is that, although they are used in contexts that are often considered less formal, community education and community colleges, they appear to replicate the progressive order of the more formal discussed by Rancière (2010). Although people apparently get a say in what they will be learning, it is guided by tutors who work with people to 'diagnose' the issues and help in the planning of what will be learned and when.

Activists guided their own learning. They were driven to understand an issue and to find ways to bring about change. They regularly assessed what they knew and what they needed to know and they worked out ways to take the next step. They had an overall aim that they were clear about, but they did not know which steps would take them there. As Mike discussed when talking about the work to repeal legislation,

I was naïve when I was going in to it, you know, I didn't have any real idea about how we were going to effect change. It's all very well saying 'I don't like this, we want it repealed' but what are we going to do, you know (Mike)

Anne, Graham and Karen similarly express not having a clear sense of what to do.

we weren't sure how you done that but we kind of tried all sorts of things, weird and wonderful things (Anne)

but it just came together at the right time I think that group of people (Graham)

I just had to work it out (Karen)

They worked it out and identified the next steps by making connections and talking to other people, both within their community and outside of it. A lot of learning was done in this way. Learning led to new learning. It was emergent rather than planned (Megginson, 1996). Otto and Williams (2014) explain that people employing a self-directed emergent strategy usually start learning with an idea of what they want to achieve and take advantages of learning opportunities as they arise. A study by Gear et al. (1994) into the informal learning of professionals found that only 20 percent of their respondents claimed to have followed a plan whereas the other 80 percent 'had an idea of the outcome they wanted, but followed an emergent strategy which took advantage of learning opportunities as they arose' (Otto & Williams, 2014, p.135). In the context of activism as described by the participants in this study, the self-directed and emergent nature of learning and action is evident. New learning is prompted by situational factors which either facilitate or serve as an obstacle to get around. The struggle to be heard presented one such barrier as I discuss in the following section.

Learning to be heard

Communication was an essential element in the work of the community activists. It was important to be able to communicate to those in positions of power, to the immediate community and to the wider public. People had already informally learned to communicate effectively in a variety of contexts – work, family and social – and these skills were put to use in their activism. Their activism placed them in new and unfamiliar contexts, with people of different social positions, backgrounds and opinions. It also presented new modes of communication, new media and new people to communicate with. People learned through communication with others, and also learned how to communicate better and more effectively through participation in different contexts, in dealing with new topics and by using social and mainstream media in new ways. Much of their learning was focused on being heard – learning in order to be heard (producing and accessing knowledge) and learning how to be heard (communicating). The latter entailed overcoming inequalities of power and influence, the former facilitated that process.

Inequality of power and influence is evident in the experiences and accounts of the community activists, particularly around knowledge. In their accounts, some people are considered to be knowers who, in such a capacity, can influence understanding, decisions and actions. Other people are not accorded such recognition and are thus distanced from

such power and influence, even over their own lives and the health and wellbeing of their families. Such inequality caused people to doubt their own analyses and understanding. Anne, for instance, even while knowing she was doing everything she could to look after her son, had been convinced by 'people in suits' that it was her fault.

> *I would report it to housing officials, people in suits, people in bigger seats than mine and they kind of convinced me it was my fault. They kind of convinced me that I was somehow responsible for no keeping my son healthy* (Anne)

The 'people in suits' not only had the advantage of a good job and of greater wealth, they also had power to influence what was known about people living in poverty. That this knowledge was contradicted by the experience and the reports of those people did not seem to matter. Rancière's concept of the dividing line, between those who know and who speak and those who do not know and who cannot be understood, marks the distinction between 'those who have a part and those who do not, between those who are fit to make decisions and to create lives and those whose lives are to be created for them' (May, 2014, p.71). As Anne describes,

> *nobody would believe us, when we says this isn't our fault, nobody would believe us* (Anne)

Rancière's concept of the distribution of the sensible, discussed above, can be seen here. The way in which the 'sensible' is shared or divided up at any given point determines 'what is visible and what is not, of what can be heard and what cannot, of what is noise and what is speech' (Rancière, 2003, p.225). What is perceived as sensible and who are thought of as worth listening to establishes an inequality between those who know and those who do not (Panagia, 2014). Equality, for Rancière, is essentially people being taken seriously as 'valid partners in a dialogue, as people who make sense' (Deranty, 2014, p.11).

In the accounts of the participants, there is a recognition of difference between those who know and those who do not

> *they were the people with knowledge and that kind of stuff so em nobody wanted to look stupid* (Anne)

More than that, there seems to be a different relationship with knowledge. There is a sense that people who are seen at being at a higher level in terms of power and influence *have* knowledge. It is possessed as a commodity or it is a personal attribute. As Ella assessed of people from whom they had received advice

> *they just seem to know* (Ella)

In contrast, Ella had to learn in order to be taken seriously.

> *I wasn't an expert in it at all, I had to learn more about it to kind of know what I was talking about* (Ella)

Depending on who is being referred to, knowledge can be a product, something that is taken for granted or it can be part of a process, something that has to be learned. As discussed above, those who are lower down in the hierarchical structure in terms of power and influence or in terms of level of formal education are the ones who have to do the learning. It is assumed that gaps will be closed and inequalities tackled by people who are most disadvantaged learning more. Those who are already advantaged do not need to learn, especially not from those 'below' them. If people want to bring about change, they have to assert their right to know and to speak and not, as Karen recalled being told, leave it to the people who know what they are doing.

> *I remember her very distinctly saying to me when I started getting involved in politics, she went 'oh hen, you're better leaving it to the folk that know what they're doing' and there is a mentality of 'leave it to the folk that know what they're doing'. 'Excuse me! Has it worked so far? Because it's no working for me, I'll tell you' ((laughs)) There's that kind of 'pipe down, pipe down, hen. Get back in your wee box because these people know what they're doing. You're just this person where what do you think you're going to manage to do anything?' and eh- th- that was a kind of realisation of 'oh right thanks'* (Karen)

Resisting being positioned as powerless, the community activists worked to challenge the *distribution of the sensible*. The participants' accounts display an understanding that given this inequality, it was not enough that they share their knowledge and understanding for anything to change. This had been disregarded, either as lacking credibility, as Anne describes, or as not being worth hearing. The activists became very aware of the disparity between their existing knowledge and experiences and the ways in which others represented a situation or in the ways in which others acted. Anne describes how those in authority convinced her that the problems she experienced were her fault. Ella talks about how she felt when an organisation funded by the government to represent women did not represent her views or experiences or those of the people she knew.

> *I was just so taken aback by the content of it. There was just… It just differed so greatly from my experience of attending football or even travelling to games or like women I know that have attended football or other women who don't have an interest in football but their experiences of it* (Ella)

In such cases, people are clear about the need for learning,

> *it was bugging me and I decided then that I wanted to find out a wee bit more about it* (Ella)

It was also important to

> *blow the myth that we were somehow responsible* (Anne).

Despite their understanding that a change was needed, they were not in a position to effect that change. Given the inequality of power and influence, they would have to work harder and produce more knowledge in order to be heard and taken seriously.

> *we absolutely realised that in order for people to believe what we were saying, we would have to produce evidence* (Anne)

Even after producing substantial knowledge, communicating this was not straightforward and significantly greater numbers of people were needed to amplify the voices of those working for change. Mike described,

> *so we eventually got to a stage where we thought something really needs to be done about this so in terms of campaign, on a number of occasions there was a big push to contact MSPs, emailing them, turning up at surgeries, asking questions and so on. What we very, very quickly encountered was almost a brick wall* (Mike)

Similarly, Graham recognises,

> *certainly in my experience, the more remote you are from corridors of power, and it's not just geographical remoteness though as here but this probably counts to some extent you know for an inner city housing estate say where you're down the pecking order in some things so the more remote you are the more you have to shout louder and longer and sometimes shout at the most embarrassing times which is what that Daily Record piece did* (Graham)

Through many frustrating encounters with those in power, where the activists' experiences, understanding and knowledge were discounted and dismissed, the activists learned that in order to be taken seriously and in order to be able to influence decisions, that they would need to find more effective ways to be heard.

Some of the activists also expressed that it was important to be heard on their terms. They were keen to ensure that a positive image of the community was communicated through the media to challenge the more usual negative images of where they lived and who they were. They were aware of the image people had of them and the assumptions and wanted to challenge that.

> *we done it in a way in which we were dead clear that you know again this image that a damp hoose is a poor hoose and a poor hoose is a smelly hoose and aw that kind of stuff, that we dinnae want that image, you know, that wisnae the image we wanted. We were sick to the back teeth of, you know, really negative images of our scheme and stuff like that so we always made sure that we, you know, that when we did put out anything it was a positive but here's the conditions so that kind of was really important* (Anne)

The desire to challenge people's perceptions about who football fans were prompted Ella to first get involved in activism.

> *I felt like for me going to the football sometimes you can already be tarred with that brush a wee bit already so for me it kind of felt like 'oh this is another level*

being added to that already stigma' almost that you kind of need to put up with so it was bugging me (Ella)

Communicating, connecting and working with others

As mentioned above, it was not enough to simply contact those promoting negative images, inaccurate representations or harmful practices for them to change what they were doing. It was necessary to forge positive and strategic relationships and to find ways to communicate to a wider audience to generate support and to speak collectively with a louder voice. Starting with their friends, neighbours and people in their existing networks and communities, before looking further afield for people to inform and support their work, activists made connections to people face-to-face and through a range of media and means to generate support and to amplify their message.

> *so I went out on the town Facebook group and I was like 'by the way councillor so and so is going to be at the tunnel at XYZ why don't we let them know what we think'* (Karen)

> *So at the start it was really just like talking to different people about it when I was maybe at the football and hearing like updates about what their involvement in like kind of activism or like what they were doing* (Ella)

> *listening to other people talking about their damp hooses and the things that was being said to them and also the amount of time that kids was actually losing fae school because of chronic bronchitis an- an- and other stuff like that so I realised that other people were being told the same shit that I'd been told* (Anne)

> *the first thing we did was to call a public meeting and we thought we'd get ten twenty thirty people turn up em we did publicise it quite well and used Gerry Martin's skills to whoop it up we got four hundred people into the hall at the school* (Brian)

Activists drew on their existing knowledge and abilities to interact with people and further developed their skills through connecting to individuals and groups that they were not used to dealing with, making use of a variety of modes of communication.

