Practice in the social space of Neighbourhood Houses: Community, relationships and adult learning

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Neighbourhood Houses are significant sites of community-based adult learning spaces that are empowering, supportive and caring. They embody inclusive community development processes and adult learning practices that facilitate formal, informal, and incidental learning. Practices in these sites of social inclusion support relationships and shared learning. This paper uncovers the relational practices in Neighbourhood Houses as people develop knowledge, skills and new ways of knowing through their participation. Many participants in this research lacked confidence as learners and were re-engaging with learning following former negative and/or incomplete education experiences. They came to learn new skills following personal interests, to re-engage with learning for employment, seeking involvement in the community and reconnecting with others following periods of isolation and loneliness.

Drawing on Bourdieu's Theory of Practice we interpret the dispositions, practices and habitus in the Houses that support learner

relationships and learning. We argue it is the Houses' intimate and nurturing relational practices that transform learners' lives, families and their local communities. This qualitative case study research involved adult and life-long learners in Neighbourhood Houses across Victoria. In-depth interviews were conducted with 87 diverse participants and from a mixture of rural, regional and urban Neighbourhood House locations.

Keywords: *Neighbourhood Houses, adult learning, Bourdieu, relationships and learning, adult community education*

Introduction and background to the research

The early aims and practices of Neighbourhood Houses focused on empowering local communities, especially women, and on providing accessible learning opportunities for adults. Focussed in particular, on those who for various reasons, had not been able to complete secondary schooling or continue to post-secondary education (Harrison, 2018). These practices were underpinned by the philosophies and activism of two social movements – the women's liberation movement and the popular education movement.

Popular education is a tradition in the field of adult education that broadly encompasses community development activity, activism and social change. Learning and education in this sense is a necessary part of the effort to achieve significant social change in some way (Walter, 2012). According to Crowther, Martin and Galloway (2005), popular education is a process of acting towards a social order that is more just and egalitarian. Popular education movements were founded on the critical pedagogy tradition of adult learning influenced by Freire (Freire, 1970/2000) and Illich (Illich, 1971), educators who spoke about the capacity to raise consciousness and transform people's lives. Education in this sense rejects rationalism and the banking system of education and eschews non-democratic forms of teaching and learning.

With a focus on empowerment, education, social inclusion, and non-hierarchal forms of organisation and participation these two movements complement one another. The women's movement and second wave

feminists adopted the slogan 'the personal is political' focusing attention on the subordination of women in the private spheres and aspects of women's lives that were constructed on the notion of women's inferiority to men (Cahill, 2007). Both movements deeply respected lived experiences as sites of knowledge. Encouraging learners' input and sharing stories of their lives enabled individuals to collectively become aware of the social and political influences on their lives. Women shared their experiences with other women in a process of consciousness raising and transformation. Importantly, both traditions embrace the idea of learning and change as a relational and collective effort rather than an individual process.

The Neighbourhood House model offered the flexibility and support that women as primary carers of young children and women from diverse backgrounds required in order to fully participate in their communities, to further their aspirations to enter the workforce or continue their education, and to become leaders and engaged citizens (Aytan, 1991; Bennett & Forster, 1985; Golding, Kimberley, Foley, & Brown, 2008; Gravell & Nelson, 1986; Harrison, 2018; Humpage, 2005; Kimberley, 1998; Moloney, 1985; Ollis, Starr, Angwin, Ryan, & Harrison, 2016; Permezel, 2001; West, 1995). As Foley (1993, p.25) wrote:

> *The houses were established for a variety of reasons: women's desire to come together to end their suburban isolation and obtain social and intellectual stimulation, to establish playgroups for young children, to provide education for women, to furnish productive outlets for women's skills.*

Neighbourhood Houses offered women opportunities to engage in education, decision-making and to exercise agency in relation to their goals and aspirations. Women in particular experienced these opportunities as empowering (Duckworth & Smith, 2017; Harrison, 2018; Ledwith, 2011; Moloney, 1985).

