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**Enhancing community well-being and the
promotion of social justice through participatory
and relational practice**

Alma Mason

**Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy**

York St John University

School of Education, Language and Psychology

February 2025

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Dedicated to the memory of Nain, Mum, Dad and Barbara, with love and eternal gratitude.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, my thanks go to my incredible supervisors; Doctor Charlotte Haines Lyon, Professor Julian Stern and Doctor Joan Walton. I could not have been better supported by this exemplary team. Julian helped to develop my thinking in the first years of my studies before moving to a new academic establishment. Charlotte always signposted me to new literature for consideration and I was most impressed by the way she could answer any of my questions in an instant and forward relevant links to my email within seconds. Particular mention goes to Joan who has been my steadfast support and inspiration over the last eight years. I am indebted to her for reminding me of the value of practitioner- based research and the importance of telling this story. I hold Joan in high esteem because of her values-driven practice and commitment to social change. I would also like to thank Doctor Margaret Meredith for developing my learning through annual reviews; her feedback and suggestions were appropriate, timely and enriched my knowledge.

My supervisors have been so patient with me and ensured that I had an appropriate balance of challenge and support. I know that I did not make things easy for them so I am grateful for the manner in which they provided constructive criticism without denting my confidence. This has been true experiential learning for me and I have enjoyed the whole experience.

I am glad that I chose York St John University to study for my PhD because of the commitment to social justice and the promotion of relevant and meaningful research. Professional development programmes enriched my learning and I appreciated the opportunity to engage with peers on study days and writing retreats. The collaborative culture is overt and I also offer thanks for the wrap around support provided by the digital services, library and PGR teams who steered me through numerous practical and technical challenges.

It is important to discuss and share one's progress with fellow PGR students so thanks are also extended to Colin O'Connor, Janice Darkes-Sutcliffe and Jihong Guo for your friendship and support throughout my studies. You all now have your doctorates and have given me practical advice and encouragement throughout our shared journeys. Additionally, special mention goes to Sharon Westhead who gave so much of her time to discuss the intricacies

of thesis composition with me but was also an invaluable ‘trouble shooter’ for all technical aspects of study.

My family and friends have been so understanding and empathic; thank you for your love, encouragement and interest in this subject matter. I appreciated you ‘checking in’ to make sure that all was going well, supporting me through the tough times and for leaving me in splendid isolation for long periods to write the thesis.

Finally and most importantly huge thanks to everyone connected with AVCT and NSC, community members, colleagues, trustees and partners. This thesis would not have materialised without each and every one of you; this is our story to tell so I hope that I have done it justice. A few of us once participated in an Erasmus + conference in Germany and were drawn to some graffiti on the remains of the Berlin Wall that read:

‘Many small people, in many small places, do many small things that can alter the face of the world’.

I think that this epitomises our approach and it is a huge privilege to work with so many inspirational people, indefatigably committed to social justice and equity. Long may this continue!

Abstract

This research study is an exploration of an unfolding narrative capturing my professional practice and a community-based charity's efforts to improve the lived experiences of members of a disadvantaged community. Having worked in the city of Liverpool for over forty- five years, the study represents a microcosm of contemporary society and presents a critical analysis of the neoliberal hegemony.

As a founding member of this charity (Alt Valley Community Trust), I explore ways to improve outcomes for the communities that we serve. During the research process it becomes increasingly clear that despite the organisation's commitment and resilience, we face increasing barriers and considerable challenges which compromise much of our collective action for improvement.

Autoethnographic framing, critical incident analysis and three action research cycles are completed and offer new insights and knowledge relating to community well-being. The reductionist and quantitative dominance of criteria applied by most funding bodies and government departments is challenged; with an alternative approach proposed in which concepts relating to connectedness and relational well-being are applied to theorise approaches to social justice.

Key findings from the study demonstrate the transformative nature of action research as participatory practice is found to be the most significant vehicle for securing pathways to enhanced community well-being and social justice. The research offers a framework for thinking differently about community development and provides recommendations for similar organisations to build upon this knowledge. It demonstrates the primacy of relationships which rarely feature in Government policy formation and practice; thus, it has national as well as local significance for all those committed to working towards a more just and flourishing society. The research encapsulates how the development of community well-being and the promotion of social justice is advanced through participatory and relational practice.

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List of abbreviations

AVCT: Alt Valley Community Trust

ACF: Adventure Capital Fund

CHATS: Community Health Ambassadors Team Service

CITB: Construction Industry Training Board

DCLG: Department for Communities and Local Government

DfE: Department for Education

DFES: Department for Education and Skills

DWP: Department for Works and Pensions

EAZ: Education Action Zone

ERA: Education Reform Act

ERDF: European Regional Development Fund

ESF: European Social Fund

ESFA: Education and Skills Funding Agency

ESIF: European Structural and Investment Funds

ETUC: European Trade Union Confederation

ETUI: European Trade Union Institute

GCSE: General Certificate of Secondary Education

HMI: Her/His Majesty's Inspector

ICAEW: The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales

ILM: Intermediate Labour Market

IPPR: Institute for Public Policy Research

ISO: International Organization for Standardization

LCRCA: Liverpool City Region Combined Authority

LA: Local Authority.

LEA: Local Education Authority

LNRPG: Liverpool Neighbourhood Regeneration Programme (G)

NEET: Not in employment, education or training

NSC: Neighbourhood Services Company
Ofsted: Office for standards in education
PCT: Primary Care Trust
PGCE: Postgraduate Certificate in Education
PLP: Personal Learning plan
QA: Quality Assurance
SATS: Standard Attainment Tests
SIB: Social Investment Business
SEU: Social Exclusion Unit
SLT: Senior Leadership Team
YIF: Youth Initiative Fund

Chapter 1. Introduction

This thesis explores factors influencing community well-being and the development of strategies to improve the lived experiences of people living in disadvantaged circumstances. My research presents the findings from a five- year study that analyses the work of a community- based charity situated in the Northeast of Liverpool, Alt Valley Community Trust (AVCT hereafter). As Chair of the Board of Trustees, I was instrumental in shaping the direction of our work and am convinced that AVCT has made a significant contribution to community development over the last four decades. However, with a reflexive mind-set, I embarked upon a PhD and applied Action Research methodology as a vehicle to seek new knowledge regarding the capacity to bring about further improvement. AVCT's vision and mission statement acted as the stimulus to consider whether I knew what difference we were making to peoples' lives within the community and how our organisation could improve upon previous best.

Vision:

Engaged, empowered communities devising community solutions to local problems.

Mission:

An enabling organisation promoting individual and community well- being.

The study can be viewed as a microcosm of disadvantaged communities and a study of the ever changing, evolving political, social and economic landscape.

1.1 Mapping the thesis

This introductory chapter commences with an overview of my thesis and a guide to the structure and contents. I explain how the research process took some dramatic turns in which a top- down approach to my work transforms into participatory practice. A summary of the purpose of my study is presented, followed by an auto-ethnographic reflection

considering factors influencing my decision to embark upon a doctoral research journey to assess how community well-being and social justice could be enhanced.

The next section outlines the research objectives with the accompanying theoretical frameworks and concepts underpinning the thesis. Following on from the overall aims and purpose of the research, I detail how eclectic methodology was applied at different stages and suggest that differentiated approaches helped to identify some unfolding new knowledge. A literature review chapter has not been incorporated; instead I chose to weave relevant academic literature into all chapters as a means of streamlining discussions and analysis. Leading on from my approach to research, I consider the scope and limitations of this study.

Finally, the thesis structure is set out by summarising the chapters as a means of highlighting arguments presented within each chapter before proposing the potential significance of my research, and its contribution to a claim to new knowledge. It concludes with a visual representation of the thesis and research journey.

1.2 A watershed

From the outset, I am declaring that hindsight has demonstrated that at the commencement of my research I was a naive voyager. Most research features unexpected pathways and new direction setting, but I certainly could not have predicted the journey the research would take me on, nor the findings or conclusions that would be drawn.

I began the research process with the intention of examining how I could facilitate improvement within AVCT as an organisation, using systems and theories of change to bring about improvements in the local community. The belief held being that if I could enhance my practice alongside AVCT's, then this would lead to greater community development, a flourishing hub with a growing sense of well-being and improved lived experiences. This approach was soon recognised as top down, and formulaic. It was at that point that I experienced a remarkable volte-face in terms of acknowledging the absolute necessity to capture the experiences and views of members of the local community. Being intuitively aware of holding a participatory world view, it now seems bewildering that I did not recognise that there were distinct paradigms to consider when I embarked upon this doctoral study. From the outset I failed to adopt a truly participative approach because I had

not fully understood the significance of the two contrasting paradigms. As the research process developed I came to perceive the distinction between Newtonian and Participative lenses and adopted the latter. A single, spontaneous interaction with one member of the community re-directed my research approach and world view to the participatory mode.

One of the most important decisions taken was when I elected to spend an extended period of time to reflect upon my professional career in the form of assessing some critical incidents. There was a hiatus at the end of my second action research cycle when I encountered overwhelming feelings of frustration and helplessness, brought about by the lack of progress in understanding how to improve people's lived experiences. The application of critical incident analysis, advocated by Tripp (2012) provided an opportunity for retrospective learning. By analysing key incidents in my professional career, insight was gained into the influence of the dominant neoliberal paradigm that was inhibiting change and compromising my contribution to community development and well-being. Taking time to assess seminal incidents proved a powerful learning experience; as each critical incident was examined, I grew more pessimistic because of the dominance of neoliberal processes impacting upon my work. Greater understanding of ontological considerations helped me to realise how the neoliberal doctrine and a Newtonian world view were the greatest challenge to improving the lived experiences of people living in disadvantaged circumstances. Thus, my focus turned towards comparing the outcomes of working within Newtonian and participatory paradigms. In effect, it was the process of studying for a PhD that made me acutely consciousness of the existence of opposing world views. I had encountered what Freire (1996) termed 'critical consciousness' by becoming aware of the barriers imposed by the neoliberal agenda and could now begin to consider action that could produce the potential for change.

My practitioner-based knowledge acquired through forty plus years of experience yields added value to scholarly theoretical explanations of how to improve the lived experiences of people in disadvantaged communities. As the research progressed, I increasingly came to see connectedness and relationship working as essential components of social justice. Ultimately, I conclude that it is only by applying relational and participatory practice that improved community outcomes can be secured with the accompanying promotion of greater social justice.

1.3 Problem statement

Historically, the Joseph Rowntree Research Foundation has been trying to discover what works in terms of improving the lived experiences of those in disadvantaged communities and AVCT has featured in some of their reports (2010). The Foundation has produced a wide range of research papers to propose strategies which reduce inequalities and promote social justice. Despite the vast array of research proposing amelioration, the depressing fact is that very little progress has been achieved. Overall, it can be seen that ‘a significant number of neighbourhoods suffer from social polarisation and multiple disadvantages. Attempts to regenerate such neighbourhoods in the UK have been met with limited success’ (Smith, 2011, p. 6). Since the beginning of the twenty- first century, we have retained inequalities in our society and these have increased in scale and complexity. Lupton suggests that this is because:

successive governments have chosen not to act to close the gap between rich and poor (through for example, more redistributive taxation), nor sought with others to contain the negative impacts of globalisation, deep seated problems will remain in many neighbourhoods (2003, p. 152).

Lupton also discusses the rhetoric of regeneration and the lack of progress in improving the quality of life of people in disadvantaged communities and invites others to investigate frameworks which can enhance peoples’ lived experiences. Thus, this thesis supports Lupton’s call for others to explore strategies that will improve peoples’ lives.

1.4 Purpose of the study

Stoecker (2012, p. 15) defines community development as:

a process in which strategies are developed as a means of building the capacity of groups to define their own concerns, acquire the resources to address them then work towards providing relevant responses.

This quotation encapsulates the genesis and objective of my research, namely to investigate strategies which improve community well-being within a disadvantaged community. In 2010, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR hereafter) identified Alt Valley Community Trust as a key factor that had influenced improvement in the North East of Liverpool:

This Social Enterprise (AVCT) was credited by many as a key reason for improvement in Croxteth. This is partly for its education, training and employment programmes, but also for the Leadership it provides within the community, challenging other service providers to use their resources for maximum local benefit (IPPR North, 2010, p. 64).

As a founding member of the organisation I recognised that there was a shared sense of collective pride given AVCT's contribution to the well-being of the local community since our foundation. However, I was also conscious that we had not fully involved community members in developing new initiatives which could impact positively upon their lives. It could be argued that well-intentioned members of AVCT had worked on developing aspects of community development, and yet despite the success of the initiatives they have missed the opportunity to fully involve community members as active participants shaping their own worlds. Conversely, the opposite could be said, by demonstrating that the key influencers in the organisation are still members of the community, even though they are employed in senior leadership and managerial roles within the Trust. AVCT has the potential to secure positive outcomes for the communities we serve, but my concern was that the organisation was not sufficiently self-aware in terms of our strengths and development areas. I found that everyone was always so busy delivering, that limited time had been set aside for reflection and discussions about best practice and assessing the impact we have within the local community.

I considered whether we were missing the opportunity to be more influential and effective, because we did not fully recognise community agency and accountability? There was a sense of a committed and motivated staff, being stuck in our individual mental models of community development and well-being, without discussing and agreeing what these terms meant. The Trust has contributed to improving community outcomes, but with limited opportunities for capturing the voice of community members and involving them in decisions which affect their lives. This theme represents another important aspect of my research, as I set out to strengthen the opportunity to devise community-driven solutions to local problems. McGarvey (2018) has described how local people in Glasgow took direct action over a thirty year period to oppose school and community centre closures. They assumed control either through the occupation of premises or through democratic

elections. He interprets this process as communities starting to re-engage having been abandoned by successive governments, the final outcome being:

the quality of life rose substantially, not because there was more money-there wasn't, but because people were beginning to take responsibility for their own community. In this shared purpose, our lives gained new meaning and our quality of life improved, even though our material circumstances remained the same (McGarvey, 2018, p. 56).

A parallel can be drawn between the national political agenda and the corresponding community experiences and responses in Glasgow and Liverpool, so my thesis explores community-based action for transformative change.

1.5 Autoethnographic research motivation

2022 marked fifty years since I left the sixth form. This realisation led my thought processes towards a consideration of factors influencing the decision to submit a PhD research proposal. Believing that we are shaped and influenced more by nurture than nature, I took some time to consider my motivation. This autoethnographic, reflective process transported me to my childhood in 1950s Liverpool. I was eldest daughter of six children. My parents ran an inner-city dairy and worked 364 days of the year delivering milk to the local community. It was a blissfully happy, stable childhood which inculcated family-orientated values alongside generosity, tolerance and respect.