> *I had then by this point started putting things out on Twitter to raise awareness that 'this is ongoing, I'm trying to get these answers, are any other people aware of this' and other women started raising their concerns so it became a kind of thing on Twitter which was good because I felt that then was adding a bit of pressure which was what at that point was what I wanted to happen* (Ella)

> *well my main learning in recent days ((laughs)) has been social media. I didn't have a clue about Facebook Twitter or any of that rubbish. I'm now not bad on Facebook but I'm cr- ((laughs)) Twitter's voodoo you know ((laughs)) I can't do that* (John)

Participants demonstrated in the interviews that they were conscious of the unusualness of some of the encounters and that they were aware of the importance of good and effective communication. Their accounts covered the need to take into account the audience, timing, message, messenger and register.

So we had to start negotiating with lots of people em around this em and we'd never spoke to the business sector before, we didn't know how you spoke to the business sector (Anne)

I remember him standing up in that meeting basically spelling out his social circumstances to [the scientist] and saying, you know, 'this is why I'm here, you're wrong' and it had such an impact on the rest of the audience, you know, so if I'd stood up and said it, it wouldn't have nearly the same impact because I'm- you know I was sort of a figure head of the movement and 'he say that wouldn't he' so but you know em John saying it was just amazing (Brian)

so we done a wee info pic and we agreed 'right let's put this out' and at first we had agreed to do it at three o'clock in the day ((laughs)) but then people were saying 'no do it at this- do it much earlier because then you've only got three o'clock and then you've got to that night' and we thought 'God, hadn't even thought about that' we just thought people… maybe three o'clock near enough finishing time the work people then pick up their phones but so there was all these things that you just do not think about or think you need to know about that you probably should consider so we pure rushed and got this message out at twelve o'clock (Ella)

Connecting to and communicating with others was an extremely important aspect of the activists' work. Communication is something that is part of formal education but the communication privileged in such contexts is usually that which is required to pass exams or to win at debates rather than that which allows us to relate to and communicate with people of different backgrounds and experiences about something which is important to us or to them. In this part of their work, activists drew on the communication skills they had learned from their life experiences – from their families, friends, work or other community involvement – and developed them further by entering into new fields and connecting with people they had not previously had experience of dealing with.

Embarrassment and confronting those in positions of power with the implications of their policies and actions was a common theme in many of the activists' accounts. The piece in the Daily Record, a Scottish tabloid newspaper, that Graham referred to above on page 104, was about a story of a couple having to be separated when they were no longer able to live in their own home and had to go into care. Not only that but the wife,

who had lived on the island all her life and had never left it, had to be moved to another island. As Graham interprets,

> *that made a very good tabloid story and the Daily Record ran a big piece on it and that kind of shamed the council and health board into action and they suddenly became a bit embarrassed and more cooperative at the same time* (Graham)

When Anne was asked, in the interview, about when people started to listen she was clear that it was in making them uncomfortable with the position those in power were holding that encouraged greater openness. This started to happen when they got media coverage which highlighted the situation from the activists' point of view.

> Interviewer*:* *so do you know… was there a time when, you know, these people in suits started listening or started=*
> Anne*:* *=they shit themselves*

As with Graham's experience, managing to bring into the open the consequences of the conditions people were living in encouraged people to start to take notice and be more open to solutions.

> *we decided that that if we wanted to keep our story alive, right, we had to find innovative ways in which to do that so one of the things we done was we courted the media, right, we got in tow with the women's editor in the Evening Press. We found out who people were, who were the important people in other places that would help keep our story alive so we had a super relationship. She was the women's editor, so she kept our story alive in the papers* (Anne)

Connecting to, and communicating through, other people was a key skill that participants employed and developed through their activism.

Positioning and how participants talk about informal learning

The learning in formal contexts is often talked about in the data in terms of possession, of acquiring and having things – highers, a degree, something to write home about, an education. In contrast, informal learning is primarily about what people did. It was talked about more in terms of the actions they took rather than learning. It was the experiences they had had, the things they had done and the actions they had taken which were important and it was these which were more likely to be highlighted in the activists' talk. Where learning was explicitly referred to, it was often itself an action that needed to be taken. Learning was something that had to be done in order to take the next steps.

> *I wasn't an expert in it at all. I had to learn about it to kind of know what I was talking about and then I had to learn about other people's experiences through other people's submissions* (Ella)

that just took me straight back to my agricultural roots if you like and I started to get genned up on the issues surrounding GM (Brian)

it's all very well saying 'I don't like this, we want it repealed' but what are we going to do, you know … so speaking to him and learning about the processes that he would have to go through … and finding out the process em in terms of the judicial system and how that works and all the rest of it, that's been a real eye-opener you know (Mike).

The tendency to focus on the actions rather than more explicitly on the learning may be related to the discussion above in the review of the literature of formal and informal learning where the difficulty of researching informal learning is clear. People do not generally focus on what is being learned informally because their focus is on action rather than learning. When asked to identify how they knew something or how they learned how to do something, people talked about not knowing but just doing.

I just had to work it out. I just had to reach out to people (Karen)

It was work rather than learning.

it was a tremendous lot of work, I mean it was a field that we had never done anything in before (Mark)

As Eraut (2000, p.13) discusses, implicit learning is difficult to detect without prolonged observation but also 'reactive learning and some deliberative learning are unlikely to be consciously recalled unless there was an unusually dramatic outcome'.

In the data, where problems are experienced people are more aware of learning things. When, for instance, things do not go as people expect them to or when people realise that if they had done things differently, they might have been more successful. People also learn when they are surprised at how other people behave. Difference provokes explicit learning. Ela, for instance, expressed surprise at many aspects of her experience, particularly at the way people behaved in ways she had not anticipated.

we said we didn't want them to pick up the story and it was like 'well we're doing it anyway' and different stuff. So it was interesting to see that type of things because I suppose you just-… Us being maybe naïve at that point thought when you tell someone you don't want something to be done, they just do that but that's not how it obviously works […] so it was amazing but again it just so many different wee things that you learned (Ella)

However, despite recognising that she had learned a lot through the experience, when she refers to those who have had more experience of activism she describes them as if they just know these things.

it's funny because the awareness of that happening is there. They just seem to know that happens (Ella)

Through these statements, Ella positions herself as being naïve and as having to learn a lot, but others as if they 'just know'. This opens up the question of who is it that is seen to learn or who needs to learn. The activists are clear that they need to learn a lot in order to know what they are talking about and to speak on their own behalf. When they talk of those in positions of power, however, there does not seem to be the same expectation of learning. They, in contrast, tend to be seen as the ones with the knowledge. Learning seems to go down, not up. Those at lower levels need to learn while those at higher levels just know.

This is interesting in light of the growing prominence of the word 'learner' to refer to those who are subjects of learning in the English-speaking world (Bingham & Biesta, 2010) and of the tendency to see societal problems in terms of learning problems (Biesta, 2011). This use of the word 'learner' is intended to shift the focus from what a teacher has decided to teach to greater agency and decision making as to what and why a person wishes to learn, to make learning more relevant and effective and to rebalance relationships of power. Bingham and Biesta (2010) suggest that this development may have unintended consequences that are worth bearing in mind. Someone is called a learner when there is something that they have to learn, whether this be skills, knowledge, values or something else. This constructs a person 'in terms of a *lack*. The learner is one who is missing something. The learner is the one who is not yet complete' (Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p.134).

> To call someone a learner thus suggests an inequality between those who have learned, those who know, can, or are, and those who still need to learn in order to know, be able, or be (Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p.134).

However, people recognising that there is something they, or others, need to learn is not necessarily a problem. There will always be something of interest or of use that we can learn. The difficulty lies more in the perception of who the knowers are and who the learners are and how this perception is related to a person's relative position hierarchically. A relationship between learners and knowers suggests that the former have something to learn from the latter, but that the converse does not apply. This perceived gap or inequality was useful in the context of activism because learning was seen as an important first step in order to have the knowledge necessary to speak with confidence. Where it is less productive is where there is reluctance of those in 'higher' positions to learn from, as Rancière has identified, 'voices from below'.

> And what are we ever told about these voices, other than the fact that they voice their unhappiness? My argument is that they don't just voice their unhappiness:

they write prose, they write verse, they speak – in sum, they do much more than express or vent their unhappiness over their condition. (Rancière & Battista, 2017, p.317)

While the perception of who knows is problematic, perceiving learning as an action they needed to take was useful for the activists. Perceiving learning as necessary and positioning themselves as learners was not a problem since, in doing so, they verified their capacity to learn for themselves.

The role of informal learning in grassroots community activism

Since informal learning was strongly linked to action, it can be seen as playing a very significant role in grassroots community activism. Rancière (with Jacotot) suggests,

> The virtue of our intelligence is less in knowing than in doing. 'Knowing is nothing, *doing* is everything.' But this doing is fundamentally an act of communication.
> (Rancière, 1991, p.65, emphasis in original)

What people were able to do and achieve in their communities was supported by what they had learned informally and their capacity to continue to learn what they needed outside of formal education. Coffield's (2000, p.1) assertion that 'informal learning … is often necessary, whereas formal training is often dispensable' is borne out by the data. While it may be assumed that the technical abilities to read and write were learned in formal education, people's ability to build relationships and communicate effectively with those around them was developed informally. Learning how to communicate in new contexts and through new media was also informal. People learned how systems of local and national government worked in practice, and their experience of engaging with those systems provided knowledge that would be difficult to acquire through formal courses. They learned what it was like to be disbelieved, to be excluded from conversations and to struggle to be heard. While this could be learned in formal institutions, it would not be an intended outcome of a course. Importantly, they learned that they could make a difference and that, through perseverance, learning and knowledge, they could work with others to bring about a change.

> *I think the play park was- th- the saving of the play park next to the school was the first time that I realised "oh my lord you can actually change things here". That's when the light bulb went on where I went "oh right so you can actually make a difference" em so I- I think that was kind of the catalyst of "well let's do some other stuff then"* (Karen)

> *you get buoyed up by successes like the GM thing, you know, we- we knew w- we'd achieved a big thing there an- and you know the Scottish Government are still committedly anti-GM which wouldn't have happened if it hadn't- there was another*

group down in Fife as well but the the collective effort from the grassroots made it clear that if the SNP allowed GM crops- of course they could do that because agriculture was devolved so England hasn't gone anti-GM but Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are all no GM so tha- that really sort of enthused me (Brian)

so we were able to dae that but I think you know we'd that core group of seven people but we had aw these other fantastic people working round about us so community workers and other folk that were gieing us a nod when we needed it and that kind of stuff so that was good and that's why it was successful (Anne)

To get a repeal for something like this, the only- the only ((laughs)) it's quite emotional actually, the only time a piece of legislation has been repealed since Holyrood's inception has been quite an achievement, it really has. (Mike)

This was particularly important learning. Through their successes they experienced and understood what they were capable of. It gave them a sense of their potential and for many, it led to further campaigns. The activists talked about other projects they became involved in. Where their first involvement was often fuelled by emotion, subsequent ones were driven by a sense of their own capacity to make a difference.