Literature review

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Kimberley (1998) considered that all participation in Neighbourhood Houses was a form of learning, and along with Rooney (2011) concludes **that adult learning is a necessary aspect of the community development** approach of Neighbourhood Houses. Furthermore, Rooney (2011, p.205) argues that these sites of adult learning are often overlooked:

> *A failure to acknowledge the learning potential of centres is a considerable oversight given that a community development focus typically means that those people involved are often highly representative of people under-represented in other educational settings.*

Ife (2016) refers to the important place of relationships in community work, **outlining the key role that community workers play in nurturing and supporting the relationships that underpin successful community** development work. Integral to relationship is dialogue. Through **dialogue people learn from and with each other 'in an open and learning way'** as a community (Ife, 2016, p.279). He argues that 'relationships are our reality' (p.86); we are not simply a collection of individuals, we exist in relationship to others. With respect to adult learning in community sites, Crossan and Gallacher's (2009) writing on further education in the United Kingdom identifies the importance of learning relationships as one of the distinctive characteristics of these sites of learning.

A learning relationship is established when people learn from and with each other and when a relationship influences a learner's view of themselves as a learner and their attitude towards learning. They **identify a spectrum of learning relationships including learner to learner relationships, and learners' relationships with key staff who are involved** in various ways in supporting their learning (Crossan and Gallacher, 2009). Importantly, within the learning environment relationships are **built on enhancing knowledge and understanding through sharing and** respecting historic and contemporary stories of lived experience.

Duckworth and Smith's (2017) concept of 'dialogic bonds of care' further **describes the nature of adult learning in community sites where the establishment of affective bonds and awareness of the lived experience** of learners are integral to the practice of teaching. This reaffirms what

many adult educators know that building relationships with learners is vital in establishing a positive foundation for learning. The teachers' role in facilitating a learning environment that encourages dialogue between learners themselves and between learners and teachers is vital.

Adult community education, commonly known as ACE, is widely viewed as the fourth sector of education in Australia (Devlin, 2020).

ACE is described as a:

> ... *community based, owned and managed not for profit sector, committed to providing accessible learning opportunities for adults in local communities that meet their needs and support place-based community development (Bowman, 2016, p.7).*

ACE delivers formal, informal and incidental learning in the social environment of Neighbourhood Houses. It is regarded as an important means of achieving social change and personal and community empowerment (Foley, 1993; Kimberley, 1998; Ollis, Starr, Ryan, Angwin, & Harrison, 2017; Rooney, 2011). Today, Neighbourhood Houses are the largest single provider type in the ACE sector, with approximately 1000 centres across Australia catering for men, women and communities (Australian Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Association, 2011; Devlin, 2020). It is not surprising given their feminist history that women remain the most frequent users of the houses at 70% (Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, 2018). It is fitting to recognise this contribution to adult learning in the 60th year of Adult Learning Australia. In Victoria, there are now over 400 Neighbourhood Houses across all local government areas offering a wide range of learning, recreation, and support activities in response to locally identified interests (Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, 2018). Formal accredited courses in English Language, Literacy, Computer and Business Skills, Children's Services, Hospitality, Aged Care, and Horticulture are offered in Neighbourhood Houses that are registered training organisations. Other pre-accredited adult education is offered in preparation for work or further study. The range of programs offered appeals to a wide range of learners, including second chance and later life learners (Bowman, 2016).

Second chance and later life learners in Neighbourhood Houses

Our study identified two distinct groups of learners within

Neighbourhood Houses – second chance learners and later life learners. **Second chance learners are people returning to study because they** have incomplete education, do not have qualifications suitable for their employment aspirations, or who wish to upgrade their qualifications to support a move outside their current workplace (Robertson, Hoare, & Harwood, 2011). Pedagogical approaches in Neighbourhood Houses, small class sizes, non-hierarchical relationships, social and supportive **learning environments, are ideally suited to support adults who have not completed secondary school and have had chequered histories of** learning (Crossan & Gallacher, 2009; Duckworth & Smith, 2017).

An early phase of this research was undertaken in the Greater Geelong area, responding to concern about the rising levels of unemployment and redundancies following significant industry restructure and shutdowns (Ollis et al., 2016). At the same time, increasingly stringent **eligibility criteria for income support was forcing many adults to try** and remain within the workforce. The industries hardest hit were those **with high proportions of early school leavers, those with no post-school** qualifications, or those whose qualifications were superseded by new technologies. Many of those learners were not ready to enter the TAFE **or higher education system, although a small number were considering a pathway into TAFE following successful completion of courses at a** Neighbourhood House (Ollis et al., 2016).