I have an indelible memory of one evening. My paternal Grandmother was looking after the children. I was about eight years of age and took myself out of bed to get some water; walking into the living room I asked my Grandmother what she was watching on the television. I had observed Nazi soldiers searching young boys in a concentration camp and found the scene upsetting and bewildering. At first, she turned my head away from the screen, then switched the set off and placed me on her knee. Holding me close, she told of the horror of the Nazi persecution of the Jews. Finally, she said, 'Promise me Al that you will never treat anyone differently because of their religion or colour'.

'No Nain, I won't'.

I am convinced that this seminal moment made a lasting effect on my life as it marked the beginning of a commitment to a generic sense of social justice and the promotion of

equality for all. It has been noted by Denzin (1997), that the process of writing an autoethnographic account helps researchers to appreciate the meaning and motivation of their own lives. The sculptor, Barbara Hepworth has stated that everything she felt as a young child in Yorkshire was dynamic and such feelings remained with her throughout her life. This held resonance for me as my childhood was imbued by sentiments relating to fairness and equality which I still carry today. 'Perhaps what one wants to say is formed in childhood and the rest of one's life is spent trying to say it' (Hepworth, no date). By including a record of my autoethnographic reflections, I came to recognise how prominent social justice was to me, as a lifelong guiding principle. Eventually these 'personal stories become vehicles for social critiques through which readers gain understandings of autoethnographers' social realities and of the social forces contextualizing their experiences' (Holman- Jones, Adams and Ellis, 2016, p. 109).

The transition from childhood to adulthood for me was set against the backdrop of major social reconstruction and radical restructuring of public welfare provision following the Second World War. Today this period is considered as a socially democratic era. It was against this background that my nascent childhood values centred upon social justice were shaped and consolidated. A raft of social policies came to form the Welfare State with collective provision for education (The Education Act, 1944), Social Security (The National Insurance Act, 1946) and Health Care (The National Health Act, 1948). Accompanying this landmark legislation was an acknowledgment of the importance of promoting economic growth, productivity, full employment and greater equity. There is no doubt that these policies improved my physical well-being, lived experiences and employment opportunities. Education was the most crucial influencer as the seven-year grammar school education armed me with the necessary knowledge, skills, qualifications and motivation to apply for a place at university. The subsequent degree and Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) were only made possible by being awarded a full maintenance grant which supported me until I secured a full-time teaching post. My entire family certainly benefitted from these gargantuan social programmes with ease of access to a National Health Service, universal free education and the safety net of social security. One most notable improvement being housing developments and slum clearance schemes which saw us relocate to a large, high quality council house. One cannot under-estimate the positive impact

the welfare state had upon the British public, particularly benefitting the more disadvantaged communities. Some commentators warn against 'the impression of a Golden Age in which lavishly funded welfare systems operated in a rosy glow of consensus' (Timmins, 1995, p. 3). Whilst appreciating this author's critique of the welfare state, I challenge his perspective because during this phase of my life, I did feel that society had experienced a watershed and that ordinary families felt more secure, stable and able to improve their lot than in previous decades. I recall anecdotes from my maternal grandparents' lives whereby the main breadwinner's occupation as a casual dock labourer created inordinate levels of poverty, hardship and anxiety for her family in the 1930s. Quite Dickensian in style with Grandpa queuing up as a young father in the hope of being selected for a day's work, or pawning items to purchase food for his family. On one occasion he applied for unemployment benefit and officials visited the home to check that the family only had essential items in situ otherwise they were instructed to sell disposable goods. My Mother recounted how on one occasion, her brothers had wheeled their piano down the back alley of their tenement home to keep it out of view from the Labour board staff and avoid losing potential welfare benefits. Given such desperate living conditions, the introduction of the welfare state brought dramatic amelioration to standards of living. The contrast between pre and post welfare state inauguration is dramatic, so this period of my life represented a care-free, halcyon phase. Timmins was analysing the welfare legislation and programmes with an academic remit and provides a coherent and comprehensive account of policies from 1942 to 1992, but I believe that one important aspect is marginalised, that of people giving their account of the difference made to their lives. Those subjected to policies are rarely given the opportunity to tell their stories. Welfare state provision impacted positively upon my extended family so their perception of positive lived experiences cannot be dismissed. Timmins (1995) however, does inform one's thinking with regards to urging caution in assuming that the Conservative party always held a blueprint to break up Beveridge's five giants (Education, Health, Social Security, Housing, Policy of full employment), whilst Labour always championed further development and expansion. He suggests that it is not appropriate to assume that these parties hold differing views on the welfare state and upholds this assertion by highlighting the fact that the Conservative party was responsible for some of the most expansionist phases such as Higher Education and the Labour party extended mean testing regulations. He goes on to say that the boundaries of

the welfare state have fluctuated therefore definition can be problematic, as it can be perceived in broad or narrow terms. 'It is not some fixed nirvana which we either draw nearer or retreat from' (Timmins 1995, p. 4). Whilst hardly a nirvana, the original components of the welfare state created unprecedented improvements in people's lived experiences and life paths. These entitlements have been dismantled gradually since 1979 following the distinctive ideological reversal championed by the Thatcher administration (Gough, 1980). Today, current welfare provision bears no resemblance to the form established in 1948. The dominant ethos of consensus and cooperation in the post war era has been eroded by successive governments, who have moved from sustaining a welfare state (Tomlinson, 2005) to an epoch which has been described as a post-welfare society. Over the seventy-year period, the central pillars of the welfare state have transformed into entities which few could have envisaged. Today, Education, Health Care and Social Security systems are primarily influenced by the tenets of neoliberalism in which economic domains, competitive markets and private enterprise dominate the political landscape.

During this first phase of my life no adverse events occurred to challenge my developing world view and associated values of quality, fairness and social justice. This is because they mostly synchronised with the prevailing spirit of consensus and co-operation during post-war reconstruction. My practice has always incorporated collaboration and working relationally to promote equality and justice. This ontological view had become a default, intuitive mode throughout my life and naively, until my teen years I genuinely assumed that most of society concurred with the promotion of a dignified, fair world for all humankind. Never did I envisage that the Newtonian paradigm would come to dominate most societies driven by mechanistic, reductionist, and competitive values characteristic of a neoliberal *modus operandi*.

It was not until the late 1960s that I became aware of dissatisfaction with the status quo and gradually became more conscious of living through what Ledwith (2020) describes as a period of significant social change. Having witnessed wide scale social unrest whilst on a French language exchange to Paris in 1968, I sought the reasons for the grievances and discontent. My teachers and host family condemned the civil disobedience and provided no explanation for the protests. The city seemed to be in a total state of turmoil and social unrest. Schools and universities were closed because of the protests and police patrolled

the streets to control those who were demanding social change. The social unrest drew me towards investigating the causes of student and worker protest and I began to assimilate a socialist ideology with a focus upon the re-distribution of wealth and a fairer society. Slowly, I was becoming aware of global upheaval, protests and increasing demands for change.

In the next decade university life galvanised my emerging ideology as I joined countless activities to advance feminism, anti-racism and socialism for a more equitable and just society. Whilst campaigning for a better world, I was never exposed to the concepts of neoliberalism or globalisation. The terms had not entered the general lexicon, but they would surface decades later. The growth of a consumer-based society led to increased demand for material possessions and globalisation was advancing. However, during this first stage of my life from childhood to adulthood, I was unaware of these emerging forces which would not only undermine the Welfare State but transform society and my professional experiences beyond recognition.

Selecting teaching as a career I worked to improve the life chances of the students in the three working class comprehensive schools in which I taught. I had experienced social mobility because of the state education system, so I now wanted the same opportunities to be available for my students. Promotion and responsibility came rapidly, but I was shocked to witness the machinations of some colleagues who sought leadership roles to secure increased financial gain and status for themselves. I also made a commitment to the promotion of lifelong learning and taught courses on a voluntary basis to hundreds of adults who made full use of their improved skills and knowledge. In the first few years of my career, I held the firm belief that schools were encouraging the empowering nature of education. However, disillusionment set in within a decade as I realised that most colleagues were content to prioritise their own needs and paid scant attention to addressing the continuing injustices found within society and illustrated daily in our schools. References to 'these types of kids' were very common, and many staff rejected my contention that schools could be responsible for underachievement or poverty of expectations. To many colleagues, the students and their families were the problem, not the school processes or national policies.

Happily, I transferred to a different comprehensive school with a colourful history involving a parent-led occupation to prevent the school closure. It had been run as an independent

school for three years then re-opened and re-instated with the Local Authority in 1985. At that stage numbers on roll were very low, as media coverage had featured it as the school run by parents not professionals. My remit was to raise attainment and harness the influence of the community to raise standards. Upon arrival, I expected the teaching staff to all be committed to the value of consolidating the community links, but surprisingly there was a sense of resentment to the continued involvement of local people in the school's development. More concerning was the arrogance I detected in some quarters where teaching staff openly voiced the view that parents and community members should now cease their involvement and leave the school to the professional educators. I was encouraging an alternative approach; to listen to parents and incorporate their perspectives into educational practices. Griffiths (2003) has shown that partnerships with parents improve outcomes for students and this increases social justice. My remonstrations to colleagues that the school and their job would not be in existence without the parents' direct action and occupation were dismissed by many staff. One teacher having remarked 'I am bored stiff with the endless tales of how they kept the school open, someone needs to tell them that nobody is interested anymore'. Tomlinson (2019) reminds us of the insidious nature of the authority of the professional when analysing power relations in the field of special and inclusive education. This concept was mirrored by the process of school-based personnel failing to acknowledge that parents and community members still had an important contribution to make to school development. Community activists had galvanised widespread support to maintain the momentum and commitment to re-opening the school but ironically, once the school was re-instated under Local Authority control in 1985, 'community involvement in the school actually decreased' (Carspecken and Miller 1985, p. 95).

This was in fact, a deeply significant moment for me, as I viewed the occupation with pride and an example of how local community members could challenge the status quo and secure improved outcomes for an acutely disadvantaged neighbourhood. Pockets of extreme deprivation existed throughout the city of Liverpool and Croxteth at that time and many felt abandoned by government agencies. The school occupation had empowered many community members to take direct action to improve their conditions, but the desire to continue being involved in a meaningful way was subsequently thwarted. Croxteth

Community Trust had been established by the occupation's action committee to raise funds and manage the school provision, so these members suddenly found themselves redundant. Their energy and commitment to change things for the better still had full momentum so the Action Committee continued as a community-based charity seeking improved life chances through Education (re-named Alt Valley Community Trust). Their vision chimed with my principles, so I accepted an invitation to join the board of trustees and support the continuing effort to enhance the lived experiences of the local community. In terms of a shared philosophy the members espoused common values of social justice and improved opportunities for our community. All were convinced that change could happen and that things would get better. More significantly the group held the firm belief that we could be instrumental in setting the direction of change.

Encountering members of the Trust left a deep impact and has influenced the rest of my life. Until this introduction, I had only inhabited a narrow educational world so now my horizons expanded, and I broadened my perspective to aspects beyond the confines of school. Concepts relating to community development, regeneration, social justice and well-being entered my discussions, and I began to consider different approaches to improvement. Interestingly, I now recognised an increased political awareness but rejected direct political action even though many others opted for this route to improve society. My energies were focused upon developing the secondary school as a vibrant community hub to raise educational standards and local aspirations. This strong vision maintained my focus and I committed myself to long-term tenure at this unique secondary school. Whilst working there though, I faced subtle and not so subtle judgements from colleagues outside the school setting which I interpreted as 'put-downs' for remaining as a long serving member of the school staff. The most common remark being, 'Oh are you still there?'

The inflection in their voices suggested surprise and disapproval for not following the traditional vertical career path of moving on to another school in search of promotion. Some individuals even enquired as to why I had never tried to work in a better school! This was a clear case of a clash of values given my professional focus upon social justice and the pursuit of improved outcomes for young people. This short but oft repeated sentence acted as a powerful affront and judgement upon my professional life and motivation. Whenever someone uttered the sentence, 'oh are you still there?' I experienced a range of emotions;

anger that the school was being judged as inferior, incredulity that individuals did not share my values and commitment to social justice. Croxteth Community Comprehensive had been vilified by the local press; frequently described as 'The Militant flagship school' which did not have qualified teachers and questioned why any parent would want to send their child to such an inadequate setting.

Instead of transferring schools in search of professional advancement, I opted for horizontal career development by combining the Deputy Head teacher's role with additional experiences, mostly community-focused initiatives. I maintained an outward-facing perspective and served on the local European partnership board supporting regeneration initiatives in the area. However, once again, disillusionment surfaced as I witnessed a series of professional consultants being parachuted into the area to tell the community what they needed. Many contentious meetings resulted in increasing awareness that local people knew what was wrong in their community and could suggest solutions. I recall a meeting where a group of commissioned consultants presented their blueprint for the area, and one elderly man asked those assembled to define the term consultant. He did this before making representations about the third draft of their proposed regeneration plans and continued with, 'A consultant is someone who borrows your watch then tells you the time'. The mounting frustration of community representatives was clearly evident, and these sentiments influenced the direction I took in terms of adopting a more autonomous, action orientated stance. Following this approach, outlined by Ledwith (1997), community members become agents of change. In 1993, alongside four other AVCT Trustees, I launched an educational alliance with the aim of encouraging partnership work to improve outcomes for young people in the area. The response was extremely disappointing as no representatives from schools, further education colleges, careers, youth service, universities or the local authority attended. At that juncture, no schools seemed to value parental or community involvement until a new Head Teacher standard of community cohesion was introduced by the Department for Education and Skills in 2000 (DFES hereafter). Henceforth, schools began to be outward-facing to be accountable to Ofsted. Clearly this was not based upon the values of the school leaders but more likely linked to Burke and Litwin's model (1992) which illustrates how external factors are often the most important influencers when considering drivers for change within organisations.

The lack of response from professionals in the public sector created a more powerful stimulus to take direct action, so I joined five other members of the Trust in donating £15,000 per person to purchase a building with the aim of creating a centre for lifelong learning.



Figure 1 Photograph of Croxteth Communiversity

Source: author's photograph

We named it The Communiversity (see above) and this marked the beginning of AVCT becoming an asset-based charity with a broader remit extending beyond the original single-issue educational strand. As a values-driven practitioner, social justice, empowerment and individual well-being had influenced all my work and professional practice, so it is easy to see how I had been drawn to AVCT as a challenging organisation with a shared resolve to improve the lives of the community we served.