So at that point I kind of thought, it wasn't something that was hugely important to me but I thought em 'Aye it's something like- Aye I'll definitely help out, do what I can, let's speak about it another time, get a bit more information about what you're thinking of doing and aye definitely I'd be up for kind of helping out' (Ella)

This awareness of potential and abilities to be involved, to be heard and to bring about change is powerful and emancipatory learning. Studies into the factors that lead people to be more likely to participate in various aspects of local politics found that 'feelings of efficacy were a strong predictor' (Dalton, 2017, p.11). The feelings of efficacy experienced by activists did lead them to become more easily involved in future action.

Although I have identified those aspects of informal learning that emerged as significant in the data – family learning, serendipitous learning, self-directed emergent learning, learning to communicate, and experiencing success – informal learning can be seen to encompass much more than these. All the experiences of the activists to date, the skills they have developed, the people they have met, the books they have read, the places they have been, the conversations they have overheard, could be considered informal learning. They are experiences that are now part of them and ready to be drawn on given the right set of circumstances. As Billet argues, this type of learning

occurs all the time as we engage in activities and interactions in our homes, with our families, with our friends and acquaintances, in our work, in our workplaces, in our community engagements, in the everyday tasks in which we engage and when we are alone. (Billet, 2010, p.402)

This learning allows us to 'complete the tasks we require to simply live and thereby enjoy connected, effective and worthwhile lives' (Billet, 2010, p.402). The data suggests that, despite the status accorded to formal learning, Foley's interpretation of learning is accurate. For him,

> the most interesting and significant learning occurs informally and incidentally, in people's everyday lives. And some of the most powerful learning occurs as people struggle against oppression, as they struggle to make sense of what is happening to them and to work out ways of doing something about it. (Foley, 1999, pp.1-2)

In light of the data and the findings that are emerging from it, it is necessary to reconsider the warning from Biesta and Leary (2012) for us not to see learning as something we cannot help but do, something so natural that we learn all the time. They argue that by doing so we are not able to determine what is valuable learning. While this argument makes sense and was something that I have kept in mind throughout the analysis, it does not seem possible to distinguish valuable learning from other experiences. Mike identified the learning while hanging around his grandparents' shop and overhearing the conversations of adults as being significant. Karen learned the value of a play park from her experiences of using it, chatting to the other mums while their children played together on the way home from school. Brian understood the dangers of pesticides from seeing a field full of dead birds just after reading a book his grandmother had given him two years ago. Ella learned about the experiences of football fans by being one and attending football matches. They all also learned how to talk and interact with people in their communities. They learned in the course of their lives and their daily experiences. It seems impossible to identify what would be valuable learning and to distinguish between useful and not useful. How do we assign value and who assigns it since, as discussed above, learning done in different socioeconomic contexts may be valued differently?

Untangling what we mean by learning, how we define it and value it is not straightforward. Given the wealth of literature already on the subject, it seems an impossible task. Fenwick (2010), referring to Usher and Edwards (2007), highlights the different ways in which learning is seen 'such as policy imperative, code for growth, and synonym for education' (Fenwick, 2010, p.80). Billet (2010) highlights the risk of confusing learning with education and the implication of this in policies where learning is seen solely in terms of formal provision where solutions are seen in terms of 'courses, courses and more courses' (Billet, 2010, p.410). The difficulty of agreeing a definition of what learning is outside of courses and formal education leads Fenwick to suggest that '[o]ne is tempted sometimes to abandon the word as utterly hollowed out of any meaning worth discussing' (Fenwick,

2010, p.80). Reviewing the literature on workplace learning, Fenwick suggests that adult educators and researchers would be better to use their energy to 'truly appreciate the multiplicity and undecidable ambivalences enacted in activities' (Fenwick, 2010, p.92). Foley calls for 'detailed accounts of the complexities and contradictions of emancipatory learning and education' (1999, p.12). In doing so, Billet's (2010) conception of learning seems useful,

> Learning is something that humans do. It requires consciousness and the capacity to utilise what we know and leads to change both in what we know and how we know. (Billet, 2010, p.402)

Recognising the capacity and the need to learn was important in the activists' experiences, as was the acknowledgment that through their learning and action, they could bring about change. Formal learning as it is structured through courses, qualifications and institutions can position people at a level higher or lower to others, stultifying and constituting an inequality whereby some are seen as more able and more intelligent than others. In contrast, the learning done and put to use in activism was emancipatory and, in Rancière's words (1991), revealed an intelligence to itself. But, as Rancière points out, formal education does not necessarily stultify and indeed there is evidence in the data that formal education could be emancipatory.

> It is thus not the procedure, the course, the manner that emancipates or stultifies; it's the principle. The principle of equality, the Jacotot principle, emancipates no matter what procedure, book, or fact it is applied to. The problem is to reveal an intelligence to itself. Anything can be used. (Rancière, 1991, p.28)

Karen, for example, describes her experiences of higher education, the theories she learned about and the research she did, as eye opening and as instilling in her a confidence to question the practices she observed around her.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has highlighted the complexity and messiness of informal learning evident in the data. Informal learning is, often, serendipitous, self-directed and emergent. It occurs as we go about our everyday life, through our interactions with people around us, through what we read and what we hear. What we know is refined and changed as we put our existing learning into practice, allowing us to develop further and to change our views about how the world around us works. Important learning as part of grassroots community activism centres around learning to be heard, developing knowledge to be in a position to communicate about the issue as well as learning how to be heard and taken seriously, how to communicate, how to take advantage of the situation and how to foster support for the

cause. Most important, however, was the activists learning that they were capable of making a difference and of being heard. The initial involvement in activism was often driven by anger and frustration. Subsequent projects were driven by feelings of efficacy, the awareness of a capacity to learn, to communicate and to bring about change.

It is clear that informal learning is essential in grassroots community activism. The learning done to gain formal qualifications is not sufficient whereas what people have learned informally and continue to learn informally as part of their activism was crucial. To make a difference, all one need be prepared to do is learn and continue learning. As Rancière (1991, p.28) suggests, '[t]here is always something the ignorant one knows that can be used as a point of comparison, something to which a new thing to be learned can be related'.

It is necessary to note that while the activists learned what they needed to know informally, knowledge that had been developed and learned by others through formal education was essential to their work and to their success. In the following chapter, I explore this aspect in more detail.

CHAPTER 8: KNOWLEDGE

This chapter focuses on the role of knowledge in community activism. It begins with a further consideration of how activists position themselves and others as knowers. It then looks at how activists gathered together knowledge, both lay and expert, in order to speak for themselves and to work to bring about change. The data allows an exploration of the role and the value of both specialist and local knowledge. It highlights the importance of knowledge gained through lived experience and how the power of that knowledge is enhanced through its combination with expert knowledge.

Positioning in relation to knowledge

Knowledge, in the accounts of the community activists, was seen as being an important aspect of a person's power and influence. Seeking and communicating knowledge was a significant element of their activism. Participants recounted an initial tendency to position themselves in opposition to knowledgeable others, seeing those in positions of power as

> *the people with the knowledge* (Anne)

In their interactions with those with more power, the activists were not seen as knowers. There seemed to be an initial assumption that it was people who were better paid and better educated who were the knowers. They were more knowledgeable and more capable. However, this assumption was challenged as the activists became more familiar with people in positions of power. They came to realise that education and wealth did not necessarily translate into accurate understanding of particular situations. As John described,

> *I realised that most of them are bull shitters [...] They are! Bull shitters. Better educated than me but bull shitters right* (John)

It seems, from the activists' descriptions, that useful learning came from the realisation that the information and knowledge communicated by people in positions of authority and power were not necessarily accurate, useful or honest. This lax way of using information and knowledge was not, however, open to the community activists within the existing power structures. In contrast, they had to make sure that they had good and reliable knowledge and understanding of their situation to be able to bring about change. Their growth in power did not come from higher socioeconomic status or a more powerful position. It came from the thorough and solid knowledge that they were able to generate and communicate. It came from asserting their capacity as knowers and from challenging *testimonial injustice* (Fricker, 2007) where a wrong is done to someone in their capacity as

a knower 'when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word' (Fricker, 2007, p.1).

The way the activists positioned themselves in relation to knowledge, therefore, changed over the course of their stories. They started in the position of people who did not possess useful or valuable knowledge, whereas those with more power were seen as those who did. In the course of redressing this balance, they came to realise that what was known by those with less power was often the more useful and reliable knowledge. By bringing together lay and expert knowledge, they were able to act more effectively from a position of greater understanding. It was important to assert this status of knowers and to be able to speak on their own behalf and not to have the projects taken away from them. Mark described his experience when he talked about looking for funding for their project. They were being advised to bring in an expert but, as Mark explains,

> *we would have had to kind of give all our facts and figures over to somebody else that was eh deemed credible just to get the project done so we argued against that* (Mark)

The changes in positioning in relation to learning and knowledge reflect a change in their positioning to the issue. When it was clear that they were not being listened to, and that their knowledge was not being sought or given credence, then the action they took entailed gathering, building on and finding effective ways to communicate what they knew.

The knowledge required for the activists' work came from a variety of sources: from people, places and times; and, through reading, talking and personal experiences. Prior learning and knowledge were brought together with new learning and knowledge to develop 'really useful knowledge' (Johnson, 1993) as people actively sought to bring about change. Local and personal knowledge was combined with the more specialist knowledge of experts and professionals to understand what was happening and to work towards change. I discuss this further below, beginning with a discussion of expert knowledge in the following section.

Expert knowledge

Activists were able to access and make use of expert and specialist knowledge from books, online information and support from experts. Anne, in particular, talks about the technical knowledge she gained.

> *So we learned about... so the building I lived in was constructed out of brick called Wilson Block. It has no cavity wall insulation. It's three metal ties that holds two*

bricks together and nothing in the middle. It loses heat four times quicker than a traditional built house, so we learned all this stuff (Anne)

I know that the fungus that was living in my house was aspergillus and penicillin so I knew what they were called. I knew the damage they were doing, you know, what's the long term implications of my son being on inhalers and steroids from such a young age, so all of that stuff, so we were gathering all this evidence and so it became really difficult for folk to ignore us, really really difficult (Anne)

Brian talks about the importance of accessing scientific information either through books or experts who came to talk to them.

