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Literacies practitioners resisting human capital theory through values-based approaches

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Data from two research projects with adult literacies practitioners based in Scotland are used to illustrate how policies underpinned by ideologies based on Human Capital Theory (HCT) lead to a narrow conceptualisation of the purpose of literacies education. It is argued that HCT ideology permeates international and national policies and thus influences practice. This results in a focus on the economy, rather than the individual, leading to narrow domains of skills-focused knowledge that become accepted as normal and are difficult to challenge. The paper outlines the changes experienced by practitioners, especially those focused on employability programs, but also shows how these changes have been resisted, particularly in relation to how the curriculum is negotiated, and outcomes are assessed with learners. Practitioners were able to maintain values-based approaches and protect democratic practice through interactions with colleagues that reinforced a collective understanding of fundamental principles for delivering social justice-based literacies programs. It is concluded that, while practitioners were critically reinterpreting aspects of the dominant discourse through building on learners' experience and valuing their perspectives, social justice requires that the impact of broader social and economic inequalities on participation in education

is addressed through structural changes rather than individual effort.

Keywords: *resistance; critical pedagogy; dialogic spaces; funds of knowledge*

Introduction

In this paper I draw on two research projects with literacies practitioners based in Scotland to illustrate how policies underpinned by ideologies based on Human Capital Theory (HCT) can lead to a narrow conceptualisation of the purpose of literacies education. This conceptualisation focuses on what is good for the economy rather than on promoting education's role in human flourishing (Lynch, 2022). The literature shows (e.g. Baquedano-López et. al, 2013), however, that if the emphasis in literacies programs is on the development of narrow employability-focused skills, then the rich resources that participants' experience and interests provide for learning are not utilised. Research also illustrates how practitioners committed to social justice can create "locally relevant curricula" (O'Cadiz, et.al, 1998, p. 536) rather than following prescribed programs. I contribute to this literature by showing how the HCT approach can be challenged by practitioners from professional cultures that emphasise the quality of the teaching, inclusion, and relationships in adult literacies rather than narrow skills-based outcomes.

In the rest of the paper, I show how the HCT ideology has influenced literacies practices (especially through The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and United Kingdom (UK) policies) and how practitioners have resisted such influences but first I explain the Scottish context.

The Scottish context

Scotland provides an interesting site to study adult literacies (AL) because of its differences from other countries. A significant difference is that Scottish practitioners come from a unique profession, Community Learning and Development (CLD), whose key role is to address the learning needs of disadvantaged individuals and communities. Thus,

it is focused on responding to adults in ways that prioritise their own needs and desires. It uses a "social practices" approach to learning that acknowledges that the use and meaning of literate practices depends on the context in which they are being used. This means that the curriculum is contextualised by tutors so that it suits the unique goals and aspirations of each learner, hence the use of the term 'literacies' plural rather than 'literacy' singular. This contrasts with the teaching of one-size-fits-all programs of learning, where all students study the same set of skills (such as sentence construction, grammar, and spelling) regardless of their life experience or educational goals (Galloway 2016, 95).

Another difference arising from this separate profession is that its graduates have a shared community of practice through their membership of a national professional association. Practitioners meet regularly (face-to-face and on-line) where they discuss common issues and network about how best to keep the learner at the center of practice. Because practitioners are mainly employed by Local Authorities (LA), the provision of AL is spread throughout Scotland. LAs provide a range of public services for a particular geographical area in addition to education, which include housing, roads, economic development and environmental protection and this holistic provision means that practitioners face similar issues that reinforce their commitment to values-based practice.

Scottish providers have also experienced the same difficulties that research shows exist in other Western countries. These commonalities include public budget reductions in funding that arise from an educational market that prioritises efficiency over social values such as equity (Lynch, 2020). Another commonality is that AL often exists in an educational silo that is separated from mainstream education and so these different providers may not understand the common contributions they can make to improving services (Zhang & Perkins 2022).