The significant role of ACE has been recognised for its flexibility, local **responsiveness and inclusive learner-centred approaches that support second chance, hard-to-reach and vulnerable learners to re-engage** with education and learning (Ministerial Council for Vocational and Technical Education, 2008). The provision of accredited VET programs **in many Neighbourhood Houses allows learners to upgrade their** qualifications to improve their opportunities for employment and re-entry to the workforce (Robertson et al., 2011).

The proportion of older people as a percentage of the population in western countries has been increasing in recent decades (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). As the population ages, adjustments are **being made in the labour market, with labour force participation** continuing until later in life (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). In **keeping with changes to economic policy, social policy is also making** adjustments, with the recognition of lifelong learning as more than a

means for enabling the labour force to "continually update and learn new skills" (Dench & Reagan, 2000, p.1). Lifelong learning benefits older people "in terms of their own health and well-being [such that] they lead a more active social life and become involved in their community" (Dench & Reagan, 2000, p.1)

Older learners, or later life learners (Withnall, 2006), are a significant cohort in Neighbourhood Houses (Ollis, Ryan, Starr, & Harrison, 2018a). In the literature, these learners are variously described as older adult learners (Findsen & Formosa, 2011), or later life learners (Dench & Reagan, 2000). Withnall (2006, p.32) prefers describing these learners as 'post work', on the basis that their primary activity is no longer full-time work to earn a living, or to support a family, rather than using age-based definitions. With the increasing ageing of the population, changes to the constitution of the labour market and the age of retirement, there needs to be more flexibility in describing this cohort of learners. We use the term 'later life learners' to encompass the notion that these learners are post-work in Withnall's sense, rather than attempting to describe them via an imposed age-defined entry point.

The older learners in Neighbourhood Houses are heterogeneous, with diverse employment and educational histories, interests, aspirations, and life experiences, and various motivations for learning. Older learners typically re-engage or engage with learning post-long-term employment, or following the cessation of family caring roles (Ollis, Ryan, Starr, & Harrison, 2018b). Participating in learning and social activities for later life learners often becomes a "long-term and an integral part of their daily lives" (Narushima, 2008, p.680). Learning is generally for personal interest and pleasure, and to develop skills which will enhance their current and future life plans. Smaller numbers are learning to increase their options for re-entering the workforce, some after the industries they were working in had made them redundant (Ollis et al., 2016).

For both second chance and later life learners, learning for any purpose is multilayered. Alongside learning skills and knowledge for employment and further study, or personal interest, it offers opportunities for social connection, to contribute to their communities, maintain physical and mental health, and enhances feelings of self-worth and confidence (Ollis et al., 2018b).

Methodology

For this research, a qualitative research design focused on "people, situations, events, and the processes that connect these" was used to provide deep insights into the relational and shared learning practices in Neighbourhood Houses (Maxwell, 2013, p.29). The aim and purpose of this research was to identify the learners, practices, and learning outcomes of adult education in Neighbourhood Houses. Qualitative research allowed the researchers to explore questions around the experiences, practices and importance of adult learning in Neighbourhood Houses. This approach provided insights into the diversity and significance of the learning relationships individual learners developed, relationships that helped them to re-engage with and enjoy learning and to re-frame previous negative views and learner biographies. The interpretive constructivist epistemology of this research allows that "what we know about the world always involves a knower and that which is to be known" (Kincheloe, 2005, p.2). Qualitative research approaches, such as case study research, "make the world visible" by providing insights into how people experience their world (Liamputtong, 2012).

Multiple case studies were chosen to illustrate the experiences of adult learners because they enabled us to show different perspectives and lived experiences of learners in the Neighbourhood Houses (Creswell, 2013). This enabled the research to provide "thick descriptions" (Merriam, 1998) of the learning experiences of individual adult learners in Neighbourhood Houses located across Victoria. This was important because of the diversity of the lived experiences and circumstances and the range of learning opportunities available in Neighbourhood Houses across Victoria. Furthermore, for the research team, it was important for individual learners' stories to be shared in a way that illustrated the nuanced and transformative impact of their learning experiences. We wanted to tell the stories of the participants in ways that held up to view the importance of their experiences with sensitivity and tone representative of the communities that were researched.