It was a very accessible book and well referenced with, you know, competent scientific… so it gave us, you know, a sort of platform and there were various other people came to talk to us from anti-GM groups and, you know, we sort of drew it all together (Brian)

Where Brian feels that,

if I hadn't had a biological based degree, I wouldn't have been able to make sense of most of that science you know (Brian)

Anne laughs as she recalls the efforts the architect made to explain things to them.

He was frustrated with us, right, I mean he absolutely was frustrated with us, and we're saying 'still don't get it, still don't get it' and he came away and he came back and he had sugar cubes and he was trying to- so it was something visual that 'right ok, we get it now' (Anne)

Brian, who has a degree, feels that his studies gave him an advantage in being able to understand technical information, whereas Anne demonstrates that having left school at the age of 16 and, according to the definition, could be categorised as 'low-educated', this was not a barrier to learning scientific and technical information that explained the problems they faced. That Anne can recall this information now, so fluently and in such detail, years later is impressive.

These experiences allow us to consider Rancière's (1991) arguments about 'explanation' and learning from a more knowledgeable other. In writings about Rancière's work, authors often are at pains to point out the paradox inherent in a book or an article written to explain Rancière when Rancière decried explanation as stultifying (Rancière, 1991). To do away with explanation, however, seems impractical and risks withholding information from those who could most use it. Anne's account of her experiences and feelings illustrates this very effectively and so I focus on her account here to explore this aspect. In Anne's experience, as with that of other activists, explanation is not a problem and explanation does not necessarily stultify. Rather, these explanations were emancipatory in their effect.

Prior to this learning, they had a lot of support from experts but those experts were talking on their behalf. Anne explains,

> *but actually what happened was that we then had all these experts and we were losing control because they were talking on our behalf and we said 'we don't like that, we don't like that, we want to be able to articulate for ourselves' so we said 'you need to slow down and you need to teach us the language you're talking'* (Anne)

The support and the solidarity from experts were welcome, but there was a sense of being silenced by the expertise of others, of not being in control and having no part in the conversation. The following excerpts from Anne illustrate this. These excerpts are presented here in the order in which the events occurred rather than in the order in which they were spoken. They emerged following a question to explore what Anne meant when she talked about 'being silenced'.

> *it was a conversation that was taking place- I mean it was like professionals talking to professionals and they understood that, they understood things, an- an- and we were sitting, we were passive em (.) passengers in that and we couldnae really em engage in it because we didnae understand it* (Anne)

> *in the beginning it was good that we had aw these other folk beside us but actually we were silenced in that space an- and the groups says 'no we need to be able to do this for wurselves'* (Anne)

> *so we learned aw this stuff so we were able to- we learned a language that was unfamiliar but we were able to articulate that for wurselves so that we could- we could sit in front of a room wi- with leading architects from the council and fae other places, designers, planners and be able to articulate for ourselves, that was hugely important about learning this other language* (Anne)

> *yeah and it was hugely successful so any one of the seven of us, you know, could have stood up and quite eloquently spoken about the construction of the building, what happens, (unclear) values, and all that kind of stuff, and how we werenae meeting the standards and all that kind of stuff so- so we- we- could confidently tell wur own story which was dead important […] I don't think we realised just how important that was but- but there was a frustration that came out of that that enabled us to say 'no, you need to stop'* (Anne)

From a Rancièrian perspective, it might be argued that the experts explained what they knew to those who did not know and criticize such action as stultifying. But this would be to take too simplistic a view of what happened here. Anne's account does not display a stultification. They have not, as the direct translation from French would express, been 'rendered stupid' (Translator's note, in Rancière, 1991, p.7). Rather this learning seems emancipatory. Rancière accepts that '[o]ne always learns when listening to someone speaking' (1991, p.102). Stultification arises in the subordination of one intelligence to another, where one is not considered intelligent enough, or ready, to learn that which the

expert, or the master, knows. Rancière makes the distinction between emancipation and instruction. Instruction, he recognises, had its place. What Rancière is more concerned with is the effects of the 'explicative order' (Rancière, 1991, pp.4-8) and in particular the power relations involved and the divisions established between those who know and those who do not. The people who know, the teachers, are those who control what the learners will know and when they will be allowed access to that knowledge. It is the teachers who decide what will be learned, in what order and it is they who will 'verify that he [the learner] has understood' (Rancière, 1991, p.8). The concept of 'understanding' in this order is problematic according to Rancière who argues that 'this word alone throws a veil over everything' (Rancière, 1991, p.6). Understanding, he writes, 'is what the child cannot do without the explanations of a master' (Rancière, 1991, p.6). The explicative order supposes a temporal order.

> The veil is lifted progressively, according to the ability attributed to the infantile mind, or to the one who knows nothing at this or that stage. (Rancière, 2010, p.4)

What Rancière was more concerned with was emancipation, by which he meant 'that every common person might conceive his human dignity, take the measure of his intellectual capacity, and decide how to use it' (Rancière, 1991, p.17). In Anne's account above, we see this in action. The activists have recognised their capacity and used it to gain the knowledge they required. They do not make reference to their level of education but rather acknowledge that they have been able to learn and thus act with the knowledge that they have acquired. The architect's explanation did not stultify because the architect considered the activists to be capable of understanding the scientific information. He demonstrated this by persevering in his explanation, rather than withholding it, until the activists decided themselves that they understood. The architect was not an ignorant master in the sense that he was teaching that which he did not know. Rather, he was ignorant of inequality of intelligence in the interaction and worked with the activists whose will and attention put their intelligence to work in learning what they needed. Rancière accepts that we cannot prove that all intelligences are equal. This, however, is not what he considers the problem to be. What we should be more concerned with is 'seeing what can be done under that supposition' (Rancière, 1991, p.46), because, just as we cannot prove that intelligences are equal, neither can we prove that they are not. What makes a difference in the manifestation of intelligence is a person's will and the attention they bring to their learning. Rather than seeing people as more or less intelligent, it is more useful to see a person as 'a will served by an intelligence' (Rancière, 1991, pp.51-2). Anne and her fellow activists wanted to understand and it was this desire to know that put their intelligence to work, focusing their attention to learn the specialist knowledge and language that they required in order to

speak for themselves. Similar to South African activists, Figlan et al. (2009, p.61), they did 'not allow academics and professionals to be on top, but rather to be on tap.'

Expert knowledge was accessed and made use of by many of the activists, through support from specialists who were either funded to do that role or who were also personally committed to the cause. It was also accessed through books or online, with Ella, for example, learning from the submissions to the Justice Committee from expert groups such as the Law Society of Scotland and BEMIS.

> *so that was like great to read that even like with different statistics and things that you learn from their submission that you could then use in like kind of argue- not arguments but debates on Twitter, like it was a real… that was a real learning curve for me* (Ella)

In each case, however, the specialist knowledge became their knowledge, not as experts but as lay people, people who were able to access and assess the knowledge produced by experts and powerful groups, in light of their own experiences and the experiences of those in their communities. From this, they were able to speak on their own behalf. As Ella described,

> *I wasn't an expert in it at all, I had to learn more about it to kind of know what I was talking about and then I had to learn about people's experiences* (Ella)

As Rancière (1991) describes it, they learned by finding something new to relate to the what they already knew. Expert knowledge was learned informally, not to be accredited and rewarded with a qualification but to effect change in their community.

It was common for the activists and their communities to be supported by experts, or to have access to expertise within their group. Rabeharisoa et al. (2014, p.111) propose the notion of 'evidence-based activism' to look at 'the ongoing co-production of matters of fact and matters of concern in contemporary technological democracies'. Using this concept they show how people

> engage with, and articulate a variety of credentialed knowledge and experiential knowledge with a view to explore concerned people's situations, to make themselves part and parcel of the networks of expertise on their conditions in their national contexts, and to elaborate evidence on the issues they deem important to address both at an individual and at a collective level (Rabeharisoa et al., 2014, p.111).

This is a useful and relevant way to look at the ways in which activists draw on both expert and lay knowledge, making it their own, before sharing it with their wider community, using it to change the minds of people in communities in order to generate support and to change the minds of those in power. It is a complex process of bringing knowledge to bear

on the issue and allows us to understand the ways in which, as Anne discovered, knowledge is power.

> *folk did take their time to work with us in order for us to be able to articulate that and say it em so I think for me that was the first time I thought you know, knowledge is power, language is power* (Anne)

What made their knowledge particularly powerful, is that the expert knowledge was integrated with the lay knowledge, in the bodies and minds of the activists. I discuss lay knowledge in the following section.

Lay knowledge

Lay knowledge is often seen as being opposite to expert knowledge (Britten & Maguire, 2016). From such an understanding, the concept of lay expertise, which the activists could be said to have developed, would be dismissed as an oxymoron (Collins & Evans, 2002). But, as Kangas (2002, p.302) argued, 'juxtaposing "lay" against "expert" can blur the analysis of their complex relationship'. I recognise that I separate lay from expert to discuss them here, but I do so to consider how knowledge is used and developed. None of the activists would have been considered experts in the issues they were tackling in the common sense understanding of that word. They were working in fields that were not areas of their expertise and they recognise this, highlighting it in the interviews.

> *We didn't have a clue where to start* (Graham)

> *I wouldn't have the first clue about you know how would- how would you get involved in that* (Karen)

> *I had never had experience… like, I didn't really know what's the Justice Committee or, like, why are they asking for these submissions and what happens with these submissions. All of that was something I had never ever experienced before or thought about so it was all really really new at that point* (Ella)

Lay, derived from the Greek word 'laikos' meaning 'of or from the people', refers to the 'ordinary and everyday rather than the ritual or sacred' (Britten & Maguire, 2016, p.87). A dictionary definition of lay highlights its most common use in the fields of law and medicine, with lay people being described as those 'not professionally qualified, esp. in law or medicine' (Thompson, 1995, p.771). The distinction between 'lay' and 'expert' is perhaps focused on more regularly in publications in the fields of law and medicine since the consequences of legal and medical actions are directly experienced by specific individuals and their families. The concepts are also very useful for examining the knowledge which is developed by other community activists in order to be heard and to bring about change. In looking at the actions of lay people and experts, along with the

ways in which they are usually expected to know and the topics they know about, we can start to see just how powerful evidence-based activism can be and how, rather than distinguishing between expert and lay, or specialist and local, the bringing together of different kinds of knowledge is often necessary. Related to the way in which informal learning is seen as the 'poor cousin' of formal learning, as discussed above, expert knowledge tends to be accorded higher status than lay knowledge. The stories of the community activists in this research, however, demonstrate, what Kangas (2002) identified as the complex relationship of expert and lay and the work done by the activists to synthesise information from a wide range of sources in their work. It also allows us to start to relate the stories of the activists to the policy context, where greater participation in local decision making seems to ignore the need for learning, when learning may be crucial for good decision making.