The influence of HCT ideology

There are many definitions of HCT, but Becker's is the most cited: "any stock of knowledge or characteristics the worker has (either innate or acquired) that contributes to his or her productivity" (Becker 1975, 16). There have been several criticisms of HCT that can be summarised as

refuting the assumption that the purpose of education is solely about the skills acquisition that drives economic growth (Allais 2012). Instead, critics argue that the focus on productivity comes at the expense of other forms of knowledge that can lead to the development of an individual's potential, greater well-being and so on (Gillies 2011). Moreover, the individualistic focus of HCT leads to the blaming of individuals for failing to invest in their own development rather than considering the impact of the economic and social circumstances in which they live (Miller and Rose, 2008).

HCT ideology permeates international and national policies and thus influences practice especially through the outcomes that are prioritised. Internationally, OECD policy documents regard investment in human capital as fundamental because, it is asserted, there are strong links between individual literacy skills and economic returns. For example: "without proper investment in skills, people languish on the margins of society, technological progress does not translate into economic growth, and countries can no longer compete in an increasingly knowledge-based global society" (OECD 2001, 3). More recently the OECD (2019a, 2) has emphasised the importance of "countries and people gaining the full economic and social value from investments in developing skills".

The human capital perspective also gets translated into narrow, measurable indicators such as those used in the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) that aims to "provide insights into how well adult populations can perform the key skills society needs, and how they are using them at work and at home" (OECD 2019b, 1). This type of assessment has been criticised on the grounds that the test reflects adults' socio-demographic characteristics rather than their abilities to use literacy in a variety of contexts (Desjardins and Ederer, 2015).

The overall approach of the OECD is mirrored in policy documents from the UK. For example, the most recent White Paper (2021) is entitled Skills for Jobs and aims to:

> *reform further education so it supports people to get the skills our economy needs throughout their lives... Focusing post-16 skills on this core mission will increase productivity, support growth industries, and give individuals opportunities to progress in their careers (p.5).*

These international and national policies focus on the economy rather than the individual, meaning that the narrow domains of skills-focused knowledge perpetuated by these documents become accepted as normal and thus difficult to challenge (Gorur, 2014). There are other negative impacts because, when the focus is on economic growth through increased productivity, "formal learning is privileged over informal learning and standardised and measurable outcomes are preferred for demonstrating achievement" (Hamilton 2012, 171). Moreover, the curriculum is restricted because the achievement of narrow skills leading to employment becomes the most important focus.

Now that I have outlined how HRT has influenced policy, I will describe the methodology used in the two research projects that focused on the experiences of AL practitioners.

Methodology

My methodological perspective is critical theory which emphasises subjective interpretations of phenomena and rejects the proposition that there are universal truths (Archer, 1995). This means that I use dialogic methods designed to foster conversation and reflection and so qualitative, rather than quantitative, methods are used to gather data. In this research, my position is of a person committed to AL that seeks to understand how its values are enacted in practice.

The two research projects were approved by the host University's ethics committee and BERA's (2018) ethical guidelines were followed to ensure "an ethic of respect" (p.5). Particular attention was paid to ensuring anonymity, informed consent, the right to withdraw, transparency and privacy. The first project, conducted in 2017, (Allatt & Tett, 2019) focused on how the opportunities and constraints of employability-focused programs had influenced practitioners' approaches to learners. The second, conducted in 2020, (Tett, 2023) investigated the changes that had impacted AL practitioners in the preceding three years and what the causes and consequences of these changes were. These two sets of data are drawn on to investigate the following research questions:

- What were the changes in outcomes experienced by practitioners and were any of them influenced by HCT ideology?
- How, if at all, did they resist such approaches?

The 2017 sample comprised twenty practitioners from community-based projects in Scotland. Experienced people were chosen because this enabled them to be able to reflect on changes in policy and practice over time. Each telephone interview lasted around an hour and focused on how the opportunities and constraints of employability-focused programs had influenced their approaches to learners. The interviews took place between March and May 2017.