From 1994 to 1995 I was Acting Head Teacher at Croxteth Community Comprehensive School, and during this time had led the school through a series of dramatic challenges to secure improvement and stability. A monitoring visit from Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) praised my contribution and indicated that the collaborative focus upon teamwork amongst all stakeholders had led to a qualitative and vibrant learning provision for students.

Following the HMI's inspection, I inaugurated an investigation into a Governor who was articulating racist views at meetings. The Chair of Governors warned me off this course of action. In a telephone conversation he told me that I was a very 'silly girl' for taking such steps and that it would have consequences when I came to apply for the Headship.

Continuing with my preferred course of action the member of the Governing body resigned. Shortly after that incident interviews were held for the Head teacher's role, and I failed to

secure the substantive position. I am sure that most individuals facing similar circumstances would have left the school as soon as possible, but I made a conscious decision to stay working in the Croxteth community and continue working with AVCT to improve the lived experiences of the local community. On a personal level, I drew upon my values-based practice to seek alternative routes to secure positive outcomes in the wider educational world. Professional and personal growth came in the form of negotiating new roles and challenges, such as directing an Educational Action Zone and becoming a Learning Consultant with the Centre for Educational Leadership.

In 2014 I embarked upon an Erasmus+ project with Uppsala University and a Vocational skills-based organisation in Berlin to develop innovative approaches to reducing NEET statistics (young people not in employment, education or training). The initial optimism soon gave way to feelings of frustration once I recognised that our partners were more interested in theoretical research and were unwilling to adopt a practical action research-based model to improve practice.

A similar situation arose from involvement in a Construction Industry Training Board project (CITB hereafter) aimed at increasing the number of young people entering at professional level in Built Environment careers. The funder's project manager rejected most of my evidence claiming that it was not sufficiently robust. I had submitted the results of qualitative interviews in which students articulated their thoughts on changing perceptions of the industry and accompanying higher aspirations. The CITB only wanted quantifiable evidence of numbers participating in outreach work and bespoke initiatives. I challenged this judgement claiming that we needed to discover what actual difference the project was having on young people, but this was rejected in favour of copies of attendance registers and checks to verify that all proposed activities had taken place. I politely suggested to the CITB's project management team that 'they inhabited a different world to me'. This important realisation had arrived late in my career, as I finally came to see that we were so frequently not comparing like with like. Invariably, funding bodies were applying a different set of criteria to assess the relative success of initiatives targeted towards improved outcomes for young people and the communities that they inhabited. Increasingly I became more compelled to explore how I could assess the actual difference that AVCT was making to peoples' lives and to enhance this impact even further.

I was introduced to a colleague's PhD supervisor with the aim of securing her services as a senior academic supervisor for the Erasmus + 'Education for Equity' project. This individual had an immediate impact upon me as she asserted that she had no interest in just being a named person to pay lip service to the Erasmus compliance processes. She continued that, if I was serious about improving our practice and thereby improve the lives of young people then yes, she would be happy to help. This was such a refreshing change to encounter a like-minded professional concerned with making a positive difference for others. This brief but significant interaction with this individual created a sense of excitement, her exposition of action research as a potential methodological approach to improve outcomes held resonance for me. The prospect of acting as a practitioner-based researcher was a real possibility and more importantly it aligned with my values and brought me full circle to childhood thoughts of hoping to make the world a better place. The person in question became my PhD supervisor and she has continued to support my practice-based research for the development of new knowledge for over eight years.

By articulating an autoethnographic framing device, I came to acknowledge that social justice had and always would be a driving force in my professional practice. This was now to be developed further and understood through the research process of a PhD study.

Mentally, I was already formulating a research question; it was to be based upon my work within AVCT and the contribution to improving the lived experiences of local communities. Having been involved with the Trust for over forty years there was now an opportunity to bring about further improvement by harnessing the efficacy of action research; an exciting and motivational prospect.

1.6 Research question and objectives

Given my long term involvement and commitment to the AVCT charity, I wanted to work with the staff body to examine the strengths and development areas of the organisation. I was open to challenge in order to bring about further improvement within local communities.

My research question remained constant throughout the study period:

How can I, in collaboration with others, enhance well-being and lived experiences within a disadvantaged community?

In order to explore this question I developed two key research objectives:

1. Investigate how AVCT as a community-based charity could achieve greater impact when contributing to improved well-being and lived experiences.
2. Identify and understand factors impeding AVCT's efforts to further enhance community well-being and lived experiences.

Initially, I had planned to include a third objective of developing a transferable model that could be applied to improve communities in similar contexts. This was abandoned at the end of my first action research cycle as a result of some new learning. Organisational models offering improved outcomes had not secured much improvement in AVCT's impact. Whilst they offered interesting discussion points, I found that imposed formulaic frameworks were counter intuitive to individuals who understood the unique contextual issues in the communities in which they operated. Models are too mechanistic and prescriptive and were found to inhibit community-based solutions to local issues. New knowledge is generated from a bottom- up basis not a top- down approach.

1.6.1 Investigate how AVCT as a community-based charity could achieve greater impact when contributing to improved well-being and lived experiences.

By exploring a range of literature, theorists, community voices and adopting an action research methodology, I discuss a range of theories which advance community development and well- being. It is important at this stage to state that I do not attempt to define the term well-being in the thesis. Any definition is problematic because it is multifaceted and subjective; contested politically, psychologically and personally. The World Health Organisation (2021) has noted how governments and researchers have been trying to measure national well-being for centuries, but usually they have deployed a single criterion such as life satisfaction. They assert that a wider and more multidimensional construct should be considered. AVCT's charity documentation focuses upon improving the conditions of life for local people. Over time, the company assimilated this broad definition of well-being and worked towards delivering interventions that could improve lived experiences. In this thesis I apply a generic assumption that well-being is based upon the concept of feeling good and functioning well. Huppert, (2009, p. 137) asserts that:

The concept of feeling good incorporates not only the positive emotions of happiness and contentment, but also such emotions as interest, engagement, confidence, and affection. The concept of functioning effectively (in a psychological

sense) involves the development of one's potential, having some control over one's life, having a sense of purpose (e.g. working towards valued goals), and experiencing positive relationships.

Whilst not attempting to define well-being, the concept is discussed at length throughout this narrative because AVCT's mission statement asserts that it is 'an enabling organisation promoting individual and community well-being'. I endeavour to identify the aspects of well-being that community members most value.

Curiously, AVCT has evolved as an organisation without a shared agreement or definition of community development and well-being. Obviously, objectives were established as part of our constitution and the following extracts reflect the overall aims of the charity:

To train and educate young persons through their leisure time activities so as to develop their physical, mental and spiritual capacities that they may grow to full maturity as individuals and members of society and that their conditions of life may be improved. To promote any charitable purpose in the area directed to the benefit of people suffering through unemployment, to advance education, to prevent ill-health and relieve poverty, distress and sickness. (Charity Commission, Memorandum of Association for Croxteth Community Trust, 20th March 1987)

These generic objectives have formed the basis of all work to address disadvantage. The organisation has been led by community activists striving to enhance lived experiences without any formal adoption of theories relating to well-being and community development.

In the first action research cycle, I explore personal and professional experiences amongst AVCT colleagues. Individual accounts were captured then assessed to examine how the organisation had improved lived experiences. These unstructured interviews created a space for individual experiences and narratives to be shared. The process gave me the opportunity to gather perspectives relating to the organisation's culture and effectiveness. Most importantly, it provided invaluable time to reflect upon the company's impact and the need to become more self-aware. Another important influence to my thinking came from Raworth (2018, p. 43) who suggests that people are able to thrive when they have, 'a world in which every person can lead their life with dignity, opportunity and community-and where we can all do so within the means of our life-giving planet'. This research study

contributes to our understanding of ways to secure conditions which contribute to improved lived experiences and well-being.

1.6.2 Identify and understand factors impeding AVCT's efforts to further enhance community well-being and lived experiences.

AVCT's context reflects life in a deprived community in contemporary society so this rich narrative has significance to wider society and is relevant nationally as well as locally. The third action research cycle offers a critique of current systems and processes required by funding bodies and the audit culture. Outputs are prioritised over outcomes and limited recognition is accorded to qualities associated with affective and relationship well-being which community members value. It demonstrates the inherent inadequacies which present barriers and challenges that compromise improved outcomes. By giving primacy to one way of thinking about the world much has been lost, and Denzin and Lincoln (2008) have demonstrated that there is a pressing need to analyse the nature of knowledge as it is certainly not value free but political. Hence it is important to seek a form of research which can generate new knowledge of aspects of social justice and well-being. Johnson and Parry, (2015) contend that it is peoples' lived experiences that generate such knowledge, not the theoretical mode of the academy.

Well-being and social justice is placed at the forefront of all AVCT's activities therefore our organisation will be better placed to promote meaningful opportunities for social change. It is envisaged that new ways of thinking and knowing will be developed which offer a counter-narrative to the current mainstream perception of community development which is based on tangible programme-focused initiatives.

1.7 Research approach

An eclectic methodology is applied throughout my research; this includes an autoethnographic framing device to examine the motivation that stimulated my research and analysis of key critical incidents experienced in my career. Action research formed the substantive methodological approach to the enquiry. The rationale to justify such an approach was that it would enable me to fulfil my purpose of creating:

a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory world view.....It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in

participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual person's in their communities (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p. 1).

I integrate first, second and third person approaches as interconnected strands of enquiry as advocated by Bradbury and Reason (2007). My individual and collaborative research will investigate how best to develop AVCT as an enabling organisation with the capacity to improve individual and community well-being. In first person inquiry I identify the strengths and development areas of my own professional practice at AVCT; this then informs future action. Second person inquiry takes the form of a collaborative investigation with colleagues to explore the possibility of developing new working practices within the Trust. The final line of inquiry is third person to support fellow professionals understanding of effective frameworks to enhance community well-being. I will share and disseminate new knowledge to a wider audience and invite further reflection and action. By applying differentiated methodology at various stages of the research, I will be able to identify new knowledge that would not have been apparent had only one research approach been used. One's choice of methodology is crucial as it represents the philosophical bedrock of a thesis. To this end, different research paradigms are discussed to highlight contrasting ontological considerations.

1.8 Research phases

The research developed along six phases:

2016	First action research cycle.
2017-18	Second action research cycle
2018-19	Extensive period of personal reflection.
2019-20	Third action research cycle.
2021-2022	Analysing, synthesising and interpreting data.
2022-24	Writing the thesis.

1.9 Scope and limitations of research

The research took place between 2016 -2021 and is focused upon one community-based anchor organisation's (AVCT) contribution towards improving the lived experiences of community members. The charity has evolved into a complex organisation providing services in education, community engagement, sport, health, libraries and children's

nurseries. Three cycles of action research were conducted and these incorporated reflective diary entries, case studies, unstructured interviews and interaction with community members accessing the company's services, members of AVCT staff and a collaborative inquiry focus group.

Given the vast amount of published material relating to Community development (Alinsky, 1971; Carspecken, 1991; Crow and Allan, 1994; Ledwith, 1997; 2010; 2016 and 2020; Stoecker, 2013; Russell and McKnight, 2022) it is clear that a plethora of approaches require consideration. For this study community well-being forms the bedrock for the inquiry. Participants were invited to describe and give their versions of well-being and in this way the community voice was captured and influenced the direction setting of all future development including planning processes and the assessment of impact. It represents a single case study. Flyvberg (2006) justifies this type of study, stating that the practical knowledge gathered offers valuable insight for theory generation.

1.10 Thesis structure and chapter summaries

The thesis objective is to assess how best to improve well-being within a disadvantaged community. This subject matter was born out of a strong sense of moral purpose and a desire to make a meaningful contribution towards advancing greater social justice by improving a community's sense of well-being and lived experiences. The thesis documents my understanding, thinking, key learning and professional practice which evolved throughout the research process.

Chapter 1. Introduction.

In this chapter I present the background, motivation and purpose of my study with the key research objectives and theoretical frameworks to be explored. A summary of each chapter is presented as a means of capturing the entire research journey.

Chapter 2. Research methodology.

This chapter identifies the range of available approaches to research community well-being and provides a justification for selecting a blended response that combines autoethnographic framing, critical incident analysis and different forms of action research.

The relationship between ontology, epistemology, axiology and my chosen methodology is discussed.

Chapter 3. The first action research cycle.

Here I share the first tentative steps taken as a practitioner-researcher to enhance AVCT's effectiveness and contribution to well-being. Research commenced with what appeared to be a clear cut and straightforward plan to explore aspects of individual and community well-being. The intention was to analyse how Alt Valley Community Trust, as an anchor organisation could contribute to improved community outcomes, by adopting leadership of change models (Beckard, 1972; Egan, 1993; Kotter, 1996; Fullan, 2005) and the principles of a Learning Organisation (Senge, 1990). Despite claiming to appreciate the value of participatory practice, personal reflection suggested that I had imposed a theory of change tool upon colleagues, so little wonder that the first year of research failed to yield sufficient depth of knowledge regarding a definition of well-being as a concept. Similarly, no plans had been made to capture the views of community members so this top- down approach to research was out of alignment with my intuitive view that communities had great potential to bring about social change. I came to the realisation that an alternative methodological position was required. Heron's work (1996) convinced me that a collaborative inquiry style of research held greater potential to secure new lines of thought and emerging knowledge. Some key learning unfolded as I recognised an error of judgement in assuming that improved organisational effectiveness would automatically have a knock-on effect upon the wider community. By the end of this first action cycle, it was clear that operating within the confines of AVCT as an organisation was too limited, and there was a pressing need to ensure that the voices of community members were captured if a deeper understanding of well-being was to be secured.

Chapter 4. Second action research cycle.

Here I explore ways in which AVCT could better understand the needs of the communities we serve by adopting a second person medium for the second cycle and forming a collaborative inquiry group with six members of staff who were eager to explore how to improve AVCT's contribution to community well-being. I acted as a facilitator to support colleagues in a process in which we considered the extent to which we actually meet the

needs of community members by conducting large scale consultation exercises. The results of this consultation reflected the overriding principle of the need to work more relationally with people. This informed our practice and led to the development of new approaches to community engagement and participatory practice.

The end of the second cycle marked another shift in my thinking as I recognised a key omission in the research process. Deliberations with the enquiry group suggested that they were experiencing a real sense of frustration, stress and powerlessness working to comply with the constraints and demands of funding bodies. This influenced my decision to pause the commencement of the third action research cycle to consider how the general political context had impacted upon my professional practice and the work of the Trust.

Chapter 5. Critical incident analysis.

The reality of working towards improved community well-being within the wider political context is examined in this chapter. By selecting four key events in my professional career, I was able to gather deeper insight and understanding of the political and epistemic currents that had influenced my work, and the factors limiting opportunities to secure improved well-being within my sphere of influence.