It also becomes clear when looking at the knowledge accessed, developed and shared by community activists, that learning is – or at least, should be – multi-directional. The community activists had knowledge of their everyday lives. They knew, for example, what it was like to be diabetic and to be treated differently from diabetics in different areas of the country. They knew what it was like to live on a rural island or in damp housing. They knew what it was like to be a mother, meeting up with other mothers and children in the local playparks after school and what it meant for these to be taken away. They knew what it was like to be a football fan. They knew what it was like to have friends and family arrested. They knew what it was like to be a woman. They knew what it was like to be ignored and dismissed. Where it is often more common to understand learning in hierarchical terms, with people learning from those with a higher level of formal education, there is a lot of important knowledge in local communities which offers important learning opportunities to those in more powerful and influential positions who are genuinely interested in fairness and tackling inequalities. Understanding the ways in which knowledge was gained and used in the activists' stories of learning suggests that how and what we can learn, and how and what we can communicate effectively to others, blurs the dividing line between those who are considered to know and those who are not.

Integration of lay and expert knowledge

Local knowledge and lived experiences, while important for others to understand and to recognise, may not be easily transferred or accurately communicated. Experiential learning and knowledge can only be acquired through experience, whereas expert and specialist

knowledge can be more easily accessed and used by all those who have use of it. Understood thus, the processes of consultation and the will to hear from those with lived experience may not be sufficient to ensure good decisions and social justice. Instead of experts or specialists making the decisions on behalf of local communities, discussions and decisions might be better taken with and by local communities because they are in a better position to know and to have a broader understanding through incorporating local and specialist knowledge. This argument is not to be understood as advocating a suspicion of experts. As Anne, and others recognised, expert knowledge and advice was essential to their work.

> *if we hadnae the TSA [Technical Services Agency], we would have still been trying to fight the good fight* (Anne)

It is rather to encourage a reconsideration of who is an expert and who does the thinking. It is not a disregard of science or specialisms but a recognition of how they are put to work for, with and by people and communities.

Rancière's work and ideas build on his early research into the archives of labour movements of the eighteenth century and the insights he gained through that work. Rancière identified and argued that rather than the works and the voices of workers being an interesting topic of study, they should be considered 'as valid and as interesting as those of the socially recognized thinkers, writers and artists' (Deranty, 2014, p.6). So, rather than 'history from below', the concept of 'thought from below' was more appropriate. The difference can be understood from McGarvey's perspective.

> Instead of me testifying my experience, for it to be dissected by academics and professionals before being fed into a bank of exclusive knowledge, how about I take a wee shot of being the expert? I mean, I know I'm not an expert and I know you know I'm not an expert but, well, this is my book. There's no way someone like me would have been given the opportunity to write a book like this had I not draped it, at least partially, in the veil of a misery memoir. (McGarvey, 2017, p.107)

Similarly, Pittaway et al. (2010) highlight the problems of seeing people as objects of research, as sources of information, rather than more actively as thinkers, knowers and speakers on their own behalf. Research that intends to advocate for people's human rights may, inadvertently, further infringe on them by positioning them as objects, as sources of stories, rather than as active and thinking participants. As they heard from a Women's group in Thailand,

> 'We never heard from them again – we decided then that we would never work with researchers again. They stole our stories. We can gather the stories ourselves from our own people – you can help' (quoted in Pittaway et al., 2010, p.236)

The community activists in this research gathered the stories from their own communities themselves. They built on their own experiential knowledge through talking with people in the wider community, to neighbours, friends, other parents, patients or football fans. In this way they gained a better understanding of other people's experiences while at the same time informing people of what was going on. Knowledge was being both shared and generated at the same time.

Knowledge of support

Anne and her fellow activists talked to the local school about attendance and they also surveyed everybody in their area.

> it's quite a small area [...] a population of just over three and a half thousand people, em, and we done a door to door survey. We chapped every door and says "do you have dampness?" "what's the impact?" and it was seventy six percent of the folk in the community that they would describe as being damp, so we knew that we had the support of the local community behind us (Anne).

The knowledge generated, as we see in Anne's comment, is not just knowledge of who experienced dampness in their houses, but also knowledge of community support. This is evident in the experiences of other activists. Ella, for example, put a post on Twitter, asking women to share their experiences with a woman's organisation who she felt was not representing her and her community's views. Forty women responded, not only producing a much wider understanding of people's views and of the issue, but also generating support and developing a stronger voice. Petitions were also used as a way to spread the word about the issue and to get a sense of the support from the community. Local support was also generated and communicated through well attended public meetings.

> em there was- there was em two hundred and fifty people [almost half of the population of the island] at the public meeting that we set up to discuss it and em and you know there was unanimity from local people that we had a desperate need for some residential care in particular here (Graham)

Local support for the issue was important and not having sufficient community support was seen as being the reason for not succeeding in achieving goals. Karen, for instance, although she had been successful in reversing the decision for a park close to her children's school, she did not find it as easy to do so for the park nearer to her home. As she reflects,

> It's a scheme, all the kids know each other, they're all out playing and stuff like that whereas I stay near the town. It's more… a bi-… it's mor… we've got more… There's not the same sense of community even though you're just five minutes up the road so when I tried to campaign for my bit of the park which was just down at my bit. I couldn't get involvement. I couldn't get engagement. I couldn't get the same support em… so that was quite frustrating (Karen)

Fostering support, and communicating that support, were seen as significant to all the community activists and something that went on throughout their campaigns. As discussed in the previous chapter, this was something that either drew on existing skills or something that people learned through their activism – through what worked well and also through what did not work as well.

The role of knowledge in grassroots community activism

Knowledge, then, played a very significant role in the community activism discussed by the interview participants. As discussed above, knowledge was power. It allowed people to speak on their own behalf and feel confident in making claims about their situations and to be taken seriously. As Brian explained,

> *it can make such a difference, you know, they don't dismiss you as just cranks because you can back up what you're saying with research documents and things, you know, they're almost forced to listen* (Brian)

Knowledge uncovered by the activists allow them to challenge what they were being told by those in positions of greater power. For example, Ella

> *found a survey but it was actually on sectarianism and it was done in two thousand and twelve so it was actually completed before the […] Act came into place and from that a lot of the same wording and a lot of what was in their submission for the […] Act was actually found in that, so they had lied, so they had used evidence from two thousand and twelve* (Ella)

Similarly, John talked about being able to get information that challenged what he was being told by the local health board.

As discussed by Johnson, knowledge was practical in terms of 'learning how to change your life' (1993, p.23). By bringing together lay and expert knowledge, activists developed really useful knowledge to bring about change. Johnson cites an 1834 edition of *The Pioneer*. In response to a call to get help from 'men of talent', the editorial declared,

> No proud conceited scholar knows the way – the rugged path that we are forced to travel […] but we will make them bend to suit our circumstances. (Johnson, 1993, pp.23-24)

This quote reflects what is happening in this study's data and how the activists avoid 'two important traps … being intimidated by academic pretensions, and collapsing into a self-satisfied lauding of common sense' (Johnson, 1993, p.24). From the accounts of the activists, there is a clear role for both specialist and local knowledge in bringing about change.

Chapter summary

While informal learning played much more of a role in grassroots community activism than formal learning, specialist knowledge was still very important to the activists. Specialist knowledge was already available and accessible but it was important for activists to incorporate it as their own to be in a position to speak on their own behalf and to question and challenge what they had been told. This expert knowledge when used alongside their own lay knowledge of their lived experiences and backed up by knowledge of support of their communities and beyond proved to be very powerful in their activism. The activists did not need to become experts in a whole field to be able to make use of knowledge that was pertinent to their cause. The experience of having experts on tap, rather than on top, worked well for the activists. People more knowledgeable in a particular area supported in different ways but it was important that the activists connect that expert knowledge to their own situations, taking into account their own lay knowledge, and the knowledge of the community and to continue to be part of the conversation. This, along with the findings around formal and informal learning, has important implications for policy and practice as I discuss below in the concluding chapter.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

This research highlights implications for policy and practice which entail perceptual shifts around learning, education and people. The complexity of learning and the ways in which people and their learning are currently constructed through our discursive practices point to the need to *see* differently before we start to *do* differently. As I discuss in this chapter, if we are to be more effective in bringing about a fairer society through education, we need first to be able to better understand the problem we are trying to solve. Both the problem and the solution are, I suggest, about perception. Policy reforms are unlikely to have the desired impact if they do not also work towards a perceptual shift. I begin in the following section by considering the impact of social class on learning and education. I then highlight the complexity of learning. I argue that our current understanding of the problem of education as an attainment gap may inhibit meaningful solutions. I propose new ways to conceive of the problem not as an attainment gap but as a dividing line and an (in)visibility. From this, I consider how we might start to address inequalities of power and influence. Recognising limitations, I argue that the rich data, the theoretical framework and the focus on action allows us to look at learning in fresh ways and to start to identify approaches and actions for policy and practice.

Social class and learning

Embarking on this research, my understanding was that people's value derived from their formal and higher education qualifications. What people learned informally went unacknowledged. I realise from this research that this does not accurately capture what is happening. This study suggests that people's value is not directly linked to their formal education qualifications. Rather people tend to be judged on whether they are the type of person – or, more accurately, the social class of person – who is assumed to have university qualifications, to be interested in formal education and consequently be considered to know and to think. There appears to be a complicated relationship between class and education – a relationship that is important to understand if we are to be able to contribute to people's improved life chances. This study highlights the need to better understand the problem we are trying to solve – not only what the problem is but also why it is considered to be a problem. Foucault (1983) focuses on 'problematization'. He was interested in why things became a problem and how problematic behaviours, phenomena and processes were linked with relations of power. In considering the power relations around the problem of working class education, we can ask who benefits from the problem of low education and poverty taken for granted as a consequence of a gap in attainment

between classes. Education is considered to be a route out of poverty but it is not clear how this is expected to apply to a whole population. A route out of poverty for all would entail higher wages for those jobs currently paid minimum wage and/or on zero hours contracts. It is unlikely that these jobs would cease to be required if everyone had better qualifications. Nevertheless, the problem so conceived requires a solution and the search for one has been the focus of much policy reform. In seeking a solution, the working class and the poor are studied and researched as a group of people who do not do well in education. The research into working class education, of which there is a significant body of work, contributes to the constitution of the problem as it seeks to tackle it. Foucault's (1980) hybrid concept of power/knowledge is at work here. Power works through our knowledge of working class education establishing itself as a truth, a necessity, something we do not question but only try to understand and solve. As we have seen from the literature and policy, the dominant understanding is that working class people have low aspirations and do not value education. Their home lives do not provide the skills required to succeed at education or in life. In turn, this understanding feeds into the ways people from a working class background are viewed. They are not considered likely to succeed at academic education and, consequently, low expectations make success less likely. They are positioned as not as good as, not as clever, not as interested and not as able as the more educated, wealthier, middle class citizens. It is their lack of success in formal education which explains their lower income and in turn their lower income which predicts their lack of success in education.