Table 1: 2017 interviewees

Pseudonym	**Location**	**Experience (Years in AL/years in current post)**	**Qualifications**
Alan	Homelessness NGO, large city	18/6	BA (Hons)
Annie	Large city Local Authority (LA)	17/10	BA, MA
Brian	Large city LA	18/9	Professional BA degree
Callum	Medium city LA	13/3	BA, MEd
Emma	Family Learning NGO medium city	16/4	MA, PG Diploma
Garry	Youth-focused NGO, large city	12/5	BA (Hons)
Jim	Youth-focused NGO, medium city	15/6	PG Diploma
Jo	Rural LA	11/3	BA, MA
Judith	Large city LA	16/7	Professional BA degree
Karen	Medium city LA	20/15	BA, MEd
Kathy	Medium city LA	10/4	BA, MA
Lorna	Large city LA	6/4	MA, PG Diploma
Louise	Large city LA	14/3	BA (Hons)
Margaret	Medium city LA	9/9	Professional BA degree
Pete	Large city LA	17/10	PG Diploma
Sheila	Medium city LA	19/12	BA, MEd
Sian	Family Learning NGO medium city	8/4	MA, PG Diploma
Sue	Rural LA	20/10	Professional BA degree

The 2020 sample comprised sixteen practitioners who were knowledgeable about AL projects, took a learner-focused approach to practice, and had five years or more experience of working in literacies. They were contacted by email and asked to complete an informed consent form. Following this a questionnaire was sent that asked about: changes in the focus of participants' work in the preceding three years, what had caused these changes, the opportunities and constraints these changes offered, any changes they had resisted. This questionnaire was followed by an on-line interview lasting around 40 minutes.

Table 2: 2020 interviewees

Pseudonym	Location	Experience (Years in AL/years in current post)	Qualifications
Andy	Large city LA	34/18	Undergraduate professional degree
Ann	Science focused NGO	9/2	Undergraduate professional degree, PG Diploma
Audrey	large city LA	19/12	BA, PG Diploma, MSc
Faith	Medium mixed urban and rural LA	12/3.5	MEd
Fiona	Large city LA	30/9	MA, MSc
Julie	Medium mixed urban and rural LA	33/8.5	MA degree, MSc, PG Certificate
Jean	small mixed urban and rural LA	21/8	MA, BSc, PG Certificate
Katherine	Large city LA	29/5	BA, RSA specialist qualification, PG Certificate
Lucy	large city LA	25/3	MA degree, PG Certificate
Mary	Rural LA	32/17	BA, PG Diploma
Melanie	Medium mixed urban and rural LA	23/4	Undergraduate professional degree
Nicholas	Large city LA	12/1	Undergraduate professional degree, SQA specialist qualifications
Olivia	Rural LA	35/12	PG Diploma
Rory	large adult education NGO	30/8	BA, SQA specialist qualifications
Sophie	medium NGO focused on social care	20/6	MA, PG Diploma
Wayne	small NGO focused on health and well-being	10/1	BA, SQA specialist qualifications, MEd

In both projects, the sample of participants was purposive (Patton, 2002) because it involved selecting specific individuals. Three criteria were identified for participants: they had to be knowledgeable about AL projects that took a learner-focused approach to practice; they had responsibility for delivering AL in their geographical area; they had five years or more experience of working in AL. I used my knowledge of the provision of AL in Scotland as well as several key informants to identify individuals that would meet these criteria. All names are pseudonyms.

The questionnaires and interviews were analysed thematically (Creswell & Poth 2018) so that the research questions could be answered. In the analysis, each data-item was given equal attention in the coding process; themes were checked against each other and back to the literature on literacies. This method of analysis has the advantage of giving a holistic picture rather than a fragmented view of individual variables. By placing these findings in the wider context of the literature I was able to understand commonalities across the field, whilst avoiding claims of generalisability which might be provided by a larger and fully representative sample (Yin, 2014).

I took two further measures to verify these themes. First, a report of the analysis and themes was sent to participants so that they could check them for resonance with their experiences. All confirmed that the findings were accurate. In addition, I analysed the teaching and learning plans for some of the programs and so was able to check, to some extent, that what participants said in their interviews was consistent with their practice.

In the following section, the data from both projects are drawn on to answer the two research questions.