Data collection and participant selection

The research was conducted in two phases during 2016 and 2017. Phase one was conducted in partnership with two Neighbourhood

House networks located in the western areas of Victoria, and Phase two was conducted in collaboration with Neighbourhood Houses Victoria. Information about the research was disseminated through the partners, and participants were purposively selected following recommendations from individual Neighbourhood House coordinators and managers (Merriam, 1998). They were sent information about the research and a *Consent to Participate Form* by the research team, and a suitable interview date arranged. The data sample included 87 individual face to face interviews held across Victoria, in the Neighbourhood Houses participants were attending. Confidentiality was assured through the use of pseudonyms. All participants were sent a copy of the transcript of their interview and invited to review these for accuracy and to recommend changes if needed.

The transcripts were analysed using category construction (Merriam, 1998), finding themes and similarities within the data that helped to identify the complexities across the cases. Multiple case study research uses category construction across the sum of cases, to interpret and cross reference emergent themes within the whole range of case studies (Stake, 2006). The software program NVivo was used to manage the substantial volume of raw data, using a detailed set of codes developed from a close study of the interview transcripts. Several readings of the data and coding enabled major themes to be identified using an iterative approach moving between the codes and the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this article we focus on relationships and the relational nature of learning in Neighbourhood Houses, a strong recurring sub-theme in the data. This aspect was integral to the first and third of the key themes identified in the data:

• The welcoming and inclusive nature of the learning environment

• Becoming more independent as learners

• Becoming more interdependent as learners

• Becoming more worldly as learners and citizens

Theoretical framework and conceptual analysis

Bourdieu (1990) notes the importance of ensuring careful, ethical and sensitive approaches are used by academics when researching communities of difference, communities that have oftentimes been

neglected for the sake of generating data. This notion underpinned the methodology and complements the theoretical framework of the research. **Conceptually, our approach to this research is informed by the importance** of how relationships are built in adult learning; those built between the **learners themselves and the relationships between the facilitators and** learners. Knowing how these relationships are shaped and structured in **Neighbourhood Houses and how they provide opportunities for adult** learning is central to this research. We use Bourdieu's (1990) writing **on practice, which is a relational ontology, one which gives primacy to** relationships and is also a theory of action. Bourdieu's theory sought to integrate an understanding of practical knowledge based on "the continuous decoding of the perceived – but not consciously noticed" (Bourdieu, 1977, p.8), by beginning to analyse the ways in which people organised, practised and interacted with each other (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). There are a number of Bourdieu's thinking tools that we use to discuss the findings in this research. Bourdieu's concept of **habitus is integral to understanding informal learning in these spaces** of community learning. Bourdieu believed certain habits, practices and dispositions are developed and reproduced largely through socialization (Bourdieu, 1984). Habitus is a collective process through which generative **dispositions of family, class, social environment and cultural traditions** contribute to a habitus within a social field (Bourdieu, 1977). Field is used to describe the space or field of struggle. A field is a system of social positions, it is "a field of struggle within which agents compete or confront each other" (Bourdieu, 1998, p.32). Field and habitus work together; **habitus is the practices and dispositions of agents that are brought to** the field. Bourdieu uses the term cultural capital to define the resources, **knowledge, skills, abilities, networks and connections that players bring** to the field. Agents are advantaged or disadvantaged based on the cultural capital they have (Bourdieu, 1984).

Theorists such as Jarvis (Jarvis, 2010) have examined how building relationships with learners is important in education. We now know that **relationships are central to much of adult learning and that most people** learn informally and incidentally for most of their lives (Beckett & Hager, 2002). This was demonstrated in the writing of Lave and Wenger (Lave, 1991) on situated learning which outlined how adults learn in the **situated site of practice, in workplaces, in small groups and communities** by sharing knowledge and problem solving with others. We learn by

social interaction with one another and this is not necessarily a cognitive act (Jarvis, 2010). In studies by Duckworth and Smith (2017), drawing on research in further education in the United Kingdom, they argued learners who have not flourished in formal spaces of learning need empowering education with support and bonds of care. Consistent with this notion, our analysis of learning in Neighbourhood Houses is cognisant of the key role played by the "relationships formed between learners and between learners and all staff" in the successful outcomes of learners (Crossan & Gallacher, 2009, p.133).

This is important to note because this research revealed many of the participants in the Houses had negative past experiences of the formal education system which impacted on their ability to identify as capable learners. In the interviews participants frequently expressed that they were not good at school, struggled with the formal education system, and did not enjoy learning. Many were disengaged and frustrated at school, which in turn, had a deleterious impact on their learner biography.