More advantaged citizens are tasked with solving the problem by studying the poor, the disadvantaged and the working class. It is more likely that people 'study down' asking, for example, why people are poor, rather than 'study up' (Nader, 1972) to ask why people avoid taxes or accumulate more wealth than they require. In this way, as Foucault (1979) highlights, those who are studied become more visible. They are known by the ways in which they do not measure up to a normative standard. They are required to change – to educate themselves – or be prepared to accept the consequences of poverty and marginalisation. There is evidence in the data from this study that people who identify as coming from a working class or poor background are aware of their visibility, of their difference, or of a deficit. They recognise hierarchy and exclusion, even as they begin to question such hierarchies. Participants expressed assumptions about people's abilities based on class and describe instances when assumptions have been made about their own level of education or job. A person's level of formal education does not seem to matter as much as being the type of person who is usually assumed to be formally educated. The

exploration of the literature and policies around widening participation in education prompted by the data provides further evidence that it is not a simple matter of formal learning being valued over informal learning, but rather the class environment in which the learning takes place. It may not be the case that people are valued less because of their level of education but that they are valued less because of the learning and education that they are assumed to have done. Informal learning may be considered to have value if it is done at the dinner table of a middle class home, but not in the kitchen of a tenement flat or in a grand parents' second hand shop. It seems to be more about the power to name learning as learning, and people as knowledgeable, rather than any inherent usefulness or value of learning, knowledge or people.

There is at once, then, a visibility and an invisibility in working class education and learning. People are visible in terms of perceived deficits. Foucault's (1979, p.184) concept of 'the examination [which] combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgement' is at play here establishing a visibility over individuals so that they can be differentiated and judged. They are differentiated, judged and hierarchized according to who they are considered to be, rather than what they do, into 'the "good" and the "bad" subjects' (Foucault, 1979, p.181). At the same time, people are invisible in terms of their experiences, knowledge and thoughts. They are not perceptible as people who make sense and as people worth listening to. This understanding is encompassed in Rancière's concept of the distribution of the sensible which determines who can be seen as being 'fully speaking and thinking beings' and who cannot (Rancière, 2003, p.219). People are thus visible in terms of their deficits and in terms of a problem as it has been constructed but they are invisible in terms of what they think and have to say, what they think and what they have learned.

Dominant discourses and attitudes around working class learning and education mean that people from working class backgrounds are more likely to be disadvantaged in education. While the learning environment may work as a positioning machine from a Rancièrian perspective, it serves predominantly to confirm and justify unequal positions in society, separating those who will be the knowers and the thinkers from those who will do manual work, the former being able to earn more money and 'to have a better life' (Scottish Government, 2016a, p.31). Formal education is so closely associated with class that to succeed in education entails, for many, a feeling of changing who they are and where they belong. So strong is the understanding that working class people are not interested in education that to be educated is often to be no longer considered working class, and vice

versa. Such social mobility can be recognised as a success but can also cause feelings of alienation for those who 'succeed' to 'move out' of their class position and resentment and inadequacy for those 'left behind'. It creates inequality. There are always those who are considered better than others and more deserving of a better life, regardless of how hard they work. Education thus does not tackle inequalities at a societal level, only at an individual level. Some may succeed in moving 'up' but to move up means that there will always be people 'below' them. There will always be inequality.

> The more intelligent he becomes, the more he can peer down from on high at those he has surpassed, those who remain in the antechamber of learning, in front of the mute book, those who repeat, because they are not intelligent enough to understand. This is the genius of the explicators: they attach the creature they have rendered inferior with the strongest chains in the land of stultification—the child's consciousness of his own superiority. (Rancière, 1991, p.21)

There is ample evidence in the data and in the literature of the value of education but the pedagogical logic around which our education systems are currently organised does not benefit large groups of people. It may in fact disadvantage them. This is evident from the ways in which the problem is constituted and tackled through policy and talked about by the research participants. To be better able to promote equality through education we need to conceive of the problem differently and to shift our perception of education. In the following section, I discuss how we might approach such a shift in perception by considering the metaphors through which we understand our world.

Problematic metaphors

While metaphor is often seen as a characteristic of language, something we learn about in relation to literature and poetry, it actually plays a significant and, indeed, essential role in how we understand our world. Metaphor is 'pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action' (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.3). The ways in which we think and act in ordinary, everyday situations are governed by metaphorical concepts which 'structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people' (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.3). Metaphors involve us using aspects of one domain to understand aspects of another. For instance, to understand and talk about life, speakers of English draw heavily on the conceptual domain of a journey (Kövecses, 2010). We can go far in life or be stuck in a rut. We can bring people along with us or leave them behind. We can coast or we can make great strides. Metaphor aids us in making sense of the world by drawing on a concrete concept to make sense of an abstract concept (Kövecses, 2010). Within the conceptual metaphor of LIFE IS A JOURNEY, learning and education are

perceived as important in the progress we make on our journeys, in the paths that we take and the directions we go in. We see evidence of this in the data. Brian, for instance, talked about taking a wrong turn by doing a degree and consequently going down a path he did not want to go down.

The metaphor of a journey allows us to conceptualise learning and education in terms of direction, motion, speed, paths and destinations. We can move on to the next level and on to positive destinations. We can measure distance travelled (Thomas, 2017) and identify people who are behind their peers. It opens up the possibility to be socially mobile. The metaphor of a journey also allows us to conceive of the distance – a gap – between the more educated and the less educated – a growing attainment gap which is seen as being caused by inequality, and is also used to explain and justify inequality. It is, as Rancière argues, an inequality created through education and which education is tasked with tackling since the 'usual aim of pedagogical logic is to teach the student that which he or she doesn't know, to close the gap between the ignorant one and knowledge' (Rancière, 2010, p.3). We are caught in a cycle. In working to tackle inequality, education confirms it. Education shows how people are not equal so that a 'reduction in distance never ceases to reinstate, and to verify, the axiom of inequality' (Rancière, 2010, p.4). Through the current pedagogical logic we establish an inequality in the process of tackling it.

Using Foucault and Rancière to think through this research allows us to take a step back, to recognise that it is possible to understand the problem differently, and to consider other approaches. Rancière's work suggests an alternative perspective and encourages new ways to perceive our world. Indeed, Rancière considers the problem to be one of perception. It is aesthetic. It is about who could be seen and heard. This is very relevant to this research and the findings that have emerged from the data. Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p.240), in line with Foucault and Rancière, point out that 'the way we have been brought up to perceive our world is not the only way and that it is possible to see beyond the "truths" of our culture'. But, in order to see beyond metaphors, we need to use other ones. We rely on metaphor to understand experience. If we are to see beyond one metaphor and to move away from the idea of people being behind or lower than others, from people being in their place, from negative destinations and from gaps, then we need another way to conceive of our experience. Rancière offers the concepts of the distribution of the sensible and the dividing line. Foucault, too, conceived of 'dividing practices', the 'objectivizing of the subject' whereby a person 'is divided from others' (Foucault, 2003, p.126). As discussed above, visibility is a concept that is relevant to both Foucault's and Rancière's work. It

encompasses both the visibility of – the focus on – those people considered to be other in some way and the invisibility of those same people when they want to speak and act on their own behalf. If, thus, we perceive the problem not as an educational gap to be fixed with more or better education of those considered to be behind, but rather as division and (in)visibility, we can consider new ways to address it.

China Miéville's (2009) dystopian novel *The City and the City* is set in two cities that are politically autonomous but are interwoven with each other in the same location. Some streets are in one city, Beszel, others in the second city of Ul Qoma. Some streets are divided between the two cities with one side of the street in Beszel and the other in Ul Qoma. The cities are kept separate through the education and training of the citizens of each city to 'unsee' everything and everyone in the other city. To intentionally or even mistakenly to perceive anything or anyone of the other city is considered a breach, a very serious crime that is severely punished. Going from one city to the other through the border checkpoint requires citizens to learn to see what they have spent years learning to unsee, and to unsee what is familiar to them. It is, as Lewis (2013, p.50) describes, 'not so much a physical journey as a *perceptual shift*' (original emphasis). It is not about distance travelled or moving forward; it is about seeing and being seen differently. This example from fiction provides an illustration of the current situation. We have learned to see the value of qualifications and to unsee informal learning. This is clear in the data and the literature. In the context of decision making, we have learned to see some people as knowers and to unsee others in the same way. In changing society's perceptions, much work and learning will be required to bring into view what has long been unseen – the thinking, learning and knowing that all people have done and are capable of doing, regardless of class or formal qualifications. This study contributes to that work. Hearing from the participants about their learning for and through community activism, we can appreciate how learning was action and knowledge was power in the work to bring about or to resist change in their communities. And, while what was said during the interviews can only really touch on a small part of the learning that activists did, the complexity of that learning and the patterns that emerge are striking. I discuss this further in the following sections, urging that to recognise complexity we need to become comfortable with it rather than to seek to control it because, as Jarvis et al. (2003, p.63) have argued, learning is unpredictable and 'when we start to learn something, we never know exactly where the process will take us'.