Findings

The changes in outcomes experienced by practitioners and the influence of HCT ideology

In this section, I show the changes that practitioners experienced in the outcomes expected from AL programs. I am prioritising outcome measurements because these externally imposed criteria privilege those aspects of performance which can be quantified and generally fail to recognise more qualitative, equally important changes (Allatt

& Tett, 2019). The consequence of this narrowing of the curriculum in response to these externally imposed outcomes tends to result in a deficit approach to learners' own knowledge (Tett, Hamilton & Crowther, 2012). Moreover, such outcomes are a manifestation of the growing distrust of frontline professionals' experience that can lead to an emphasis on what is easily measured, rather than what is important (Moutsios, 2010).

All the respondents from the 2017 interviews reported that there had been changes in the outcomes they were expected to deliver that impacted on how they organised and approached AL. These changes were mainly caused by the expectation that the programs would focus on employability. For example, Sarah explained that the employability agenda was the 'key driver' in shaping their organisation's curriculum offer, while another referred to employability as 'forcing our hand to look at a skills-focused way of doing things' (John). It was also exacerbated by a reduction in welfare benefit levels and both these factors caused a decline in the motivation of learners that were participating: 'we are having people who are being forced to come ... and it feels completely different ... because they are quite forthright in putting across how little they want to be here' (Jean).

Another group of changes was driven by the requirement for claimants to apply on-line for employment-related benefits that led to: 'huge pressure on Jobseekers that have to use digital skills to actively seek employment' (Emma). The result was a more constrained curriculum 'targeted at employability skills' (Alan) where 'a lot of our workshops are based on getting people to see how to write an email for a job and how to write a letter, how to write a job advert' (Gary). Some practitioners felt that this narrow curriculum arose from a lack of belief by other professionals in the possibility of improvement in learners' capabilities and so resulted in 'inward thinking along the lines of developing a CV, job search, etc.' (Pete) rather than a belief that people would change and grow if given the right opportunities.

A further issue was capturing employability outcomes, especially where official criteria for success were numbers moving on to other courses or gaining a qualification or employment. This was because many participants 'were far away from the job market and although many gained "soft skills," such as increased confidence, they could not be

accredited and were not easy to record' (Sue). Some funders required very prescriptive skills-focused content in literacies courses that led to learners gaining accreditation and the result of this was negative. For example, 'there are fewer opportunities for learners to develop more personal interests that usually enable them to be more engaged in learning' (Jim). 'There's not really much room in our funding ... for having people who just come along because they want to learn a bit' (Margaret). The outcomes that could be achieved had to be thought through carefully because: 'for the work with young people we get an initial starting payment but if they don't complete a training course or move on to a positive destination then we get nothing' (Brian).

Instead of learners themselves applying to join literacy programs, many were now referred from the Job Centers because they were 'having trouble claiming benefits and ... filling in online all the [employment related] stuff – CVs, evidence of applying for jobs and so on' (Sarah). Consequently, large numbers of people that hadn't accessed literacy services before were coming along and that meant some practitioners were 'able to offer a greater range of courses in response to the learners, many of whom see employability as their key goal' (Callum). Other practitioners raised some concerns, however, that they were now 'attracting greater numbers of learners' (Sian) and the result of this was 'we aren't as focused on the people that are more difficult to reach because of the demand from those that are more aware of the opportunities we offer' (Judith).

The main issue for participants in the 2020 interviews was that overall funding for LAs had been reduced over the preceding three years due to the UK government's decision to curtail state provision of services. This had strong consequences for literacies because, as a non-statutory service, providing programs was not a requirement and so the service experienced major cuts. This was compounded by 'structural difficulties and lack of knowledge [in the LA] about how [literacies] can work best' (Katherine). Another reason that literacies provision was easy to cut was that engaging participants is a key part of the process whereas in other services, such as care for the elderly, there is already a strong demand for provision that the LAs are under pressure to respond to. As Audrey argued 'unless you get people that are articulate about their needs it's difficult for them to see that literacies development is for them'. Research (Beattie, 2022) shows that learner engagement should be a

collaborative process that includes meaningful interactions with tutors and peers, requiring investment of time and resources, but these funds were simply not available.