Findings

Our research found Neighbourhood Houses are a significant social space and an enriching shared learning environment for second chance and later life learners. The study provides a nuanced insight into the transformative nature of shared and relational learning pedagogies on people's lives. The findings provided insights into the distinctive habitus of Neighbourhood Houses created by the reciprocal and dialogical dispositions, habits and practices of adult learning. In the social environment of the Neighbourhood House, learners sharing their stories in the classroom was a valued source of knowledge included in learning activities (Harrison, 2018; Kimberley, 1998; Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Furthermore, the findings showed the importance of this habitus for people with diverse motivations and lived experience, for second chance and later life learners alike. Learners were enabled to explore new horizons, gain skills for employment and living, and to develop new relationships within their communities that enhanced their sense of self, connection, and belonging.

Monet, a later life learner following diagnosis of a chronic illness, noted the importance of the group environment, social connections, and friendships she made in a painting class for her skill development and her sense of wellbeing:

The friendships and the group environment, I could be doing this at home and learning off YouTube, but it's the one to one interaction with other people that I think is extremely important and the feedback that you get for your work. Social interaction is important for a lot of people, it might be the only time that they see someone all week and interact as a group and as a friendship in that as well. I think that's extremely important; I really don't know where I would have been without that in the early days.

First theme: Making social connections

Many of the learners in the study had identified the Neighbourhood House as a place to establish social connections. Their reflections establish that one of the main reasons for initially attending was a desire to establish or re-establish social connections and networks. They engaged with the Neighbourhood House at a time in their lives when they were experiencing change and disruption to social connections and networks as the result of moving to a new town, redundancy or unemployment, isolation, or due to complex life and family issues. They appreciated the local accessibility and welcoming environment of the Neighbourhood House, and the range of program and activity options available to them.

Some knew from previous experience with other Neighbourhood Houses that this was a probable outcome of becoming involved. Rowena, a later life learner, who was hoping to find work in her new location, came to the Neighbourhood House because she knew it was a place to meet people and 'become involved in the community'. Others were referred by friends, health professionals or Job Network providers. Nadir, a second chance learner, arrived in Australia as a refugee and was waiting for his permanent residency. A doctor recommended coming to the Neighbourhood House when he was experiencing isolation and depression:

I needed to be involved and communicate with other people to improve my English, to make friends and to meet other people.

Ruby, newly arrived in a small coastal town, was living alone and hoped to form new lasting connections within the community:

Because I'd retired and moved to [coastal town] and although I'd lived in [large town in area] years ago [this] was a

> *new community, so it was to start a network and to start a*
> *permanent relationship with the community. I had to go looking*
> *and exploring to find what was happening for older people and*
> *the House did that.*

Even learners whose primary motivation was to gain a qualification or skill to facilitate their entry or re-entry into the workforce discovered that coming to the Neighbourhood House provided opportunities for developing and extending their social connections. Bird, a second chance learner undertaking a Children's Services qualification, said that the social environment was good for mothers who had been out of the workforce for long periods of time. The sense of connection and feeling of belonging it engendered kept many learners engaged with the Neighbourhood House for many years. Being acknowledged for the time she had spent in a gardening program gave Ruby, a later life learner, the sense that she belonged:

> *Someone called me an original, that was really nice, so that did*
> *achieve that bit of community and belonging.*

For Caroline, a later life learner, who had been in computer and writing classes, and a sometime committee member over 26 years, the Neighbourhood House formed the backdrop of her social networks. June, also a later life learner, decided to join a computer class because her husband seemed to be having a lot of fun being involved at the Neighbourhood House. Self-described as 'not a social person … a hermit' she was surprised that she no longer wanted to stay at home, as she was learning to mix and improve her social skills. For Francis and June, volunteering in later life created a sense of belonging and fulfilled the desire to contribute to the community. Francis was volunteering in the Men's Shed and a committee of management member, he claims:

> *… being able to help solve problems, feeling useful I suppose*
> *you'd say I feel like I can contribute to the organisation, and also*
> *knowing that you are being appreciated back.*

Similarly, June says she gained a great deal from her volunteer work:

> *I feel a treasured member of the community and I know I'm*
> *adding to my community as well, so it's win, win because you*
> *don't do anything like even volunteering you don't do it unless*
> *you get something out of it too.*