Powerful and complex learning and knowledge

The experiences of not being taken seriously and of their views and ideas being dismissed or ignored were common to all activists in the interviews. Learning to be seen and heard was an action recognised as important by everyone. Their activism, while working towards different goals, involved learning how to be heard and in order to be heard. This learning, through which they claimed 'the status of fully speaking and thinking beings' (Rancière, 2003, p.219), was emancipatory in nature. Those who had no part and, as Graham highlighted, were far removed from the corridors of power both geographically and hierarchically, demanded to have a part in the discussions and the decision making processes. Regardless of their level of education prior to their involvement, they all accessed and learned specialist and technical knowledge, along with the local knowledge of their communities. The knowledge they drew on and gained as part of their activism was powerful. They could speak on their own behalf, could resist negative portrayals of them and their communities, and could garner support from local, political and academic individuals and groups. They did not have a clear idea of what they should do or how they should do it. They proceeded by trial and error, taking opportunities as they arose, and making connections to people, ideas and past learning. The complexity of the learning identified as useful is evident in the accounts of the activists. Relevant learning is recognised as occurring at different times of their lives and in a variety of circumstances. This brings into question the tendency of educational discourses to always move to a place of control and measurement, even when dealing with informal and experiential learning (Fenwick, 2006). Reflective practice, for instance, allows us to feel that we are taking control of what we learn outside of formal education, identifying the knowledge gained from particular experiences. But, as Fenwick (2006) points out,

> What is imagined to be 'experience' is rooted in social discourses that determine which experiences become visible, how they are interpreted and what knowledge they yield. (p.43)

Some experiences, then, tend to be judged as more educational or valuable than others. This constrains our understanding of learning and knowledge and leads to the situation discussed above when some experiences are deemed more worthy than others depending on the socioeconomic or cultural context in which they occur. As Fenwick (2006) argues,

> Bodies of people, psyches, knowledges and cultures are excluded through normative approaches to experiential learning that determine which sorts of experiences are educative, developmental, knowledge-producing and worth enhancing. (p.45)

Processes such as Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) encourage an understanding of informal learning in terms of formal learning. Such programmes can only recognise learning for which evidence can be produced. While it is useful to be able to acknowledge experience in the context of higher education, these processes continue to position formal learning as the more legitimate form of learning. We have to be able to show our learning to value it. From this study, we see that we may not always be aware of valuable learning when it occurs. Sometimes the learning from childhood may only prove really useful in a very particular set of circumstances much later in life. Experiences cannot all be rationalised, recognised and commodified in terms of institutional requirements. They are frequently emotional. Some experiences may only be of use in the context of future experiences and later learning. We cannot control the ways in which learning will arise or come into play through the interaction of many different aspects of our lives and our environment. It is similarly difficult to see learning and knowledge outside of dominant discourses whether these be in the context of formal education or the more informal adult education. Importantly, this does not mean that some people have not learned or do not have knowledge. Rather, our desire to accredit and recognise only some knowledge or to place a higher value on some over others, fails to recognise, and make space for, a wider range of voices, experiences and knowledge.

It is clear from the data that an extensive variety of learning arises from interactions between different elements of people's contexts – passively and actively, reflectively and unreflectively. While the design of the study may facilitate the identification of relevant or useful learning for community activism, it can only ever be a sample of that learning. Nevertheless, the variety in this sample highlights the unpredictability and the complexity of learning and points to the difficulty of being able to accredit or recognise informal learning, including the learning that occurs in and around formal learning, in any meaningful way. Awarding qualifications and degrees in recognition of the acquisition of a particular set of skills, knowledge and understanding for particular roles, trades and professions makes sense. However, it does not necessarily follow that greater recognition of informal learning, through identifying what counts as valuable, is a good use of our time and energy. This entails problems about how we might ensure we see all learning, and, even if that were ever possible, who would decide what is useful and valuable, in which contexts and for what purposes. From the data in this study, we see that we do not know what might be useful in the future or what we will need to learn to achieve particular goals and take certain actions. The value in recognising informal learning lies in enabling people to see their abilities and their capacity for learning so that they might be open to building

on that learning. The stultification which arises from the belief that more valuable learning occurs in formal contexts means that people come to believe that they cannot learn outside of educational institutions, or that what they know does not count (Rancière, 1991). A person's position in society is judged by their level of education, or by the level they are assumed to have reached. People defer to those seen to be at higher levels, but do not recognise those who are considered lower than them as having something worthwhile to contribute. While education is seen as a way to tackle inequality, inequality is part of the system. As Rancière points out, when we set equality as a goal, we postpone it. We accept the current inequality in the belief that it can be tackled eventually through learning and education. We continue to position some people as not as able, as not as ready, as not as educated or as not as aware as others. But just as we cannot prove that one person is more intelligent than another, neither can we know what an individual has learned in their lives. However, if equality is the starting point – the presupposition – as Rancière (1991) suggests it should be, then this changes our perspective.

Acting on the implications

As I discussed in chapter 5, Lincoln and Guba (2000) suggest that we use standards of authenticity and trustworthiness to assess research as good. They urge researchers to ensure that the findings of a qualitative research project are sufficiently authentic to be able to trust themselves in acting on their implications. This research is grounded in data generated through conversations with people who have direct experience of the topic. I had initially expected to interview more people for this research but it proved to be more difficult than anticipated to recruit people. This, on reflection, is understandable and I am very grateful to the nine who were willing to give up their time and to generously provide such rich data. Nevertheless, as I interviewed, transcribed and started analysis, it became clear that similar themes were being touched on by all participants and it did not seem necessary to continue to recruit. The patterns that emerged from the complexity of people's experiences and what they said about them provide sufficient reason to be able to trust myself in acting on them.

It is also important to acknowledge the possibility that, in focusing on community activists as participants in a study of formal and informal learning, the research may only have something to say about a very particular type of person. However, from the data, it seems clear that, while the actions and the perseverance of the activists were inspiring, they were people who were going about their lives not looking to take on a cause. A particular set of

circumstances meant that they were moved to take action. What was possible for them could be possible for many others. It is this possibility that is ever present, this presupposition of capacity, that is an important message of this research. I discuss what this could mean for policy and practice below.

Perceptual shift

The challenge for policy and practice is to identify ways of working that do not continue to position people as not yet ready or not willing to participate but that presuppose equality and the wealth of knowledge and experience that people already have. It is important to recognise people's capacity and willingness to act and to continue to learn. To be able to do this effectively, a perceptual shift is required. We need to learn to see what we have spent a long time unseeing. To support this perceptual shift, we can work to replace the metaphor of a gap and a distance between people – some being further ahead, or further up, than others – with the metaphor of a dividing line between those who can be seen and heard as making sense and those who cannot. We can do this through our actions and the language we use. This encourages us to understand the problem differently and, consequently, to take different steps to address it. Ever increasing educational reforms without a perceptual shift are, I would argue, unlikely to succeed. Similarly, legislative and democratic reforms designed to make space for more people to participate and for more diverse representation will struggle to be effective without a perceptual shift and new ways of working with others.

There are encouraging developments in Scotland at a national level with the Community Empowerment (2015) Act and the work to improve public services, most recently with the Local Governance Review which aims to ensure that the diverse communities in Scotland will have more influence and control over decisions which affect them (Scottish Government, 2019a). There is also to be a Citizens' Assembly of Scotland (Scottish Government, 2019b). At a more local level, however, more work needs to be done to make connections between diverse communities and between communities and public bodies and to move away from tokenistic inclusion of community members. Despite the encouraging and welcome narrative in Scotland about people having more influence and control, it is important to be alert to the taming of democracy (Simons & Masschelein, 2011) whereby processes and policies are put in place to be seen to be ceding power to individuals and communities but that serve only to control who gets to say what. These spaces were discussed by activists who recognised that they were ways to control people's

contributions, not places where they felt that they and their communities could be accurately represented. So, while we can seek to influence the ways in which public sector organisations make space for more people to be involved, it is also important to recognise the role of learning and education in supporting change.

Humans, Learning, Systems

Foley argues that we should recognise learning as 'infinitely complex social processes' (Foley, 1999, p.13). The data from this study reflects such complexity. According to Lowe and Plimmer,

> The world is complex. If we want to contribute to creating positive social outcomes, we must learn to embrace this complexity. (Lowe & Plimmer, 2019, p.5)

The complexity of the social world is reflected in the ways in which people, their lives, needs and strengths are all different, in the ways in which issues are interdependent and tangled and in the ways in which systems involve many different people, organisations and elements. In exploring how people work in complexity, Lowe and Plimmer (2019), building on an earlier report (Davidson Knight et al., 2017), are in the process of developing a Human, Learning, Systems (HLS) approach to work in the public sector. The HLS approach entails a recognition of the 'variety of human need and experience', the strengths of each person and the building of empathetic, effective and trusting relationships between people (Lowe & Plimmer, 2019, p.5). The approach recognises that work with people and around social issues is a 'continuous process of learning' (p.6) which has important implications for the ways in which services are funded and commissioned. Rather than funding services based on particular specifications, funders and commissioners see their resources being used to enable learning and 'they are funding the capacity to learn and adapt to continuously improve outcomes in different contexts' (Lowe & Plimmer, 2019, p.5). The systems aspect of an HLS approach recognises that valuable outcomes are not produced by individual people or organisations but by whole systems, with many different actors having an impact on what happens.

This approach reflects the findings of this research well and, thus, suggests practical ways in which to influence policy and practice in light of this study. Through the accounts of the grassroots community activists, the variety of human experience and strengths is clear, as is the continuous process of learning required for their particular purposes. The systems view is also relevant in that the learning and the work that the activists were able to do was made possible by a complex web of connections and interactions between individuals,

organisations, knowledge, objects and technology. Where the HLS approach may differ slightly, and where I would be inclined to shift the emphasis slightly, is on the learning of all involved, and not just of those providing services. This is possibly already understood in the recognition of the variety of human experience, but it may need to be more explicitly stated. With a focus on learning by all involved in the work to tackle important social issues, an HLS approach puts learning back in the spaces between the policies discussed in chapter two. It recognises that we do not know what we need to do, what we can do, or what will work. Rather, continuous learning is required, recognising people as fellow human beings all with different experiences and needs, with stories to tell and strengths to draw on and develop, and also recognising the systems which we are part of and which any individual or organisation alone cannot control.

The role of educators

While Rancière (1991) points to the stultifying effects of education as it currently tends to be structured, he does not believe that educators are not required. Rancière's main concern with education was that it was founded on the axiom of inequality. The intelligence people had employed to learn before entering formal education was stultified by the understanding that they could not learn without a teacher's explanations. Rancière was also clear that his writing did not present a methodology to use, warning that progressive education could be as stultifying as traditional education if it continued to see other people as being not as able or not as intelligent and if it worked from the axiom of inequality. As is clear in the data, other people, education and access to information and expert knowledge are all recognised as being valuable. People can and do learn really useful knowledge themselves informally. However, they do not do so in isolation but in interaction with the social and physical world of which they are part. Kemmis and Smith (2008, p.5) argue that it is our 'capacity to live with, live by, interpret, extend and sometimes creatively trouble or avoid the rules of organisations' which is one of the things that give us our identities as educators. Conceiving of learning and education differently does not remove the need for educators but changes our role and what we see as valuable work. This could lead to different interpretations of the rules of organisations and government policies in ways that may make a significant difference to people's lives and sense of who they and others are.