One consequence of reduced funding was that staff became involved in projects that had external funding or were a priority for the Scottish Government and the LA rather than arising from the needs of the learners. 'The Scottish Government expect us to focus solely on digital skills, but these are not what learners are asking for' (Faith). However, additional funding brought in new staff that had 'new skills and ... different ideas [and] made our team more dynamic and forward thinking' (Mary). Another issue was that 'Government expectations of how we can use this money ... and communication about what may be available next year really hampers effective planning'(Olivia). Several participants, whilst welcoming the extra funding, found that it had consequences for existing groups, especially literacies learners. This included 'ESOL [English as a second language] learners being more likely to come forward than literacies learners' (Julie) because the latter group needed to be actively engaged in provision that met their interests. Another found that 'literacies work is more difficult due to the reduction in resources and a shift to working with schools and family learning'(Lucy) so negotiating the curriculum was more challenging.

Another consequence of the funding reduction was a greater focus on measurable targets, particularly for those working for NGOs. One reason was 'because more funding is coming via foundations with specific targets' [and this] 'creates competition amongst organisations [as well as leading to] more precarious work for tutors ... and lower wages' (Wayne). Within the LAs, the lack of funding led to more targeting because 'otherwise staff are overstretched' (Olivia). Targeting could be positive, however, because it meant that literacies was focused on those with the greatest needs and, in some LAs, led to 'improved links with Health Visitors, Schools and Social Work staff' (Mary) especially in family learning work with parents.

Applying for external funding and then reporting on the outcomes also took time away from teaching and learning. One said, 'it is harder to focus on the educational role when there is more reporting, more funding to write, ... and a fragmented field across many charities. [Moreover], LAs had specific narrow expectations [that required you] to

prove that the funding was helping people to become more employable' (Wayne). Another participant however, suggested that the key in applying for external funding was to ensure that 'it fits with the work we do ... that the outcomes are the same ... [and reflect our] priorities... so it's clear how [this new funding stream] fits into the wider picture' (Sophie).

Resisting the HCT ideology

Although practitioners were often struggling to manage in the face of changed priorities and reduced funding, they were able to resist narrow interpretations of the literacies' curriculum. At the heart of their resistance was being clear about their professional culture of using learners' experiences and knowledge rather than seeing them as empty vessels to be filled with pre-determined skills. This meant that for nearly all the interviewees, good practice involved 'ensuring that the learners' goals are at the center of our provision' (Kathy). A key value was 'being focused on the assets that learners bring rather than their deficits' (Jo) and many practitioners showed how they operationalised these values. For example, Gary said: 'rather than writing CVs we build the curriculum around what the young people are interested in. That means that they do develop their literacy skills but in ways that arise from their own interests'. Many operated from 'a funds of knowledge approach' (González et al., 2005) that recognises the cultural practices, lived experiences, and daily activities of learners in developing a curriculum. For example, Alan, working in a project for homeless people, started off by:

> *Asking them about their housing issues or how they have dealt with Social Work so that we can use their experience. We get to deliver our outputs about being 'employment ready' but we start from their knowledge rather than telling them what to do and it's so much more effective.*

Sian, who was based in a family learning project, argued that she was able to 'work from the strengths of our learners ...from what the parents know, and we ask them to share their knowledge with each other. She considered that 'it's about changing attitudes...learning how to see themselves positively again'. From her perspective, participants' growing self-confidence was as important as their gaining literacy skills.

Rather than seeing knowledge as an economic commodity, many of the interviewees were focused on knowledge as a way of expressing critical opinions about the world. For example:

> *We discuss why they think they didn't get qualifications when they were at school and what they think could be done about it in ways ... that put the emphasis back on the system failures. They then write about how they might change education, and this helps to build up their skills as well as improving their self-esteem. This means we can hit our output targets but in a way that enables us to still stick to our social practices approach (Louise).*

Louise was able to work in this way because she ensured that the writing, talking, and listening skills that were developed through these discussions then enabled participants to write more effective CVs, improve their interview skills and gain greater confidence. For most practitioners, good practice also involved taking time to remove barriers to help people towards becoming more employable. This meant that: 'although our overall aim is to move young people on to positive destinations, behind that is helping them to take small steps...so they gain the confidence in what they know' (Jim). Working in these ways was not easy because of the time and commitment involved. Staff were under pressure from the Job Centres to report on learners' attendance but 'we have made it clear that any referrals they make to our provision is on the basis that we will not monitor or report on learners' attendance because it would violate our principles' (Annie).