The snapshots of four incidents included:

1. Learning lessons about community resistance following the closure of a local secondary school.
2. The impact of an Ofsted inspection and a failing school status.
3. Leading an Education Action Zone and experiencing challenge from the local authority.
4. Witnessing an audit explosion and AVCT being obliged to repay over £58,000 to European funders.

The extended period of reflection was a powerful learning experience as I engaged at a deeper and more critical level with literature and refined theoretical and conceptual tools more assuredly.

Chapter 6. Third action research cycle.

The final action research cycle features in this chapter. Here, I conducted an examination of two contrasting community-based projects: a traditional government funded adult learning contract is compared with an autonomous platform of initiatives designed to respond to the community's perception of well-being. A critical analysis of both approaches is presented with a critique of current systems used to measure impact. Findings reflect the positive outcomes secured by AVCT-led initiatives with the transformative nature of working relationally with community members. This contrasts starkly with the constraining nature of neoliberal institutional frameworks demanded by most government funded initiatives.

Chapter 7. Findings and conclusions.

Having completed three full action research cycles, the thesis presents a synthesis and an assessment of what can make a difference to community well-being. It concludes with a reflection upon the key research findings and my contribution to new knowledge. The final iteration contains summative conclusions with potential implications for those who continue to strive for greater community well-being and the advancement of social justice.

1.11 Significance of the research

The study is significant because it offers a contribution to new knowledge within the field of community development; well-being and the promotion of social justice can be enhanced through participatory and relational practice. The current political context limits what local community organisations can achieve in the face of the various interests that dominate the global, national, regional and city-wide agendas. Yet my contention is that despite significant constraints, community-led change is still possible and should not be dismissed. A counter-narrative which places social justice and community well-being at the forefront of activities does exist and is articulated by those who experience the consequences of social injustice. Collaboratively we need to co-construct knowledge for change:

Change comes from small initiatives which work. We cannot wait for great visions from great people, for they are in short supply at the end of history. It is up to us to light our own small fires in the darkness (Handy, 1994, p. 35).

1.12 Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of my research motivation and the purpose of the inquiry. Autoethnographic reflection demonstrated a commitment to social justice throughout my life, and it is anticipated that the process of studying for a PhD will develop my knowledge and understanding of ways to further improve community well-being and lived experiences.

1.13 Visual representation of my research journey

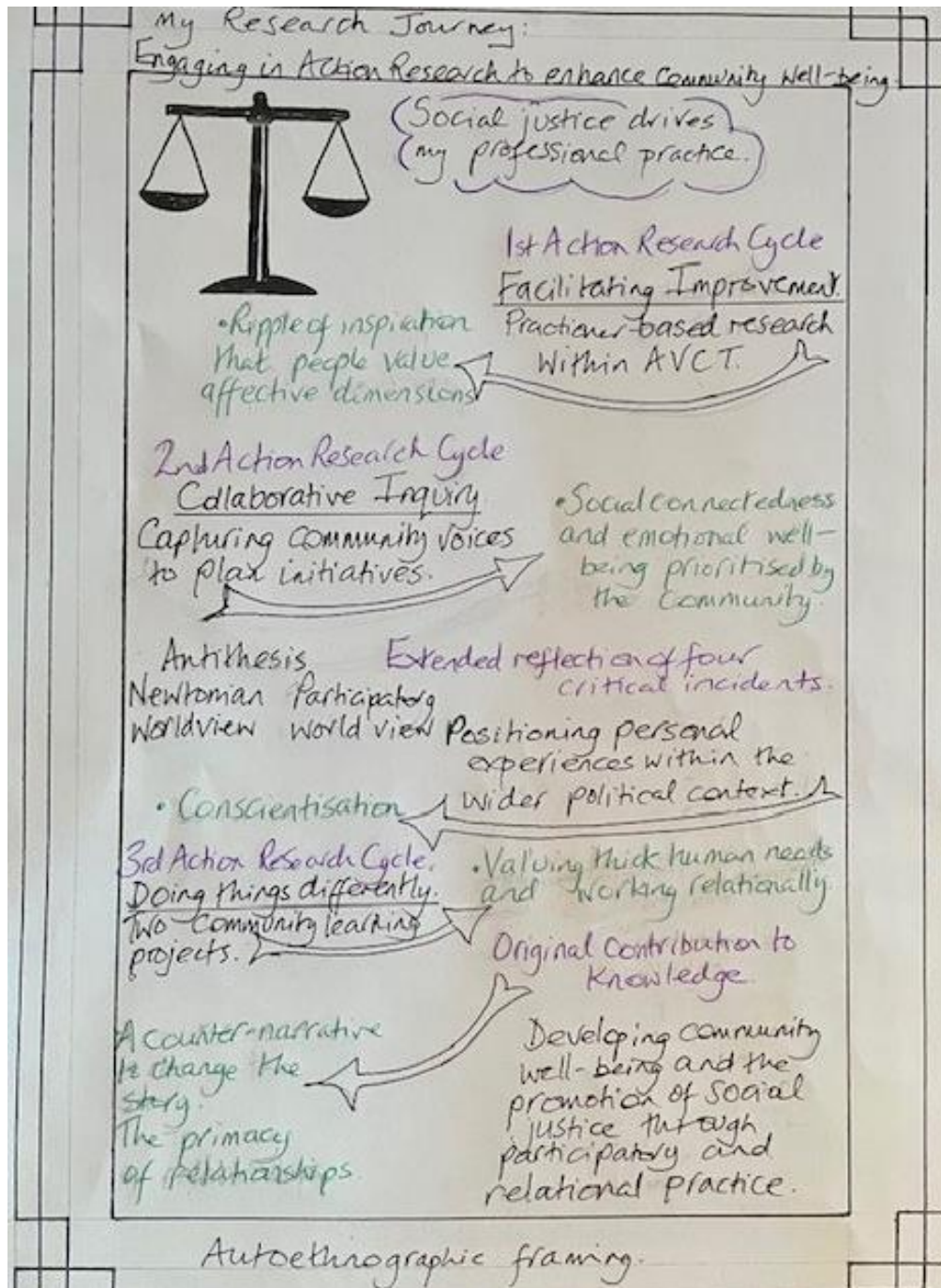


Figure 2 A visual representation of my research journey

Chapter 2. Research Methodology

In this chapter, I present the rationale for applying action research methodology to my inquiry and explore a range of issues influencing research practice. It commences with a summary of the autoethnographic framing that underpins this thesis followed by a discussion of the thinking processes involved in determining the most suitable methodology to achieve my research outcomes. Critical incident methods are also deployed as a means of complementing the substantive action research approach. The setting, timing and context for my research are explained and the overall strategy discussed with a focus upon evidence generation and analysis. Positionality and quality issues are explored in terms of justifying the validity of evidence and claims to new knowledge.

To conclude the chapter, I emphasise the importance of ethical considerations, particularly given the collaborative nature of this study and the prolonged interaction with a high volume of participants connected to a community-based charity in a disadvantaged area of Liverpool.

2.1 Autoethnographic and critical incident influences

My research question and methodological approach were clearly influenced by my personal biography and lived experience. In the previous chapter I presented an overview of my forty-five year career in secondary schools and a community-based charity in the Northeast of Liverpool. Over this arc of time, I had acquired a mass of practitioner-based, authentic knowledge which had left me with a deep sense of unease; a feeling that disadvantaged communities had been abandoned by successive governments. So much so, that in many cases community activists had taken it upon themselves to develop strategies to secure social change. Liverpool is acknowledged as one of the poorest cities in the United Kingdom; ranked third most deprived of the 317 local authorities in the country based upon average scores with the second highest number of areas in the most 10% deprived nationally (Index of Multiple deprivation, 2019). This index applies scores based on seven domains; income, employment, education, health, crime, housing and the living environment. Whilst a useful

tool to examine factors contributing to community well-being, I agreed with Lupton (2003) who stressed that quantifiable data can never provide accurate knowledge and understanding of peoples' lives, therefore, alternative forms of inquiry were sought.

The value of my cumulative knowledge is difficult to replicate given that it incorporates nearly half a century of experience. I am in a position whereby I can evaluate the policies and values impacting upon community members, thus offering a unique historical account of peoples' lived experiences in a deprived area of Liverpool. From the outset, it was envisaged that the original contribution to knowledge would be based upon my distinctive role and extensive experience of collaborating with others to improve community outcomes. 'Most of us come to a social justice paradigm because we have experienced injustice in our own lives and want to do something about it' (Johnson and Parry, 2015, p. 11). This was the case in my research journey. Having reflected upon experiencing decades of declining services and conditions; I had detected minimal improvement in peoples' lived experiences. Throughout my life I had worked indefatigably to contribute to a more socially just world, thus, I sought a form of methodology that could bring about greater social change.

Autoethnography underpins this research endeavour and was deployed because the reflexive process helped me to make sense of my professional experiences and created a social commentary on the reality of living and working under a neoliberal hegemony. To deepen this reflexive process, I incorporated critical incident analysis as advocated by Tripp (2012). Rather than viewing events as inherently critical, I embraced the idea that it is our interpretation that renders them significant. These incidents functioned as heuristic devices (Pölya, 1945), enabling me to examine challenges from new angles. When I encountered an impasse in understanding AVCT's impact within the local community, I turned to four key episodes that illuminated both the strengths and limitations of my professional practice. This approach generated deeper awareness of the factors impeding my contribution to shaping improved community outcomes.

2.2 Selecting a methodology; the rationale for applying action research

Methodology incorporates principles of inquiry and the approach taken to seek new knowledge about the world. It can be described as the overall strategy, plan and research

design (Crotty, 2015). It generally follows that positivist researchers will favour quantitative methodology with deductive, theory-testing practice, whilst Interpretivists tend to opt for qualitative approaches and their accompanying focus upon 'listening' to the data through an inductive method, developing new knowledge as part of this process, (Heron, 1996; Brew, 2001). The positivist and interpretivist methodologies are generally regarded as mutually exclusive because communities of researchers hold different lenses (Sparkes, 1992) when examining and trying to understand the world. Whilst the adequacy of traditional methodology is being challenged, (Brew, 2001) the schism between positivist approaches to research and more recent interpretive modes remains entrenched; 'the rules of objectivity, consistency, rationality and detachment are still the major way in which research outcomes are judged in the peer review process' (Brew, 2001, p. 54). Increasingly though, it is being recognised that there are more nuanced contrasts between the two lenses. Most researchers encounter dilemmas when selecting the most appropriate methodology to support their study's objectives. One is faced with the axiomatic nature of paradigms and invited to select from positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, constructivism or the emerging participatory approach. (Heron, 1996; Reason, 1998; Reason and Bradbury, 2001). Adding to such difficulties we come across increasing examples of the 'blurring of genres' (Geertz, 1993) as several paradigms overlap on occasions. 'Inquiry methodology can no longer be treated as a set of universally applicable rules or abstractions' (Denzin et al., 2024, p.75).

Research paradigms are composed of ontology, epistemology and methodology. It is my contention that axiology and the importance of values should be accorded greater influence when considering the inter-sectionality of the three domains; others however, such as Denzin et al., (2024) have argued that axiology should simply be grouped within basic beliefs. Values do feed into one's process of inquiry and influenced my initial research question, context, theoretical framework and methods of data-collection. Given that this research is focused upon examining ways to enhance the lived experiences of a community, it follows that social justice became an integral strand of the inquiry. Several academics (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Kuntz, 2015; Johnson and Parry 2015; Ledwith and Springett, 2022) helped to broaden my understanding of how one could specifically promote the use of research to secure greater social justice and social change. Some authors (Reason and

Bradbury, 2001; Johnson and Parry, 2015) have suggested that scholars committed to social justice-based research follow a 'paradigmatic orientation' with characteristics and shared features of qualitative inquiry.

Before committing to a specific research paradigm, I explored a range of options, mindful that one's methodological rationale represents the philosophical foundation for an inquiry. All types of research involve selective processes and the subsequent judgements and decision-making processes originate from an individual's own world view and unique life experiences. 'One's stance on ontological and epistemological issues generally drives theoretical and methodological principles that lead to research design and execution' (Johnson and Parry, 2015, p. 20).

2.3. The positivist research paradigm

The obligation to make choices is a relatively new phenomenon because until the middle of the twentieth century the positivist research paradigm predominated, and other ways of knowing were generally disregarded. This long standing paradigm emerged from the principles of Newtonian science formulated in the seventeenth century, and it became the dominant world view underlying traditional science (Heylighen, 2006). The key tenets became associated with certainty and determinism; a machine metaphor reflects the separation of parts with materialism, reductionism, objective knowledge and a belief in accurate prediction. According to Carey (1989, p.99) positivist sciences came to be viewed as 'the crowning achievement of Western civilisation and they assume that the 'truth' can transcend opinion and personal bias'. Fundamental to their belief is an objectivist ontology focusing upon universal rules and laws of the universe. Charmaz (2014) explains how positivists are committed to scientific empirical methods and knowledge because they promote the importance of objectivity, generalisations and the establishment of causal connections. Newtonian objectivity is an epistemology that claims the value of deploying a unitary scientific method to establish generalisations in the external world. Positivism promotes scientific objectivity because it holds that to be the only way to develop generalisable theories and causal connections. In this way the universe is seen in terms of an objective reality and the researcher is totally separate from the subject being researched. In addition, positivists assert that it is possible to have a theory of everything based upon the notion of a universal truth. It has developed into the most enduring, dominant and

influential paradigm and become deeply embedded in our psyche. Positivists maintain that 'qualitative research is not rigorous' (Silverman, 2016, p.4), mostly because of their insistence that researchers should remain detached to ensure objectivity when conducting research. However, this view is 'fundamentally flawed because all research involves the researcher's subjectivity no matter how much we might try to brush it aside' (McDonough, 2021, p. 70).

Lewin (1946) asserted that positivist, linear research has limited potential to encourage action and social change. A case in point being Frederick Taylor:

the American engineer advocated a Newtonian approach to the 'science of management' where industrial efficiency depends on work being entirely predictable and therefore performed mechanically, subservient to precise time-and-motion studies (Chevalier and Buckles, 2019, p. 15).

Even today, despite the wide range of methodological approaches available most academics continue to locate their research in positivism with an emphasis on the scientific method. This incorporates hypothesis testing, observation, experiments, measurement, technical procedures, replicable research designs, generalisations, predictions and verifiable, objective, quantitative knowledge. By applying these approaches they overlook many human issues because they cannot be aligned with positivist research designs and methodology. The main limitations of the positivist paradigm are the mechanistic, reductionist and deterministic principles underpinning this approach to research. The obsession with quantifiable evidence dismisses qualitative and interpretive data collection because it is regarded as non-scientific. 'Their beliefs in scientific logic, a unitary method, objectivity, and truth legitimized reducing qualities of human experience to quantifiable variables' (Charmaz, 2014, p. 6).