Second theme: Learning together

Our previous research revealed many of the learners in Neighbourhood Houses came with negative learning identities and incomplete and unsatisfactory educational histories (Ollis et al., 2018a, 2018b; Ollis et al., 2017). Some of this can be attributed to the dominance of competitive learning models driven by market imperatives and power inequities based on class, gender and ethnicity in which learning was an isolating and individualistic exercise (Duckworth & Smith, 2017). Teresa, a later life learner in a writing class, noted the lack of competitiveness between learners in the Houses:

> *There hasn't been any competition in the courses that I've done, which I felt was great. That gives you more confidence because we're all doing the same sorts of things.*

One of the most striking aspects of the participants' reflections was the almost universal experience of learning with other people and its significance for their learning. Learning was relational, a shared rather than a solitary activity, undertaken in small groups with people regarded as friends, learning peers, and acquaintances. Crossan and Gallacher (2009, p.134) suggest that learning relationships are formed when "we learn from or through others", or when a disposition for learning forms as a result of relationships between people. For the participants, the initial motivation for learning primarily came from personal aspirations for re-entry into the workforce, a new career direction, or to learn skills for life and interest. Once they were within the small group environment of the Neighbourhood House learning became a collective and shared endeavour, and motivation and interest in learning was enhanced.

Adult learners in Neighbourhood Houses are heterogeneous and diverse, coming to classes and activities from different backgrounds and with varied lived experience. Learners recognised their own and others' areas of knowledge and understood that in the relaxed environment of the Neighbourhood House they could help one another. Learning from and with each other was supportive and reciprocal. When someone had more understanding or knowledge in a particular area they would help others, and in turn would be helped when they needed it. They looked to each other, not just the teachers as the quotes below from Dorothy and Annabella, both second chance learners, and Connie, a later life learner reveal:

> *We helped each other out a bit, some things I could do, some things they could do, so we put them together and we got it right (Dorothy).*

> *We all came from different backgrounds and it was just the encouragement and talking through answers, working through it together that was a massive help (Annabella).*

> *Whenever we've been in class we ask each other questions for help, we all help each other, we're always there to answer each other's questions, which is good (Connie).*

The horizontal relationship between learners and staff members engendered respect for each other and was an important aspect of the learning environment. Many commented that the small class sizes ensured that 'there is plenty of interaction between the teacher and yourself'. Teachers were appreciated for their professionalism and experience and were often regarded as friends. The learning experience was enriched when teachers were willing to share their interests and lived experience with the learners. This dialogical relationship between the teachers and learners and learners and teachers, forged important connections and bonds within the group:

> *Our teacher has got lots of life experience, she's done lots of different things and she has brought a great deal of knowledge to the table, not just what we have to learn, her life experiences and the information she's given us as well has been a big help to me. I work in a bit of a tricky centre and she's been a great support and has given me lots of advice which has been great (Alice, second chance learner).*

For adults who had not been confident learners, hesitant to ask questions, or were not able to keep up with the class content when they were at school, it was important that the Neighbourhood House class created a safe space of care and support, and that they could voice their opinion about what they wanted and needed to learn. Support and understanding from the teacher helped when learners felt 'overwhelmed' when beginning a course of study. Ann, a second chance learner, said it was easier for her because the teachers did not 'just walk over you' when she asked questions, she was surprised that 'they listen'! For

many learners knowing that the teacher was 'approachable' was very important in their assessment of the learning environment.

Third theme: Making friends

In addition to the sense of belonging and connection to social networks, the learning shared with others in classrooms and learning sites, participants formed new friendships with other participants in the classes and activities they attended.

Many participants commented on the 'friendly learning experience'. They knew each other's names 'whether you're a teacher/trainer or not'. While it was not uncommon for friendships to form with classmates, Reem, a second chance learner in a Computer class, commented that for her the language barrier meant that it was 'too hard' to make friends. Friends were people who helped each other out, inside and outside of the classroom. Friends in the classroom helped each other to catch up or understand course content. Evie, a second chance learner in a Horticulture course, commented that:

> *When I was stuck with learning instead of constantly pestering the tutor I was able to lean on my friends that I've made in the course and we'd stay back a little bit longer to help me catch up.*

Linh, a second chance learner in a Computer class, says that her classroom friends:

> *… understand more than me and when I come back to the computer class and there's something I don't understand I ask them, 'Do you know this one, and can you teach me before the teacher asks me?' They're very good friends.*