This research aimed to further understand the learning of those involved in community action in order to more effectively support people to participate in creating a fairer and more equal society. It found that people draw on what they have learned at various points

in their lives and that they continue to learn in pursuit of their goals. It found that a person's experiences, their strengths, their interests and the people they are surrounded by all affect what a person learns and what is available to be learned. It found that a person's knowledge of lived experience is very particular to them. That knowledge is part of them, complex and difficult to communicate with accuracy or effectiveness to others. In contrast, specialist knowledge or formal content can be more easily delineated, packaged, communicated and used by others. It found that some people are not considered to be part of the system, which thinks and makes decisions about the issues that matter to them, and considerable effort and learning are required to be able to speak for themselves and to be heard on those issues.

This study makes a contribution in three areas: theory, practice and policy. Theoretically, the use of Rancière's work alongside Foucault introduces a new theoretical framework which is of particular use in examining educational and democratic practice and policy. The framework can be used by researchers, community educators and those involved in innovations aimed at widening participation in democratic processes. It draws attention to hierarchisation and categorisation, dividing practices and the distribution of the sensible, and the visibility and invisibility of those targeted by policy and practice. Practically, this study encourages a shift in focus and perception in the work that is prioritised. Rather than focusing on inequality of intelligence and working to abolish that inequality with educational provision, whether formal or non-formal, equality should be presupposed to see what can be done under that presupposition. While the value of both formal and non-formal education is acknowledged, it is important not to treat people as 'not yet' ready to participate, to think or to know. Rather, we can encourage and make space for participation, thinking and sharing of knowledge in order to open up opportunities for a wider range of people to learn from the diversity of experiences and perspectives in and between our communities. Policy wise, this study contributes to the critique of policies that promote social mobility, widening participation and closing of the attainment gap. It challenges the focus on low aspirations and low attainment of working-class people in policy and points to a classist view of people's abilities and learning. The research highlights the necessary complexity of learning and urges a recognition of that complexity in policy so that learning can be recognised, space made for further learning and people seen as knowers, learners, thinkers and speakers – now, rather than as something to be realised in the future. Essentially, this study urges a reconsideration of the problem we are working to solve, whether we are researchers, practitioners or policy makers, in order to

have a better chance of working together to bring about a fairer society and to improve the lives of people and the communities we live in through education and learning.

This research has changed how I see my role and the work I now prioritise. Before, I focused on identifying individuals' learning needs and addressing these through activities designed to target those needs. Now, my focus is on making connections between individuals, groups and organisations so that they might learn from, about and with each other. To effectively support and make space for people to participate in creating a fairer society, more of us need to see each other as fellow human beings with a wealth of experience, a variety of strengths and needs and the capacity to learn and to take action. I have started to work towards this in different ways. I look for ways and opportunities to communicate this perspective. For example, I have developed an activity using Lego with groups to highlight the advantages of recognising what people have to offer instead of focusing on deficiencies and problems. People have reported that this activity is an effective way to see our work differently. In my current role as Engagement Officer with the Local Authority's Equalities Team, I will be carrying out an engagement process using the Place Standard Tool which has been developed collaboratively by NHS Health Scotland, the Scottish Government and Architecture and Design Scotland (NHS Health Scotland, 2017). This tool provides a structure to have conversations about both social and physical aspects of a place, considering what it is like to be a person in that place. It allows priorities to be identified, actions for improvement to be suggested and for more people to be heard and involved in issues that matter to them. I expect it to be challenging to make the necessary connections between individuals, community groups and organisations but, in light of this research, I believe that challenge to be worthwhile.

We need space, time and facilitation for people to learn from and about each other, moving away from seeing each of us as being on a particular point of a hierarchy of learning, above or below others. In tackling social issues with and for people, we need to recognise that we do not know what to do and that we need to use the knowledge available to us – the knowledge in particular of lived experience and the thinking that emerges from such experiences – and to continue learning. Rather than seeing inequality, where some people are considered not yet ready to participate in discussions or to take action to solve complex issues, we should, as Rancière suggests, presuppose equality and see what can be done under that presupposition.

APPENDICES
Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet

University
of Glasgow

College of Social
Sciences

Participant Information Sheet

Title of study: Learning Journeys of Grassroots Community Activists

Researcher: Carol Goodey

Supervisor: Dr Sinéad Gormally

Course: Doctorate of Education, University of Glasgow

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

The purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to find out more about the learning journeys of people involved in grassroots community activism.

What the research will involve

If you decide to take part, I will ask you to tell me about your experience of activism and education. This will take about an hour and a half of your time. I will make a recording of our conversations which I will subsequently transcribe so that I have a written version of what we said which is easier to work with.

Following our conversations, I may contact you by email with one or two questions. Any response should take no more than an hour of your time. I may also ask if you would be willing to meet again to talk more about some aspects of your experience.

You do not have to take part in this research and you should feel comfortable to decide not to, for any reason. Also, if at any stage of the study you feel that you no longer wish to participate, just let me know. I will be happy to stop and I will not use anything you have said in my study.

Confidentiality and storage

I will keep information collected for this study in a locked cabinet or on a password protected computer. When I transcribe our conversation or when I write about I have found, your name will be replaced with a different name and any other details which could help to identify you will be changed or omitted.

Please note that confidentiality will be maintained as far as it possible, unless during our conversation I hear anything which makes me worried that someone might be in danger of harm. I might have to inform relevant agencies of this.

Use of the information

I will use the recordings and written versions of our conversation to get a better understanding of the learning journeys of people involved in community activism. I will then write about what I have learned for my doctoral dissertation. The research may also appear in journals published online or in print, in a book or a conference paper. A copy of my dissertation and any published articles will be available to you on request. A written summary of results could also be provided. The transcript and interview notes will be kept for no longer than 10 years in secure storage for use in future academic research.

Disposal of personal information

Following the successful completion of my doctorate, I will destroy any personal information that I have collected from you for the purposes of this study. Paper documents will be shredded and electronic files will be completely deleted from my computer.

This study has been considered and approved by the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact me, Carol Goodey (c.goodey.1@research.gla.ac.uk) or my supervisor, Dr Sinéad Gormally (sinead.gormally@glasgow.ac.uk).

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this study, you can also contact the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, Dr Muir Houston (Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk)

Appendix 2: Consent Form

University
of Glasgow

College of Social
Sciences

Consent Form

Title of Project: Learning Journeys of Grassroots Community Activists
Name of Researcher: Carol Goodey
Name of Supervisor: Dr Sinéad Gormally

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

I consent to taking part in one-to-one interviews about my experience of activism.

Following the interview, I <u>consent / do not consent</u> (delete as applicable) to receiving an email asking further questions about what I have said.

I <u>consent / do not consent</u> (delete as applicable) to the discussions being audio-recorded.

I acknowledge that all names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.

I understand that the material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.

I understand that personal data will be destroyed once the project is complete as described in the Participant Information Sheet.

I understand that anonymised research data will be retained for no longer than 10 years may be used in future projects or publications, both print and online.

    I agree to take part in this research study   ☐

    I do not agree to take part in this research study   ☐

Name of Participant …………………………………….…… Signature …………………………………………………………

Date ……………………………………

Name of Researcher ……………………………………… Signature …………………………………………………………

Date …………………………………

Appendix 3: Ethics approval

University
of Glasgow

College of Social
Sciences

Monday, 18 December 2017

Dear Carol Goodey

College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Project Title: **Learning Journeys of Grassroots Community Activists**

Application No: **400170044**

The College Research Ethics Committee has reviewed your application and has agreed that there is no objection on ethical grounds to the proposed study. It is happy therefore to approve the project, subject to the following conditions:

- Start date of ethical approval: ___18/12/17_____
- Project end date: 31/12/2019
- Any outstanding permissions needed from third parties in order to recruit research participants or to access facilities or venues for research purposes must be obtained in writing and submitted to the CoSS Research Ethics Administrator before research commences. Permissions you must provide are shown in the *College Ethics Review Feedback* document that has been sent to you.
- The data should be held securely for a period of ten years after the completion of the research project, or for longer if specified by the research funder or sponsor, in accordance with the University's Code of Good Practice in Research:(http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_227599_en.pdf) (Unless there is an agreed exemption to this, noted here).
- The research should be carried out only on the sites, and/or with the groups and using the methods defined in the application.
- Any proposed changes in the protocol should be submitted for reassessment as an amendment to the original application. The *Request for Amendments to an Approved Application* form should be used: http://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/forms/staffandpostgraduateresearchstudents/

Yours sincerely,

Dr Muir Houston
College Ethics Officer

Muir Houston, Senior Lecturer
College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer
Social Justice, Place and Lifelong Education Research
University of Glasgow
School of Education, St Andrew's Building, 11 Eldon Street
Glasgow G3 6NH
0044+141-330-4699 Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk

Appendix 4: Interview Guide

I'm interested in your experience as a community activist and the role of learning and education in your work to bring about change – how learning helped you and what you learned from being involved

Initial Open-ended questions

Can you tell me about the activism you've been involved in?

How did you come to be involved? When was it? Where were you? Who influenced your decision?

What was/is your role?

Who else was involved? What did they do?

Tell me a bit about your group. What are/were you trying to achieve/change?

What has happened as a result?

Intermediate questions

You said that part of your role was to _____. Is that something you had experience of before you became involved?

You mentioned that you _____. Can you tell me a bit more about that?

What did you need to be able to do to _____? How did you know how do to that?

You said that you _____. Where did you get the information you needed?

You talked about _____. Is that the kind of thing you would do before you got involved in community activism?

In what ways has your involvement in activism changed you as a person?

Who else is involved? How do you work together? Who does what?

As you think of the other people you have been in contact with through your activism, who stands out? Someone who encouraged you? Someone you learned from? Someone you helped?

What have learned you learned from your experience?

How do/did you know what to do? Where did you develop the necessary skills? Where did you find out what you needed to know?

Where did you go to school? What was it like? What did you do after school? Have you taken any other courses?

How has what you learned at school helped you in your activist work?

What opportunities have you had because of your involvement?

What was difficult about being involved?

What did you enjoy about being involved?

Can you complete the sentence "If I hadn't got involved in activism, I wouldn't….."

Ending questions

What do you think are the most important things activists need to be able to do? How do people learn/develop them?

After having these experiences, what advice would you give to someone who wanted to be an activist and work to bring about change in their community?

What do you think makes people get involved? What stops them?

What was it like to talk about your experiences today?

Were some of the things we talked about things you hadn't thought about before?

Is there something else you think I should know about the role of learning and knowledge in your work as an activist?

Is there anything you would like to ask me?

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