I rejected the positivist research approach because my inquiry was based upon human interaction; something far too complex to develop and apply a unitary theory. I did not think that quantitative methods could add substance or value to my inquiry (Somekh and Lewin, 2005). The emphasis on theory-testing overlooks a vital issue because; '...the complexity and the 'becomingness' of social life belies the possibility of a single exhaustive or definitive account' (Sparkes, 1992, p. 330).

2.3.1 The interpretivist research paradigm

It needs clarifying that in the initial stages of research I did not work within a participatory paradigm, this evolved as my inquiry developed and I came to view the value of such an approach as a result of new learning.

The empirical-positivist world view had been the foundation of Western inquiry since the enlightenment (Reason and Bradbury, 2001) but eventually it began to be questioned and challenged (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017) for accentuating measurement, objectivity and generalisable, universal laws. In contrast to positivist methodology sits an interpretivist approach. These relativist scholars represent an important response to the meta-narrative of positivism by proclaiming that no ultimate reality exists and there is no objective knowledge or universal truth, (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, Hurt and McLaughlin, 2012). Reality to them is always subjective and based upon individual interpretation, so truth depends upon an individual's personal perception. In time, I developed a qualitative, participatory research paradigm, with the aim of gaining knowledge of the subjective aspects of people's lives without attempting to quantify their actions or views. This held particular resonance for me in my first action research cycle when I gained some insight into community members' perception of their lived experiences. My early approach had not fully considered subjective dimensions of human experience, particularly within community contexts. As I engaged more deeply with the lived realities of community members, the interpretivist tradition held greater significance for me. This shift in perspective aligned with my growing recognition that understanding how people see and experience the world is essential for identifying meaningful strategies to improve community outcomes. Johnson and Parry (2015) advocate participative inquiry methods for those who hold specific research goals of making the world a better place and through my cumulative learning, I was drawn toward participatory practice as a theoretical preference and also, a necessary evolution in my methodology. It became clear that only by engaging with people relationally and respectfully, and by co-constructing knowledge from the ground up, could I access authentic, grassroots data that truly reflected their circumstances. This transition marked a significant change in my thinking, affirming that participatory approaches are not only more inclusive but also more capable of capturing the richness and complexity of lived experience.

2.3.2 The critical theorists research paradigm

Critical theorists seek knowledge about power dynamics and inequality questioning how society continues to produce unjust circumstances for so many groups of people. Resolutely committed to social justice, I have always been attracted to critical theorists because they sought knowledge about how to change society for the better. Freire, (1985) criticised positivist researchers' belief in an external truth which they could investigate objectively in a vacuum and one in which a researcher exists and operates independently. He suggests that they metaphorically don 'gloves and masks' to protect themselves from the world in which they themselves are participants. In a similar vein, Ledwith (2022) urges us not to critique as an outsider, at a distance, as orthodox research demands, but rather raise questions from within the realities of life.

However, my impression was that critical theorists were more concerned with structural dimensions and too hasty to offer solutions in the form of a grand theory. Marxism being a case in point; comprehensively challenging the social order through the combination of an economic analysis with political and cultural theory (Keucheyan, 2014). The 'class essentialism' associated with Marxism has been challenged by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) who argue that the social world has evolved into a more heterogeneous entity with class no longer being central. In a similar manner Fraser (2008) has written extensively on contemporary forms of injustice which may not always include economic oppression. There was an array of critical theories to consider, but I felt that something important was missing. Ledwith (2022) helped me to bridge a gap in my knowledge; she welcomed examinations of why unjust situations still exist but urged scholars to accept that such an approach only generates one form of knowing. I began to discern that there were alternative ways of knowing emanating from participatory ontology:

By engaging directly in the entangled processes of knowing and being in everyday life, the process of critical questioning can take place immersed within the process of participatory practice (Ledwith, 2022, p. 19).

2.3.3 Evolution of Action research

When I commenced this inquiry, I did not fully appreciate the potential of challenging injustice within the community by empowering people and encouraging them to engage in collective action for social change. Having reflected at length on my long-standing career

and examining comparative research literature, I selected action research as the main methodological orientation. This was a positive choice to select a qualitative model because I was seeking to generate research that would be practically useful to those working in communities who wanted to improve their professional practice, and make a direct, positive impact on people's lives. 'The practices of qualitative research can help to improve and change the world in positive ways', (Denzin et al., 2004, p.xxxii).

The sole factor influencing my decision to pursue a research degree was to seek deeper learning to improve AVCT's contribution to peoples' lives and sense of well-being; hence the decision to select a more meaningful methodology with the potential for social change. Alternative research approaches did not have as much potential to actively promote improvement within the community, so I embarked upon an action research form of methodology; eventually however, there was a realisation on my part that community development needed to be grounded in participation, if improved outcomes were to be determined at grass roots level.

I was drawn to action research after reading the work of Lewin, 1946; Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000; Reason and Bradbury, 2006. It is a form of inquiry that gives an opportunity to examine one's practice then take action to address any identified issues. The process of reflection and learning from the action is integral as Carr and Kemmis (1986, p.162) explain:

Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out.

The principles of action research stem from the tradition of self-reflection and reflective practice advocated by Schön's (1983), experiential learning, Dewey (1944) and Buber's (1947) theory of knowledge creation through lived experience analysis. Many regard Kurt Lewin as the founder of action research in the 1930s, and I noted with interest that he was supported by Argyris who then went on to investigate interactive theories of organisational behaviour and professional effectiveness with Schön's (1974). My research commenced within the theme of applying action research to improve my professional practice and AVCT's effectiveness, so it was a natural development for me to remain focused upon

working relationally with stakeholders within the company. The next stage involved moving beyond the confines of examining AVCT as an organisation to the broader community that we served. 'The pioneering action research of Lewin and his associates showed that through discussion, decision, action, evaluation and revision in participatory democratic research, work became meaningful, and alienation was reduced' Adelman (1993, p.15).

His model involves a series of steps, 'each of which is composed of a cycle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action' (Lewin, 1946, pp. 202-3). The stages follow a sequential process in which researchers plan, act, observe and reflect.

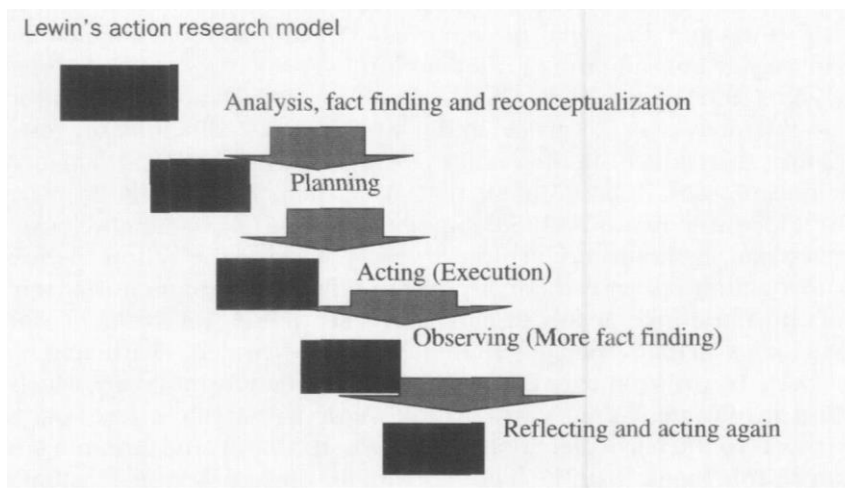


Figure 3 Lewin's Action Research Model

Source: Dickens and Watkins (1999, pp. 134)

Plan. A problem or concern is identified as requiring attention. Data is gathered to conduct a preliminary analysis of an issue then an informed action plan is devised. This is where unfreezing takes place as the awareness of a need for change is recognised.

Act. The agreed new actions/ behaviours are pursued.

Observe. As new behaviours are enacted fact finding continues through observation

Reflect. Outcomes and results are considered and if positive then the new behaviours need to refreeze.

This does not represent the end of the process; on the contrary it marks the beginning of the next action research cycle whereby an initial idea is identified followed by fact finding,

planning, taking first steps, evaluation, amend the original plan and move onto the next action step.

In the 1960s there was a brief period in which action research was popular; evidenced by a range of intervention schemes in education, health and housing which were designed to improve life chances within disadvantaged communities. Stringer, (2007, p. 9) believed that this proved to be short lived and declined 'because of its association with radical political activism', subsequently, the traditional separation of knowledge and practice was quickly re-established. The resurgence of action research came about in the 1990s with the work of proponents such as Heron (1996) and Reason (1998). Since that period action research has established a significant foothold within the realm of community-based, participatory inquiry. I was drawn to action research because it offered the opportunity to apply research as a vehicle to promote improvement in society. Lewin (1948) goes as far as suggesting that action research should be conducted as the substantive methodology when studying everyday practice because it can integrate research and professional practice. I envisaged action research as a vibrant form of methodology that had the potential to bring about genuine and positive change for the community, as it provided a framework for 'engaging in an individual and collaborative cyclical process of reflection and action with the aim of improving practice and enabling social transformation' (Kemmis and Mc Taggart 2005, p. 22).

The action research continuum is now extensive, and deep thinking was required to select the most relevant mode for my research. I began the first action research cycle by adopting a professional self-study as outlined by McNiff (2013) whereby an exploration of AVCT's effectiveness and my leadership role was conducted. Very swiftly this approach was deemed to be inadequate as I had applied a problem-solving mechanism. Similarly experience in the educational world had shown me that too often classroom-based versions of action research were one dimensional and simplistic, orientated solely towards problem-solving. The reflective cycles are deployed as a series of steps and a process to follow to address a technical issue to solve. One definition of action research is that it is 'the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it' (Elliott, 1991, p. 69) His work is rooted in the professional development of teachers and whilst important it fails to

connect action beyond an individual's setting, this realisation led me to seek an alternative form of action research.

Johnson and Parry (2015) have illustrated the broad action research spectrum which includes classroom action research, organisational efficiency and critical action research. I sought a form of action research that could extend into, through, and back from the community I served. My interpretivist position drew me to a form of action research rooted in participatory principles and knowledge equity for the promotion of social justice. Some theorists promote a basic premise maintaining that action research is simply an approach to inquiry and not a methodological formula:

Action research is not a methodology but an orientation that shapes methodological practices. There are no right answers, rather lots of choices, and quality of inquiry is shaped by the appropriateness of these choices and the way they are made. (Reason and McArdle, 2004, cited in Becker and Bryman eds. 2004, p. 4)

A watershed was reached at the conclusion to my first action research cycle when I recognised that I had been pursuing a top-down form of action research. The key learning at this stage was that henceforth, it would be more important for me to pursue action research which was based on generic principles of collaborative and democratic inquiry to create new knowledge relating to community development. I interrogated the literature to help me re-locate my methodological approach and decisively selected participatory action research as the most relevant mode for creating positive change. Having always held the belief that everyone can make a difference to improving our world it followed that my research should be participatory and cooperative in style. 'Traditional' research tends to be linear and stops at the report and dissemination of findings stage even when dealing with people- related subject matter. 'Having a purpose involving action or change is additional to the traditional exploring, describing, and explaining purposes.' (Robson, 2011, p. 40). I regarded action research as the most appropriate vehicle to develop methodologies which pursue action for change. It does not rely upon any specific academic theory because it is flexible, and the form of inquiry is open to researchers designing their own methods and techniques to collect a body of evidence for a study. This evidence can then be used to challenge and change by sharing new claims to knowledge to influence other practitioners and policy makers.

2.3.4 The participatory research paradigm

A researcher's philosophical stance is shaped by ontological and epistemological commitments, yet it is important to acknowledge that at the outset of my research journey, I experienced conceptual uncertainty regarding differing worldviews. Although I felt intuitively drawn toward a participatory approach, I lacked the confidence to fully embrace or articulate this approach in the early stages. As the inquiry progressed, however, I was increasingly drawn to personalised, relational, and humanistic forms of investigation as these approaches resonated more deeply with the lived realities of the communities I was engaging with.

Over time, it became clear that my interpretivist position was inherently aligned with participatory principles and rooted in a commitment to equality and social justice. This realisation marked a significant shift in my thinking, as I began to see participatory practice not merely as a methodological choice, but as a philosophical and ethical imperative. I grew confident in applying participatory methods, finding strong resonance with Gadamer's (1975) assertion that inquiry should move beyond the pursuit of generalisations and instead seek to understand the uniqueness of social phenomena.

I came to view the positivist paradigm as incompatible with the relational, inductive nature of my work and my evolving participatory stance allowed me to explore and honour the complexity of people's lived experiences. This changed mind-set emerged through cumulative learning and reflective engagement, ultimately shaping the conceptual framework and methodological integrity of the research.

2.4 The concept of knowledge

Any exploration into developing new knowledge to improve communities requires a discussion surrounding the concept of knowledge, with a greater appreciation that this is fluid, relative and context-bound. Lyotard (1997, p.7) declared:

Scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with, another kind of knowledge, which I will call narrative in the interests of simplicity.

Brew, (2001, p. 64) argues for an expanded notion of research inquiry in the academic world and claims that 'Since research is a systematic process of developing our knowledge of the

world and our relationship to it, ideas about knowledge are fundamental to an understanding of its nature'. Scholars have written extensively (Brew, 2001; Herr and Anderson; 2015) on aspects of knowledge generation, the status and validity of different forms of knowledge as well as the management and dissemination of knowledge. Lyotard (1997, p.8) suggests that whilst nation states once fought over territory and raw materials there could be a possibility that in the future they may compete for the control of information. This has now come to pass as so many of us question what is truth?

For it appears in its most complete form, that of reversion, revealing that knowledge and power are simply two sides of the same question; who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided?

Brew (2001) goes as far as suggesting that knowledge is in crisis. She maintains that the positivist rules and values of objectivity and detachment are valued by academics and society at large because they define standards of rigour and validity. However, such rules can inhibit new learning because:

...the requirement to be objective means that only a certain area of the total possible knowledge available to the individual researcher or team of researchers can be accepted as legitimate and an even more limited range presented to a wider audience (Brew, 2001, p. 53).