The way that friendships were enacted differed according to people's circumstances and needs. Mary, a second chance learner in English Language and Computer classes, brought friends 'from my neighbourhood to learn because they were interested'. Caitie, a later life learner who became a volunteer writing tutor, was busy with family and had limited time, and mentioned her lovely friends:

> *It's not the friendship where I'd have them around all the time, but friends they'd ring if they want something, and we'd help each other out. We like to go out for dinner at the end of the year, we meet socially that way. They're really lovely friends.*

Valued friendships were formed between people with differing life experiences and circumstances. Bianca, a young single mother returning to study after a long disruption with a sick child, made friends for life during a pre-employment course:

> *… lifelong friends actually and they're all lovely people. Everyone was from a different walk of life, all different ages, different genders.*

Sally, a second chance learner in an English Language class, appreciated the diversity of cultures in her classroom and the new friendships and understandings that were forming between herself and her classmates:

> *I'm happy because I've really made friends from different countries and their culture makes a lot of diversity. We teach each other by their culture and their food. Sometimes they give us the fruit, and sometimes in gatherings, each one brings a plate of food, so we share with each other.*

Bianca, Ruby, and Kaye talked about the way their classroom friendships have extended outside the classroom into other areas of their lives:

> *We talk through things, some things we'd get on a really deep level, other things we wouldn't get so then we'd talk about that … we've helped each other, we still help each other with things like that. She's a really lovely person, we actually worked out that her boys are cousins to my son, so it was very surprising, but we're just going to stick together from now on (Bianca).*

Ruby's shared interest in gardening led to her and a small group forming a working-bee-style gardening activity that began to meet fortnightly and rotate between each other's gardens. This group who have become 'really nice friends', and the ongoing community garden group, form the basis of Ruby's friendship network:

> *We'll often say the reason for coming is to spend time together because we've all got gardens at home, so we don't need like a plot to do our own gardening, it really is that connecting of people. That's important to me but I think it's important to the others too so that certainly achieved that. It's a really nice group, it would be my network and my friendship group now.*

Kaye, a later life learner and volunteer, spoke about her growing friendship with the Neighbourhood House coordinator who has no family in Australia:

> ... *she's got my phone number any time she wants to ring me. Last Saturday we went to Melbourne on the bus to see Matilda together, the first time we've actually been to something together and it's lovely to have that.*

Discussion

Neighbourhood Houses are dynamic social spaces that provide important opportunities for learning, social inclusion and community connection. It was evident in the data that the practices and dispositions of staff and participants within the Neighbourhood Houses have shaped the learning cultures within these community-based organisations. Many participants noted that friendships and relationships formed in the Houses were ongoing and important. For some who came to the Houses because they were socially isolated and looking for something meaningful to do, the Neighbourhood House provided a social space, connections and engagement with people in their local communities. For the later life learners in this research, connecting with people through their personal interest learning provided ongoing connections and friendships in their local community. Some participants became actively involved in the governance of the Houses, through volunteering on the management committee, furthering their connection to the Houses and developing knowledge and skills in governance.

The central proposition of this paper is that learning in Neighbourhood Houses is relational and embedded in the historical development of the Houses. We argue that the feminist history of the Houses, including the historical practices of empowerment, advocacy and social inclusion, have been integral in shaping these democratic spaces of learning. It is also the practices and dispositions of the tutors, volunteers and staff that ensure a social space that is caring, egalitarian, supportive and empowering. Duckworth and Smith's (2017) significant study of further education in the United Kingdom argues that feminist bonds of care and support ensure a holistic approach to learner empowerment and success. Similarly, Crossan and Gallacher (2009, p.135) claim that in community learning spaces what is valued is the relaxed and informal relationships

between the staff and participants, where learners had expectations of staff to not be "too teachery". This was a striking feature in the data. Facilitative teacher practices and pedagogy coupled with empathy for participants' lives and circumstances and inclusive dispositions of practice helped to keep participants engaged and focussed.

Learners were pleased and surprised by the lack of competitiveness in the classroom. In addition, other wraparound services provided within and by the Houses such as access to health support services and care, work experience programs, volunteering and other support services contributed to the Neighbourhood Houses habitus of social inclusion. We found the horizontal relationships that were formed in the Houses between the teachers and learners and learners with other learners, ensured the boundaries of the learner/teacher relationships were non-hierarchical. This was important as many of the participants were disengaged in schools, but some had also experienced difficult family and personal relationships, mental health issues, language barriers, were socially isolated and dealing with a myriad of complex social issues. Crossan and Gallacher (2009, p.136) referred to the "permeable boundaries" of learning that occur in these community spaces that "enabled people to bring many of these issues with them into the centres".