Practitioners were helped to stick to their value base because of the: 'passion for the job that gives you the courage to work in this way because all your experience tells you that this is the right kind of approach that is going to help people to learn' (Emma). The practitioners also had the support of colleagues that they considered 'shared their values' and so they trusted them 'to make good judgements' (Sian). However, there was still 'a big discrepancy between the rhetoric about the value of our work and the lack of funding for it at the LA level' (Brian) due to the pressures on LA budgets from the services, such as school education, that the LAs were required to provide.

Interviewees found creative ways of delivering outcomes including making 'use of impact statements from learners that include gains

in self-confidence that are powerful ways of explaining the whole life impact that they experience' (Annie). Staff also had to be careful about how they described their provision, as one pointed out: 'I was anxious we might lose our family learning provision, so I pitched this as parental engagement for employability ... Crucially, this still allows us to deliver some of the initial work that is so valuable' (Karen). Another interviewee described how within her organisation some of the courses offered had to be titled 'Communication for Employment' rather than 'English' or 'Literacy'; 'It's jargon basically to get the funding.' (Sonia).

For some participants resisting the employability agenda meant recognising that learners had different reasons for attending literacy classes:

> *I don't think it's just about work. A lot of people come here because they must. Sometimes pressure from the Job Centre and so on ... but for some people in the class their reasons are... more about being amongst people who are in a similar position to them socially, as well as to do with being literate and about gaining confidence generally ... It empowers them. They might then feel more able to go out into the wider world whether it's to get a job or progress on to a college course ... I'm not sure that when they joined the class that that could have been their aspiration (Sheila).*

When applying for funding, staff had to be clear about what could be achieved. This meant that it had to be thought through carefully so that it did not compromise 'the values about what good practice should look like' (Lorna). They looked for funders that were more flexible about outcomes and one found that: '[X organisation] is just looking for any improvement in literacies or English as a second language (ESOL) communication skills or digital skills [rather than] having to demonstrate that people can write a CV ... or that they have moved on to accredited courses' (Pete). For some, external funding had made it possible to develop more 'critical literacy' programs that 'developed communication and numeracy skills at the same time as involving the participants fully' (Sue). However, such temporary funding could generate a huge administrative burden that 'took skilled staff away from the "front line" and meant that their ability to innovate was lost' (Andy).

Discussion

These findings show the negative consequences that policy based on HCT ideologies had on AL work. It also demonstrates that practitioners were able, to some extent, to resist these ideologies by translating and enacting policy texts differently (Ball, Maguire, and Braun, 2012). In both research projects, a values-based pedagogy guided critical pedagogical practices based on social justice. Practitioners asserted their agency to support literacy that was based in rich and meaningful practices rather than the narrow curriculum required by HCT. The curriculum they offered instead was based on a "funds of knowledge" approach (González, Moll, and Amanti, 2005), which can help learners to develop the effective strategies and skills they already use rather than being seen as having individual deficits that need to be corrected. Practitioners used "workarounds", situations in which practitioners seize, rather than seek, discretion when "policies were seen to be unworkable in practice, or in conflict with professional and philosophical values" (Smythe, 2015, 6). They contested HCT ideologies that constructed learners as problems, rather than people with important knowledge. Practitioners resisted this discursive construction and instead enabled literacies participants to make the curriculum relevant to their lived experiences (Freire, 1993). For example, practitioners used assessment instruments to give learners more agency as meaning-makers rather than receivers of expert knowledge.

Despite the intense pressure from the increased workloads caused by finding ways of assessing and teaching learners, practitioners persisted. What kept them going was being part of a professional learning community that supported them to stay true to their values and commitment to adult learning. This professional culture of being open and responsive to learners and making use of their wider experience enabled them to focus on engaging learners and respecting the knowledge that they brought with them. These shared understandings of good practice were developed through interactions with colleagues that reinforced a collective understanding of fundamental principles for delivering AL programs.