I increasingly sought ways to engage in dialogue with others as co-researchers and co-subjects, this represents the evolution in my thinking. Collaborative, relational working became a pre-requisite because inter-connectedness was increasingly being acknowledged as an important concept to explore. Ledwith advocates the application of participatory methods (2016; 2020; 2022), her work acted as a significant catalyst in my overall research strategy. She had acknowledged (2016) the influence of Reason and Rowan's seminal work *Human Inquiry* (1981) in recognising that there were alternatives to traditional research methodologies which could also acknowledge the humaneness of all those involved in the research process. Ledwith has (2016, p.147) described the excitement of being introduced to alternative styles:

An eclectic range of methods within an action research approach gave me confidence in participatory action research as consonant with the value base of community development. It offered me an integrated praxis, a way of building

knowledge in action and acting on that knowledge in iterative cycles that go even deeper and broader into understanding and change.

Her enthusiasm was infectious and convinced me to adopt a participatory methodology. The value of applying a participatory action research mode was further strengthened by Heron's argument that people have a basic human right to participate in decisions about research design if the intention is to develop knowledge about them:

This right of research subjects to participate in research decision-making has, as its correlate, the matching duty of researchers to encourage, educate and empower their subjects to exercise it. To generate knowledge about persons without their full participation in deciding how to generate it, is to misrepresent their personhood and to abuse by neglect their capacity for autonomous intentionality. It is fundamentally unethical (Heron, 1996, pp. 21-22).

Heron's expanded epistemology (1996) was another important factor in selecting to apply a participatory approach to research. He advocates a multi-dimensional account of knowledge by identifying four different ways of knowing; experiential, presentational, propositional and practical. These forms are subject to value judgements linked to the status and hierarchies of knowledge. For Heron, experiential is the source of all knowing and my study sought this form of knowing as a means of understanding the tacit, embodied lived experience of community members. My epistemological stance developed into one that values participants' knowledge which can contribute to a body of evidence and interpreted into a meaningful reality. Smith (2004, p. 40) has demonstrated the value of exploring details of 'participants' personal lived experience and how people make sense of that personal experience'. Any attempt to separate methodology from the researcher's worldview or ways of knowing will prove to be problematic. The symbiotic relationship is represented in Braun and Clarke's argument that states:

Our key point is that ontology and epistemology are everywhere, that theory is something we *practice* in and through research, not as an abstract and optional precursor to the doing of research (Braun and Clarke, 2024, cited in Denzin et al., (2024, pp. 389-390).

Participatory action research operates from a belief that any inquiry studying groups of participants should involve them far more meaningfully than merely using them as informants generating data for a researcher. Participatory action research elevates participants' stories by including them in the process of data collection, analysis and

subsequent action planning and change implementation. (McIntyre, 2006; Tuck, 2009). Because my study was based upon exploring ways to improve the lived experiences of disadvantaged community members, it became an absolute prerequisite that research would be conducted with participants and not something done to them. Many community members had voiced sentiments suggesting that apathy was a common outcome given that positive change had not been realised in their lifetime, therefore this inquiry prioritised capturing community voices.

My resolve was to develop a process of co-producing knowledge with our community so that local problems can be addressed and community-led change encouraged. The rationale for this approach is based upon decades of observing areas remaining disadvantaged despite national and local intervention strategies, (IPPR North, 2010). Failings are often attributed directly to the community members when frequently the consequences of failures within the system are generally poorly thought out or poorly administered policies. Such external forces are beyond local peoples' control, but action research can be used to address aspects of life when community members are able to become self-determining agents. Problems can be identified and prioritised as issues leading on to collaborative work to make changes and assess impact. These lived experiences bring their own realities, and new knowledge can contribute to our understanding of positive community development.

The advantage of involving participants in the active transformation of their own lives is acknowledged because they possess authentic and embodied knowledge which informs the research process. 'This approach is particularly beneficial for marginalised populations whose voices are seldom represented in the scholarship' (Johnson and Parry, 2015, p. 51).

I drew upon aspects of the action research continuum to develop a personalised and differentiated approach relevant to my situation. I selected the participatory and collaborative inquiry method as I judged this to be the most efficacious mode to develop new knowledge of factors contributing to well-being. AVCT has a long-standing history of encouraging sustained interaction with members of the local community, so I was confident that community members would participate and collaborate in the research process.

I selected collaborative inquiry as one form of action research as it represented a means of helping me to understand and improve the working practices at AVCT and, through

reflecting upon practice, to theorise what we could do to improve community well-being. Collaborative inquiry formed the foundation for the second action research cycle. The aim was to facilitate collaborative inquiry processes to enable fellow professionals to apply cycles of action-reflection to understand how their evolving commitment to community development, in dialogue with service users, enhances well-being. This method aligned with my core values of social justice and fairness and complements my relational style of working to encourage human flourishing. I sought a cooperative, experiential inquiry method to generate the co-production of knowledge. I am acutely aware of gatekeepers controlling the status of knowledge and appreciate that if communities do not represent their own stories and create their own futures then others will continue to do so for them. My aim was always to seek knowledge which would improve action and outcomes and not just stop at the reflection and report writing stage. I facilitated a collaborative inquiry method underpinned by action research cycles; this approach was favoured because it sought knowledge for action, rather than knowledge solely for reflection. A dynamic, live inquiry with action-orientated outcomes offered the best opportunity to consider ways of enhancing community well-being. Action research is grounded in a relational and transformational epistemology, so community members' authentic knowledge of lived experiences was sought as a means of considering alternative approaches for community development and well-being.

2.5 Research strategy

My research strategy evolved through a dynamic and layered integration of action research, autoethnography, and critical incident analysis, each contributing uniquely to the depth and direction of the inquiry. While action research formed the substantive backbone of the study, I increasingly recognised the value of understanding important aspects of my lived experience in order to gain 'insights into the meaning of my own life' (Denzin, 1997, p. 11). This shift reflected a growing momentum in my thinking toward approaches that privilege relationality, reflexivity, and personal meaning-making:

Autoethnography is not simply a way of knowing about the world; it has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally and reflexively. It asks that we not only examine our lives but also consider how and why we think, act, and feel as we do (Holman-Jones, Adams and Ellis, 2013, p. 10).

Autoethnography became a pivotal element in this evolution. Its emphasis on the researcher's active engagement in the narrative allowed me to juxtapose personal experiences with broader societal conditions, requiring conscious, emotional, and reflexive engagement. Through this lens, I was able to explore significant aspects of my own lived experience and gain insights into the meaning of my professional journey. These reflections helped contextualise the study and ultimately served as the springboard for adopting action research as the most credible methodology to pursue social change and improve community outcomes.

This methodological shift was also informed by Herr and Anderson's (2015) work on researcher positionality. I came to understand that critically examining my own status within the inquiry required deep engagement with autoethnographic influences, including key professional experiences. Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) argue that self-reflection often transforms the personal into the political, and my own reflective processes affirmed this claim. Bochner's (2000, p. 70) view that 'we narrate to make sense of experience over time' further supported my understanding that autoethnography is not about precise recollection, but about extracting meaning from lived experience.

Together, the autoethnographic, critical incident analysis and action research methodologies formed a cohesive and evolving research strategy, whilst not linear in design, the approach honoured the complexity of human experience, prioritised relationality, and affirmed my commitment to social justice through participatory, reflexive inquiry.

2.6 Methods of data collection

An array of data collection strategies was deployed during this inquiry; action research cycles, unstructured interviews, reflective logs, project reports, meeting minutes, autoethnographic and critical incident narratives. These methods can be likened to tools; therefore the choice of tools impacts upon new knowledge and findings. Methods have consequences as Charmaz (2014, p. 26) asserts; 'How you collect data affects which phenomenon you will see, how, where and when you will view them, and what sense you will make of them'. By selecting a broad range of methods I opened more opportunities to read, observe, hear, discuss, sense and attend to peoples' lived experiences. All these

mediums generated data that informed my learning, but an important factor was to ensure that critical reflection was deployed when analysing and making sense of all data sources.

By using reflections of personal experiences, I was applying autoethnographic and critical incident methods. Three cycles of action research incorporating interviews and interaction with community members accessing the company's services as well as twenty-seven members of AVCT staff. A reflective journal was maintained throughout the research period and similarly I prioritised critical reflection when conducting the collaborative inquiry and participatory action research. In this way, I as the researcher became an integral component in the study. The observations recorded by the researcher are as equally valuable as those collected from the researched (McDonough, 2021). So long as I am 'locating myself in the research, I am able to critically reflect on the varying positions and standpoints from which I am developing my data and producing my analysis' (Marley, 2016, p. 1).

2.7 Overview of research methods

Phase	Methods
2016. First action research cycle	Autoethnographic reflection, meeting notes and minutes from SLT sessions and the cross section of staff focus group, informal discussions and semi structured interviews with colleagues and community members, reflective journal narrative
2017-18. Second action research cycle	Collaborative Inquiry group conduct participatory action research with extensive community consultation through surveys and face to face interaction, meeting notes and minutes plus recordings of deliberations, reflective journal narrative.
2018-19. Extended period of reflection	Individual retrospective reflective inquiry into four critical incidents to locate my professional practice within wider society. Reflective journal narrative.
2019-20. Third action research cycle	Continuation of collaborative inquiry group to conduct participatory action research comparing two community learning based projects, reflective journal narrative.

Table 1 Showing methods used to collect data.

2.8 Research setting

The research took place from 2016-2021 and the study is limited to an examination of one charitable organisation, located within a definitive geographical sphere of influence in the Northeast of Liverpool. All participants and co-knowledge creators either reside or work within the same socio-economic context. For this study, community development and well-being form the impetus of the inquiry.

2.8.1 Timeline and phases of research

The research was characterised by six distinct phases:

Phase 1 (2016) Formal research commences through extensive reading and autoethnographic reflection. First action research cycle. First person research into improving my practice and the effectiveness of AVCT as an organisation to improve people's lived experiences.

Phase 2 (2017-18) Second action research cycle (part 1 in 2017) Second person research in the form of a collaborative inquiry to develop strategies that pay cognisance to community voice.

Second action research cycle (part 2 in 2018)

Delivering new activities and programmes informed by community voice.

Phase 3 (2018-2019) Extensive period of personal reflection.

Exploring political and structural factors inhibiting progress towards social justice and community well-being by applying critical incident methodology.

Phase 4 (2019-2020) Third action research cycle. Comparing a traditional government funded initiative with a bespoke project targeted at improving community well-being.

Phase 5 (2021-2022) Analysing, synthesising and interpreting data.

Phase 6 (2023-2024) Thesis writing.

2.9 Analysing and interpreting data...Quality issues

Baptiste (2001) reminds researchers that whilst there are numerous ways to achieve one's research objectives there are certain 'non negotiables' connected to the analysis stage. His contention is that regardless of one's discipline or subject matter four phases are prerequisites; defining the analysis, classifying data, making connections between the categories of data and writing to convey the results. When analysing data, I was conscious that the overarching aims of the process would be to find meaning in the body of data

generated through first, second-and-third person inquiry. All members of my research community would need to be able to make sense of this evidence and similarly those outside of the inquiry could benefit from the cumulative findings. There is no prescribed framework for analysing data, so I steered a path that synchronised with AVCT's setting and context.

I collated a broad spectrum of rich data. Analytical processes were conducted on a continuous basis. My sustained interaction with colleagues and service users within AVCT provided significant insight into the lived experiences of people living in disadvantaged circumstances. I was able to capture a plethora of views and perspectives of participants, these took place through on-going conversations, collaborative inquiry groups, community engagement meetings and semi-structured interviews. The creation of safe spaces encouraged dialogue and this provided greater insight into peoples' lived experiences. Interactions valued 'a purposeful conversation that takes place to gather descriptions of an interviewee's reality' (Johnson and Parry, 2015, p. 56). In this way, analysis provided a framework to identify important issues and draw conclusions. 'As we learn how our research participants make sense of their experiences, we begin to make analytic sense of their meanings and actions' (Charmaz, 2014 p. 19).

2.9.1 Positionality

Most researchers have a tendency to define themselves with an insider or outsider status, but this binary position is too simplistic 'and does not take into account the fluid and complex experiences of researchers and participants' (Levy, 2013, cited in Johnson and Parry, 2015, p. 95). From the outset I was conscious of being classed as an insider researcher given that I was an integral part of AVCT and considered ways to ensure that I did not make assumptions about participants' experiences and behaviour. A typology devised by Herr and Anderson (2005) proved to be an invaluable device helping me with the difficult task of defining my position, evolving as I progressed through the different stages of each action research cycle.

2.9.2 Table of researcher positionality types

	Positionality of Researcher	Contributes to	Traditions
1	Insider (researcher studies own self/practice)	Knowledge base, improved/critiqued practice, self/professional transformation.	Practitioner research, autobiography, narrative research, self-study.
2	Insider in collaboration with other insiders	Knowledge base, improved/critiqued practice, Professional/organisational transformation.	Feminist consciousness raising groups, Inquiry/Study groups, Teams
3	Insider(s) in collaboration with outsider(s)	Knowledge base, improved/critiqued practice, Professional/organisational transformation.	Inquiry/study groups
4	Reciprocal collaboration (insider-outsider teams)	Knowledge base, improved/critiqued practice, Professional/organisational transformation.	Collaborative forms of participatory action research that achieve equitable power relations.
5	Outsider(s) in collaboration with insider(s)	Knowledge base, improved/critiqued practice, Organisational development/transformation.	Mainstream change agency; consultancies, industrial democracy, organisational learning; Radical change; community empowerment (Paulo Freire)
6	Outsider(s) studies insider(s)	Knowledge base	University-based academic research on action research methods or action research projects

Table 2 Researcher positionality types

Source: adapted from Herr and Anderson, 2005, pp. 40-41

This six point continuum of participatory action research supported my thinking as I moved through each cycle of reflection, it convinced me to deploy an autoethnographic framing device and to adopt multiple positionalities. The subsequent chapters illustrate how the first action research cycle was underpinned by a combination of position one and two, insider researcher examining my role as Chair of the board of trustees in collaboration with other insiders (colleagues). At the conclusion of this cycle there was a recognition that new knowledge could only be secured by moving into positions three and four; the second cycle therefore was characterised by we (AVCT colleagues) insiders collaborating with outsiders (community members) to determine criteria to judge well-being, then tentatively we sought reciprocal collaboration by acting upon community voice and delivering activities in conjunction with community members. The third phase of action research replicated positions three and four as the collaborative research group compared two different forms of projects to assess which was the most effective. Herr and Anderson (2015) contend that position four (insider-outsider teams) is the ideal to achieve because it prioritises reciprocity, collaboration and equitable power relations. This thesis demonstrates how 'achieving an equitable and democratic collaboration across differences in power, status and resources is extremely complicated' (Herr and Anderson, 2015, p. 48). Whilst I found achieving position four challenging, I remained committed to a collaborative and participatory style. Traditional forms of research position the researcher as an outsider, and this creates power differentials. I wanted to ensure that I was not speaking for members of our community or claiming to have created new knowledge on their behalf. Collaborative research is complex but by attempting to understand this we can deepen our learning and specifically produce new knowledge (Herr and Anderson, 2015).