Notably, the data revealed many of the second chance learners in the Houses had struggled with the formal education system that ranks, assesses and categorises students according to their abilities (Duckworth & Smith, 2017). Their experiences of formal education had made them feel inadequate and not capable of learning. Many did not inherit the symbolic capital of social networks, resources and connections that would enable a schooling trajectory to continue seamlessly (Bourdieu, 1984). Others did not have the symbolic capital, including linguistic capital, that would ensure academic success in the upper years of schooling. Some had struggled with literacy and numeracy in school. Others were encouraged by family to leave school early, to get a job and contribute to the family income. These forms of capital created barriers for second chance learners in particular and were embedded in their individual habitus from an early age. As Moore (2008, p.105) claims:

> *'The formation of habitus takes place initially within the family, the domestic habitus, but, for Bourdieu, the most important agency is education where capital assumes an institutionalized form'.*

As a consequence of this lack of symbolic capital many of the research participants had a negative perception of themselves as learners embedded in their personal habitus (biography) which provided barriers to returning to study. Bourdieu uses the metaphor of "fish in water" to describe when we are comfortable with the world. "When **habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a** "fish in water". It does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted ..." (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In this **research, learners expressed feelings of alienation from and within the** mainstream education system, feeling more like a 'fish out of water' in the neoliberal system of education. This misrecognition of ability was affirmed through the symbolic violence of the education system, where **academic progress is impeded by learners not having the required cultural capital, enabling them to immerse themselves in education** and feel comfortable in the field of schooling (Bourdieu, 1977). The capital, therefore, in its institutionalised forms (formal schooling), for **different groups in varying ways, attempts to make embodied a habitus** with the principles that are dominant in a particular field where capital resides (Moore, 2008). In the case of learners in Neighbourhood Houses and their educational trajectories, the capacity to know "the rules of the game" of secondary schooling was absent, without these forms of academic capital they found it difficult to survive in the education system (Moore, 2008, p.106).

The case studies of these Neighbourhood House learners are significant **because they provide us with a cautionary tale of the importance of economic and symbolic capital in terms of access, equity and success in** education. If we are truly committed to understanding the systemic logic **that contributes to student disengagement in formal schooling, these** case studies can contribute to understanding some of the significant **barriers they face in an education system whose logic entrenches power** relations and structured inequalities (Moore, 2008).

Notwithstanding these barriers, it is evident from this research that the social space of Neighbourhood Houses has enabled learners to reconstruct their personal habitus about schooling, it has enabled them to experience some academic success and to begin to experience the joy of learning. What the data did reveal is that once these learners started to feel like a "fish in water", they had a "feel for the game of learning", that they were capable learners and their lives flourished

in transformative ways. Their family relationships improved, their incomes improved through gaining accredited qualifications and earning more income, and their social isolation decreased as new friendships were formed. There is much to celebrate regarding the pedagogy and practices in Neighbourhood Houses and the ability of these spaces to transform individual lives and communities.

Conclusion

Formed in the 1970s on community development principles of advocacy, empowerment and social change, and having provided adult learning in local communities for close to 50 years, Neighbourhood Houses are important spaces of learning and social inclusion. People came to the Houses for a variety of reasons, to attend a class, to socialise, to join a personal interest group, and to volunteer. Many came with previous negative experiences of learning, seeing themselves as unsuccessful learners, and lacking confidence in their ability to learn. The horizontal relationships that developed within the Houses, shaped by the practices and dispositions of both the staff and the participants, influenced the learning and organisational cultures of these spaces. The community development and learning practices in Neighbourhood Houses portend and reaffirm their former connection to social movement history. The idea that learning and social and personal change is a relational and collective process are dispositions embedded in and stemming from the new social movements, in particular, the women's movement. Horizontality encourages relationships, not only between learners, but between learners and teachers, and learners and other staff members. These learning relationships in which people learn from and with each other, as they shared their stories and experiences, influenced and in some cases reconstructed learner's view of themselves as learners and changed their attitude towards learning, transforming their lives. This strong and distinct aspect of the learning environment in Neighbourhood Houses supported and encouraged learners to embrace learning with a sense of confidence and agency.

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