By keeping learner-centered solutions to the forefront, these practitioners have shown how they created imaginative responses by developing resources and providing support that enabled learners to

participate in ways in which they were comfortable. Practitioners also negotiated activities with learners including adjustments to the pace of learning in ways that gave learners a space to think. Practitioners could draw on sources of support to maintain their "activist craft" (Costa et al., 2021), including their expertise in pedagogies based on the idea that the whole human is involved in learning. Support stemmed from dialogue and mutual learning among learners and practitioners. Practitioners' motivation to resist difficult or hostile messages enabled them "to create dialogic, emancipatory spaces which are affirming, positive and culturally sensitive for those participating in them" (Tett & Hamilton, 2019, 253). It also came through forming alliances and professional cooperation that contradicted the ideal of competition.

Resisting dominant ideologies, however, has emotional costs and takes up valuable time (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006). Despite this, practitioners were highly motivated to resist narrow outcomes and seize the agenda when they thought policies conflicted with their professional and philosophical values to construct a more open curriculum. They also made funding applications designed to provide more critical literacy focused programs and developed partnerships with other organisations that held similar values. These actions not only show how practitioners participate in policy networks as powerful actors but also enabled them to draw the attention of policy makers to "dissonances between policy discourses and the actualities of learning in local settings" (Smythe 2015, 6) so that provision could be modified. Although these changes were generally quite small, they did enable practitioners to assert their agency in ways that gave them some resources for hope.

Conclusion

I have shown that the values that drove the practitioners' pedagogical practices were a focus on the learners' goals and so the learning arose out of "the inherently socially negotiated character of meaning ... in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world" (Lave and Wenger 1991, 51). The practitioners also emphasised the importance of using the individual's wider experience and operated from the position that the learners' experiences were a positive resource. As a result, they used a "learning curriculum that evolves out of participation in a specific community of practice" (op cit., 97). This was based on an epistemology that acknowledges that knowledge is developed socially,

and this approach also enabled the "development of criteria for deciding which knowledge is most worthwhile" (Allais, 2012, 266). One aspect of this involved "working *alongside* instead of *for* community members [and so] opened new possibilities for better, more responsive programs" (Smythe et al. 2021, 21).

Raymond Williams (1977) has argued that many possible routes are within our reach if we challenge excluding discourses to make changes in deep structures of feeling and imagination. Educators, even when constrained by narrow curricula, can open spaces for critical reflection and dialogue and imagine new forms of teaching and learning that make education relevant. New meanings and values can then emerge that spark different ways of thinking, kindling the desire to learn more deeply and explore further. Such learning could result in a redesigned education system that provides full "human relevance and control... [and] emphasises not the ladder but the common highway, ... [because every person's] ignorance diminishes me, and every [person]'s skill is a common gain of breath" (Williams 1989,15).

Getting to this point, though, means that both researchers and practitioners must engage with a variety of ways of challenging the dominant ideology of HCT. Williams (1977) suggests that dominant discourses "select from and consequently exclude the full range of human practice [yet some] experiences, meanings, and values are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of some residue – cultural as well as social - of some previous social and cultural institution or formation" (125). These *residual* resources were formed in the past but are still "active in the cultural process ...as an effective element of the present ... [through people's] practical consciousness" (123). In addition to these resources, there is "*emergent*" culture which carries new meanings and values, and "depends crucially on finding new forms or adaptations of forms" (126).

The practitioners quoted here have shown that they are both challenging HCT, using residual resources built up through value-based shared practice, and that an emergent culture that seeks new partners and funding sources to offer more critical literacies programs is being built. Practitioners were critically reinterpreting aspects of the dominant discourse through building on learners' experience and valuing their perspectives and through sharing their own knowledge to make

institutional systems and spaces of government more transparent. In the end though, social justice requires that the impact of broader social and economic inequalities on participation in education must be addressed through structural changes rather than individual effort. This paper has shown what can be done by practitioners and learners acting together, but larger alliances are necessary if lasting structural change is to be created.

Smythe and colleagues argued in their research during Covid-19 "we have glimpsed how adult education could contribute to a more equitable future", (2021, 27) and I hope that this research has made a similar contribution. As researchers we all have a responsibility to help to make the case to our governments about AL's role in helping to address inequalities and the concrete examples from Scotland of effective interventions can help to illuminate how a more equitable education might be provided.

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