Most researchers can acknowledge that everyone brings perspectives drawn from their own lived experiences; therefore, it is imperative for one to acknowledge such influences and build critical reflexivity into the research process (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). Having taken many years to establish mutual trust with all stakeholders associated with AVCT, a participatory action research approach aligned well with my objectives. However, I recognised that positionality also influences a range of associated factors such as responses relating to quality criteria, validity and the trustworthiness of research; 'the degree to which

researchers position themselves as insiders or outsiders will determine how they frame epistemological, methodological and ethical issues' (Herr and Anderson, 2005, p.30).

2.9.3 Validity

Adopting qualitative research methodology in the form of action research soon brings one face to face with questions relating to quality indicators and validity. Positivists criticise qualitative research suggesting that the approach is anecdotal, unsystematic, subjective and unscientific. They invariably call for the application of rigorous methods which can prevent bias and subjectivity; otherwise, findings have no validity (Hammersley, 1992). Their underlying belief is that researchers should not play an active role in any inquiries but remain detached to present a plausible and credible explanation to others; this is a positivist interpretation (Weber, 1947) seeking value-free, objective, scientific neutrality and an external truth. Those favouring quantitative research methodology have questioned whether findings from action research inquiries can be generalised. This is probably due to their belief that concepts are verified through statistically-based data (Herr and Anderson, 2015). 'They reject other ways of knowing, such as through interpreting meanings or intuitive realizations' (Charmaz, 2014, p. 6). Thus, I recognised the importance of ensuring the value, rigour and validity of my research.

I began by applying Kemmis and McTaggart's (1987) spiral model of on-going process of self-reflective cycles (plan, act, observe, reflect then repeat) to generate new, authentic knowledge and expand upon social theory. The validity of qualitative research, particularly within participatory and action-oriented paradigms, is most compellingly articulated by Herr and Anderson (2015) and Reason and Bradbury (2001). Focusing upon epistemological issues and the nature and production of new knowledge; seeking to broaden the bandwidth of validity. They argue that the generation of trustworthy knowledge hinges on critical and reflective dialogue with others, a process that fosters authenticity and dialogic validity. In this view, peer action researchers serve as critical friends, engaging in ongoing dialogue to offer alternative interpretations and challenge assumptions (Herr & Anderson, 2015, pp. 69–70). Validity, then, is not a static benchmark but a dynamic, relational achievement.

In my own inquiry, validity was not secured through conventional means but through a sustained, evolving engagement with self, colleagues, and community members. The

research was not a discrete or isolated study; rather, it unfolded as a dialogical and reflexive journey over time. Gadamer (1975, p. 37) affirms this orientation, describing understanding as a process of ‘risking our prejudices in conversation with others’, a sentiment that resonates deeply with the relational ethos of my work. To ensure credibility and depth within the complexity of real-world settings, I worked reflexively to examine my influence on data collection, selection, interpretation, and analysis. Validity was further reinforced through the application of Winter’s (1996, pp.14-22) six principles of rigour in action research, which provided a robust framework for inquiry:

- Reflexive critique: Continuously interrogating my own assumptions and positionality.
- Dialectical critique: Embracing contradiction and tension as sources of insight.
- Collaborative resource: Valuing co-inquiry and shared meaning-making.
- Risk: Acknowledging the vulnerability inherent in authentic engagement.
- Plural structure: Recognising multiple realities and perspectives.
- Theory, practice and transformation: Integrating conceptual understanding with lived change.

Together, these principles served not only as methodological anchors but as ethical commitments, ensuring that the knowledge produced was both credible and deeply attuned to the relational and transformative aims of the research.

Reason and Bradbury (2001) propose an essential element for action researchers to consider; they encourage individuals to ask what the purpose of the endeavour was and to question whether the research has been worthwhile in terms of, what value has been actualised. These questions led me to a deeper understanding of validity and what they refer to as ‘choice points’. I concur with their contention that action research cannot simply be viewed as a stand-alone, discreet study, on the contrary it is an, ‘emergent, evolutionary and educational process of engaging with self, persons and communities that needs to be sustained for a significant period of time’ (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p. 12). Overall, as Greene (1992) suggests the most important issue for action researchers is to make it more meaningful, rather than getting it right.

2.10 Ethical considerations.

Avoiding harm to others is a key principle when considering good ethical practice. A key question to stimulate discussions would be whether research 'poses risks to the subjects that are greater than the risks they face in their everyday lives' (Giddens, 2013, p. 33). I held such an interpretation of good ethical practice at my research proposal stage; articulating a simplistic belief that because I had been an integral member of the AVCT community for several decades that I could adopt a researcher's role without needing to consider the possibility of causing potential harm to others. This participatory action research inquiry involved me as the Chair of the Board of AVCT trustees with a wide range of participants associated with the charity. As my research progressed, and I thought more deeply, ethical considerations became more apparent and complex. 'Clearly, ethics-philosophically and pragmatically-are of the utmost importance to the social justice scholar given our propensity for advocacy' (Johnson and Parry, 2015, p. 54).

On a practical level ethical practice included informed consent, here I outlined the aims of my research to all AVCT staff and community members accessing our services and invited them to participate on a voluntary basis in an action research study. It was explained that through meetings, discussions and unstructured interviews I would be investigating the charity's effectiveness in improving peoples' lived experiences. In addition, colleagues were invited to join a collaborative research inquiry to assess AVCT's impact at a deeper level. Participants were informed when I recorded any verbal interaction, and I requested permission to use extracts from transcripts in the thesis using pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. It was always made clear that individuals could withdraw at any time, and I repeatedly emphasised the importance and value of their views to the study.

Once my first cycle of action research commenced, I swiftly acknowledged that although I was ethically intentioned, I was insufficiently ethically aware and informed. There can never be a universal model of good ethical practice because ethical dilemmas are a constant presence in the research process. Relational ethics became increasingly central to my thinking as the research unfolded, shaping both my methodological choices and ethical sensibilities. From the outset, I encountered dilemmas that demanded a relationally attuned response. One such challenge arose during the writing of my autoethnographic summary and the recounting of critical incidents, where I became acutely aware that some readers

including current and former colleagues might recognise themselves. In response, I redacted potentially sensitive material and rephrased the narrative to a more considered, less confrontational tone, guided by a commitment to care and respect within relational boundaries.

As the action research cycles progressed, ethical tensions surfaced in three key areas: agenda setting, the potential to evoke anxiety among colleagues when discussing sensitive topics, and the influence of my positionality on participants' responses, particularly the risk of reproducing existing power dynamics. I recognised that power differentials are often embedded in researcher–participant relationships (Johnson and Parry, 2015), especially in how agendas are shaped and questions framed. This awareness led me to prioritise the creation of safe, democratic spaces where meaningful dialogue could flourish and dialogic validity could be secured (Herr and Anderson, 2015)

Power became a recurring theme across the three cycles, prompting sustained ethical reflection and adaptive responses. Initially, I approached ethics through a rule-based lens, but this gradually evolved into a more relationally responsive stance- one that was sensitive to context, emotion, and the lived realities of those involved. Over time, I came to view ethical uncertainty not as a problem to be solved, but as a generative space for shared understanding. Constantly mindful though of how my thoughts, assumptions and actions could be influencing the research process.

Finlay (2019) reminds us that no single theory can resolve all ethical questions, as these are inherently context-dependent. Gabriel and Reeves (2024) deepen this insight by suggesting that relational ethics invites practitioners to move beyond compliance and into connection. They suggest asking not only “what is right?” but “what does this relationship require of me?” This reframing helped me to see ethical practice as a dynamic, relational endeavour, grounded in mutual responsiveness, attuned care, and a commitment to honouring the dignity of others.

This chapter captures the factors influencing my overall research strategy.

I have justified the use of a blended approach in supporting the realisation of this inquiry. My choice of autoethnography, critical incident and action research methodologies provide an evolving history of practitioner-based attempts to enhance the lived experiences of people living in disadvantaged communities. Subscribing to Reason and McArdle's (2004) philosophy that the purpose of human inquiry is the flourishing of people within their communities, I resolved to critically evaluate the strategies purporting to bring about the most positive changes in people's lives. By positioning myself in the epicentre of events and examining my own experiences over a forty-five year period this research study also captures the changing political, social and cultural landscape experienced by so many community members, most notably in the city of Liverpool.

Whilst the diverse range of methodological approaches and considerations were bewildering at first, Johnson and Parry (2015, p. 283) provided reassurance declaring that, 'Research-like- life is a contradictory, messy affair'.

The subsequent chapters include three action research cycles as well as a reflective, critical analysis of incidents experienced in my professional life. The cumulative findings from these methodological processes are then analysed and interpreted before presenting the outcomes and conclusions in the final chapter.

Chapter 3. First action research cycle 2016: Facilitating improvement

This chapter commences with a contextual background to Alt Valley Community Trust and reasons for adopting a first-person research practitioner style of inquiry. As Chair of the board of Trustees, I outline how I worked with senior staff to identify the key strengths and development areas of our organisation to inform future planning and direction setting. The application of theoretical models of leadership and change fail to convince me that their adoption would make any significant improvement to the lives of the communities that we served.

At the next stage a focus group is created consisting of staff at all levels of the organisation; the intention being to broaden my understanding of what form of provision most enhanced community well-being. Few colleagues showed any interest in furthering a long-term analysis into the company's effectiveness; largely due to the challenges being imposed upon them by contract compliance. I had not appreciated the scope and detail associated with audit systems, and the way in which the accompanying demands were limiting colleagues' effectiveness when working with community members. Research stalled at this point before serendipity came into play. Whilst discussing ways to improve AVCT's work with a colleague, a member from the library reading group interjected; she challenged my premise that every organisation has development areas to work upon. This interaction and her comments deepened my thinking to the extent that research took an alternative route.

At the end of the first action-reflection cycle it was clear that operating within the confines of one organisation was far too limiting; there was a pressing need to capture community members' views about how AVCT contributed to lived experiences if a deeper understanding of community well-being was to be secured. Therefore, I set a new course and established a collaborative research inquiry group.

3.1 Research commences

In the previous chapter, I outlined the range of methodological influences informing my research practice. Autoethnographic framing led me towards an action research approach and my first cycle commenced in 2016. The overarching aim of this first cycle was to conduct a practitioner- based inquiry to explore how I, as Chair of the Board of Directors, could facilitate improved outcomes for communities served by Alt Valley Community Trust (AVCT). My research was based firmly upon core values of equality, social justice, inclusivity and human flourishing; always promoted throughout my professional life as a secondary school leader and director of a social business. I sought to investigate how I could make a greater contribution to individual and community well-being.

Research question: How can I, in collaboration with others, enhance well-being and lived experiences within a disadvantaged community?

As a founder of AVCT and long serving director, I had the opportunity to apply first person action research to improve my professional governance role and strategic direction setting. If I were to make a difference to the lives of local people, then robust self-reflection and analysis of my skills as a facilitator would be needed to develop the organisation and improve upon our previous best. Until this juncture, my role as chairperson had been non-operational with quarterly board meetings acting as the key medium to support and challenge staff to realise the company's vision; 'engaged, empowered, sustainable communities devising community solutions to local problems'. (Alt Valley Community Trust, 2016)

3.2 First action research cycle

The decision to step away from a traditional Chair's technical role and adopt an action research approach to improvement marked the commencement of the first cycle. Before beginning to work directly with the leadership team, I reflected upon the organisation's development and summarised it from my personal perspective.

Historically, the first phase of the company's development (1987-2000) had been characterised by establishing ourselves as a small charity providing locally based lifelong learning activities. Gradual expansion of educational programmes for young people and community-focused engagement activities led to slow but steady growth of the company

regarded as the second phase of development between 2000 and 2010. Then, a dramatic wave of change occurred as the finite nature of our main funding source (European Social Fund) was announced. In response to economic pressures, the organisation altered course and worked towards a wider regeneration-based agenda. Subsequently, in addition to community-based educational provision; health, sport, business support, employment and leisure-based activities were now offered. The third phase (2010-2016) brought in fundamental change with a strategic shift to new premises acquisition, broader provision and more diverse sources of funding. Rapid growth ensued, largely credited to the leadership capability of the chief executive. He had inspired and enthused stakeholders within the organisation to expand and diversify within a relatively short time frame. Expediency had created the need for swift and major change, and positive outcomes had resulted mostly as a result of a fierce resolve (Collins, 2005). His authoritative and affiliative style of leadership had a positive impact upon the climate of performance within the company. Goleman (2000) has outlined the efficacy of authoritative leadership styles in mobilising teams to secure a vision, people are given clear direction but simultaneously the freedom to decide key operational issues. He suggests that this ethos is the strongest determinant upon the climate of an organisation, and I found this to be a pertinent point. The chief executive was a long-standing community activist with formidable leadership skills and deeply committed to community development.

The stakeholders bought into the new company vision, so his overall impact on climate was strongly positive. He motivated people by making it clear to them how their work fitted into the larger vision for the organisation. The staff understood that what they did mattered and why. This was evidenced by the company's Investors in People assessment (2016) which highlighted the overwhelming sense of pride amongst company personnel, and satisfaction of being part of an innovative organisation that was improving the quality of life for communities. Clearly the blend of authoritative and affiliative leadership styles had maximised commitment to the company's goals and strategy by framing an individual's role within a big picture and vision. 'An authoritative leader states the end but gives people plenty of leeway to devise their own means' (Goleman, 2000, p. 84). The climate provided autonomy for staff to innovate, experiment and take calculated risks. This fitted perfectly with the company's stage of development, which needed total commitment to the re-

direction plus empowered individuals with the confidence and competence to meet the challenges of the changing economic landscape.

This strategic vision had a clear impact upon AVCT. Several authors (Beckhard, 1972; Kotter, 1996; Fullan, 2005) confirm this feature as a pre-requisite for successful change. The swift response to changing conditions was commendable, the successful change process had been accompanied by a clear vision, relentlessly communicated to everyone, (Kotter, 1996). Change outcomes became embedded within AVCT's culture, and the focus shifted from the past to a positive future scenario where the company would become an anchor organisation managing a suite of community-based services such as libraries, sports and community centres which previously had been under the jurisdiction of the local authority. However, by 2016, board deliberations indicated that progress had stalled, mostly attributed to factors linked to austerity; financial challenges were constantly in need of redress. Some members of staff were finding it difficult to adjust to the company's expansion and new direction of travel. At this point, I judged the impasse as being attributed to what Fullan (2005) refers to as an implementation dip; where innovation and change cause a dip in performance and confidence. Perhaps the pace of change had been too swift creating psychological resentment to change or concern that individuals lacked the skills and understanding to make the changes work.

It was at this juncture that I commenced the first cycle of action research by offering my services as a facilitator to support the leadership team in enhancing the organisation's effectiveness during a period of transition. This would be an opportunity for collective self-evaluation through extensive reflection and thus, support and inform future planning and direction setting. The intention was to monitor and record my professional practice in a systematic manner via a reflective journal research tool, in this way McNiff (2013) suggests that significant episodes could be used to create new knowledge as new learning is acquired. From the outset, it was my belief that the process of action research would help me to understand how to improve my professional practice. By developing and improving company effectiveness, I would be able to make a greater contribution to the work of the Trust and ensure that positive community outcomes were realised. Robson (2011, p. 21) notes that 'some would doubt the feasibility of insiders taking part in any worthwhile, credible or objective enquiry into a situation in which they are centrally involved'. My belief

was that the status of an insider researcher was not an issue to the proponents of participatory action research, who adopt a variety of action-orientated approaches to inquiries. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) describe a wide range of action research approaches including organisational efficiency and development, so this practitioner-based study was in- alignment with this context.

It was particularly prescient at this juncture to analyse factors which had achieved success and those which inhibited further positive development, because I was conscious of a general inability to articulate what difference our organisation was making to people's lived experiences. In chapter 1, reference was made to the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR North, 2010) report that had identified Alt Valley Community Trust as a key factor that had influenced improvement in the Northeast of Liverpool. The research had compared Speke and Croxteth considered two of the most deprived neighbourhoods in England. It found that despite significant investment, Speke residents had not benefitted much from the opportunities created by investment in John Lennon airport, Jaguar Land Rover, retail and business parks; in fact, levels of deprivation had grown:

Croxteth on the other hand, despite its negative reputation, has seen significant improvements for the local population without as much nearby investment. A key to Croxteth's success seems to stem from initiatives at its community run 'communiversity'. Not only does this local initiative build skills and offer apprenticeship-type opportunities, but its very existence appears to provide leadership and generate a sense of shared confidence in the area which then ensures any local investment is turned into local opportunities (Cox, 2010).

A remarkable fact was that nobody within AVCT had even been aware of the IPPR research process taking place; once published we were pleased as it affirmed our practice in community development, but when asked to outline specifically how we had impacted so positively it was difficult to articulate how the organisation had brought about improvement. For me, the position could be attributed to staff being unconsciously competent or intuitive with regards to what would work well in the Croxteth community. If the reasons for the effectiveness of AVCT were to be understood, then it was important for me to analyse and critically reflect on what has worked well and then to explore ways in which I could improve and enhance our current practice and maximise impact.

3.3 Engaging with the Senior Leadership Team (SLT)

Having attended a senior leadership team meeting and requested permission to pursue a practitioner-based enquiry aimed at improving professional and company practice, I was pleased by their initial positive response to my intentions. I would attend the weekly SLT meetings to support the strategic planning deliberations, ensuring transparency in terms of informing them that my role as a facilitator was an integral component of PhD research and outlined the principles and practice associated with action research. When one member declared, 'this is a great opportunity for us to learn from your skills as an educator and adviser'; I became aware that some were viewing my presence as that akin to a mentor, 'To tutor, train, give hints to, prime with facts' (Whitmore, 1995, p. 4).

My intention was to ensure sufficient reflection time was given to allow dialogue and a free flow of information to form the basis for a collective self-evaluation exercise. Each week, reflection time was written into the agenda so that we could discuss the company's progress and development areas with the hope of that process informing future plans. In one session I asked the group to identify the main factors that had impacted positively upon the local community. The SLT deliberated and arrived at a consensus identifying five aspects which represented their collective perception of the company's achievements and contribution to community development.

3.3.1 SLT identify key strengths of AVCT

SLT minutes 10th February 2016:

Asset based offering a carousel of opportunity

A place where people can 'hop on and off' at various times and stages in life and participate in a range of activities that support their needs.

Physical asset ownership providing stability through income streams/balance sheet, provision of facilities from which to provide local services and improving the local environment and making it a safer place to live.

Values –driven

AVCT has a moral commitment to ensure that community needs are met and are prepared to be a challenging organisation to achieve this.

'Give it a go' attitude

Not afraid to fail which is supported by the whole organisation, including the Board. People are willing to do what is needed. Always looking for the next opportunity, willing to take a risk, willing to step up to challenges faced. Highly responsive, making forward planning difficult, but ensuring local need is constantly reviewed and met.

Inspiring opportunity and empowerment

Equality and social justice; everyone is given the same opportunity and the same chance to succeed, including the chance to start again. Provide wrap around support. Start with small steps getting people to try and do for themselves. Non-judgemental. Important role of staff and skilled understanding along with the relationships they develop.

Partnerships

Partners with the Community, responding directly to community need and not imposing what might be considered to be need. Joining up and working across partnerships. Filling gaps and connecting people up.

This exercise informed me that the SLT shared similar views about company strengths and their belief that AVCT delivered intervention strategies successfully. The one issue that confused me though was the suggestion that the organisation was highly responsive ensuring that local need was reviewed and met. When the SLT claimed that they regularly reviewed community views to respond directly to need, I offered a challenge asking whether they thought there was a tendency to plan and realise initiatives without community consultation. Most members agreed that this was often the case, primarily due to expediency and the need for a rapid response to submit applications for commissioning opportunities. Others rejected the suggestion that more opportunities should be accorded for community contributions to strategies claiming that; *'we always know what the community needs are because most of us have experienced similar lives to the people we now support'* (SLT minutes 10th February 2016). The five exemplars of success that were produced reflected the team's collective understanding of the company's strengths and vision. They were able to articulate these concepts but emphasised that government policies were making it increasingly difficult to always apply them in practice.

3.3.2 What needs to change?

The analysis of areas most in need of development provided interesting insight for me, as there was a reluctance to identify internal barriers. The default position was always to cite

external factors linked to government agendas, particularly those relating to increasing competitive application processes of funders and contract compliance. Clearly, they were heavily influenced by the demands placed on them to demonstrate measurable impact, and discussions suggested that they were seeking to acquire a quick fix which could demonstrate the impact of AVCT. I felt as though there was an undercurrent in which the team were expecting me to devise solutions to the challenge of impact assessment. On one occasion I enquired as to whether alternative forms of impact could be offered to funding bodies, and suggested case studies or video montage clips. Each member swiftly dismissed this idea and emphasised that quantifiable evidence was the only form that funders accepted as proof of impact.

Reflective log excerpt 10th February 2016

I was surprised today by the sharp response to my suggestion that case studies and other similar qualitative methods could be shared with funders to demonstrate impact. Time after time I hear team members give detailed outlines and examples of positively helping, redirecting, supporting individuals and families yet nobody seems to be capturing these or recording them.

Rita brought the discussion to a close when she declared;

“We have loads of examples of impacting positively on so many people but the powers that be who award the grants are not a bit interested in these success stories. Absolutely no point in collecting or submitting these because it would just be a waste of our time. We know that we have made a difference so that is all that matters”.

Further discussions helped me to understand why the SLT were so focused upon quantitative measurement of impact. The team were involved with external consultants who were encouraging them to develop impact measurement tools such as Social Return on Investment, Local Multiplier 3 and the Social Value Commissioning tool kit. These activities were non-negotiable as they were a condition as part of a loan from the Cabinet Office, Social Investment fund, so they were obliged to work with an approved supplier to develop

impact assessment frameworks. The consultants presented themselves in a manner described by Schein (1999) as selling and telling technical experts. They offered change models with a relentless focus upon quantifiable, measurable outputs and outcomes. I found it difficult to accept their approach as it bore no resemblance to the qualitative research processes that I sought. The implications of the consultants' style were many because, 'measurements have an impact on what we observe'. (Chevalier and Buckles, 2019, p. 16). The emphasis upon quantitative evidence of impact seemed to be distracting team members away from a deeper understanding of the contribution to the lived experiences of community members.

Changing political landscapes were affecting AVCT's spheres of influence and income generation, so these forces were limiting the capacity for further improvement in the community. The SLT were obliged to dedicate time and effort to acquiring grant funding which relied heavily upon universal competition and comparison. By this point, I had learned that although the SLT still had a clear vision of what was to be achieved within the community, their efforts were being thwarted by competitive funding applications, intensive monitoring and reporting systems. I made the decision to move onto sharing some theories of change with the team to break the negative discussions surrounding contract compliance as nothing valuable was being achieved by labouring this concept.

3.4 Models of leadership

On 13th April 2016, I shared Beckard's (1972) model of effective team leadership with the SLT to discuss and agree the importance of goals, roles, processes and relationships. There was unanimous agreement that the company had an effective SLT with clear goals, roles and positive relationships. However, the processes component lacked clarity and standardisation. Although the team accepted this analysis, I was conscious of the group being overtly affiliative and quite reluctant to challenge one another. Lencioni (2005) identified 5 dysfunctions of a team, and two aspects were in evidence within AVCT: namely avoidance of accountability plus fear of conflict.

Next, I shared another framework, Kotter's (1996) eight-step model which most members claimed helped them make more sense of change management processes:

1. Create a sense of urgency
2. Create a guiding coalition
3. Create a vision for change,
4. Communicate the vision
5. Remove obstacles
6. Create short term wins
7. Consolidate improvement
8. Anchor the changes.

We discussed the usefulness of Kotter's (1996) model and members noted that it had provided clarity for them and provided valuable time to reflect upon AVCT's current position. There was consensus that the company had achieved the first four steps with relative ease but as time progressed the latter four had not been accorded sufficient attention. The sense of urgency and our burning platform being that the company's viability and survival was at stake, so a wider regeneration remit had been a necessity. The senior leadership team were the guiding coalition formalising the vision and overall strategy. They were a powerful group, coordinating significant and complex changes and possessing authority and credibility. They worked collaboratively and co-operatively to communicate for understanding and buy-in. Progressing through the first four stages had been a relatively smooth process, so by the time the company had expanded significantly, all those involved with the organisation understood and accepted the new vision and strategy. One member suggested that stages 5-8 are ones in which change is actioned and embedded in the culture, then asserted that we had failed to focus as much energy on the final stages particularly in the sphere of empowering others to act by removing barriers to the change. This analysis was insightful, and most members found clarity and greater understanding of change processes with Kotter's model. I added the view that we had probably experienced an implementation dip at the end of stage 4, which combined with the lack of focus to Kotter's stages 5-8 had no doubt caused progress to stall. Members gave examples of how the newly expanded provision had created a sense of low confidence and competence for some colleagues. One difficulty I encountered was the position taken by two team members. Both individuals were unable to identify any required development areas,

focusing upon the removal of barriers stage, asserting that only the government could do this.

Kotter's 8 step model had been useful for assessing components of successful change and gauging factors inhibiting change, but the reaction of some members helped me to recognise that it only offers a check list for structural and rational decision making. The differences in opinion within the SLT highlighted how the model fails to give sufficient attention to the human factors influencing change.

I did not share any more change models with the team because I sensed that they would perceive frameworks to be repetitive. Independently though, I sought a more definitive structure to help me assess the company's position to further my understanding of the stall in AVCT's progress. Egan's (1993) model A is a working template for organisations to evaluate their effectiveness by auditing six master tasks; these provide the bedrock of needs of an enterprise and are recognised as the vehicle for achieving the desired company outcomes:

1. Strategy
2. Operations
3. Structure
4. Human resource management
5. Value added management
6. Pragmatic leadership.

A brief audit of AVCT's status against this model confirmed that whilst strategy, operations, structure and leadership were highly focused, the human resources and management tasks had not been addressed with sufficient rigour. Perhaps the company's impact could have been improved if greater attention had been paid to these human resources and management spheres because:

few managers use a comprehensive and integrated framework to guide their efforts. Many do have some kind of model, but it is often intuitive and idiosyncratic, one carried around inside their heads and not generally shared with others (Egan, 1993, p. 22).

It was only by considering model A that I detected the gap with these two master tasks. All staff were attuned to a visionary style of strategic leadership that provided focus and direction. The operations sphere was effectively translating strategy into services which were valued by the community. However, the pace of change had been so rapid that little attention had been paid to management processes and the development of human resources and capacity building. They were in place but implemented at a very superficial level. It became clear that frameworks alone would never provide sufficient detail for me and the SLT to fully appreciate the multi-layered narrative and complexity of organisational change. Egan's model was interesting but when applied in practice, was experienced as formulaic and technically constraining. I then sought deeper levels of analysis involving more intricate human and cultural dimensions. Egan (1993) was one of the first theorists to acknowledge the 'messiness' of organisational change by highlighting the importance of 'arational' factors such as culture being able to enhance or inhibit organisational effectiveness.

Thoreau, (1854) once wrote that 'Things do not change, we change' and this axiom is pertinent when exploring the nature of change. Innovation and change within a company is not simply a mechanical process, but rather a developmental one influenced by interplay of context, culture and the individual's response to change. There was a swift appreciation of the pitfalls of applying theoretical frameworks without examining the motives, reasoning and perception of change from a stakeholder's perspective. The shift towards new goals and spheres of influence had been successfully achieved, but exploration of the company's two marginalised master tasks revealed that the accompanying change in the way people thought about their organisation was not fully aligned with the overall strategy. A pocket of opinion was detected in which frustrations were being exposed at the lack of robust management, the nature of professional development and opportunities for dialogue exchanges.

Fullan (2005) claimed to offer a formula for understanding change better, so that leaders will be equipped with leadership skills under rapid non-linear change. His five core themes or capabilities of implementing successful change were identified as:

Moral purpose

Understand change

Building relationships

Share knowledge

Make coherence

Successful application of these five areas should lead to member commitment and results.

Yet again it was found that AVCT had elements of core strength in moral purpose and the accompanying qualities of energy, enthusiasm and hope, but it was not focusing sufficient attention onto managers' ability to understand change, and their responsibility for effective communication and capacity building at all levels. Attending the weekly SLT meetings provided me with greater insight into factors causing the original company's re-positioning to stall. My analysis identified the need for better communication, re-culturing and staff empowerment, as these appeared to be the main causes of inertia. The importance of effective communication is well documented, (Dixon, 1998; Block, 2001; Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, 2006; Bradbury, 2018) and the dissemination of the original reforms had been aided because the staff perceived the change to be congruent with their values and the company's culture. I found Egan's (1993) Model C most useful as it is based around dialogue and asserts the critical feature of reciprocity and two-way communication. The authoritative style, whilst effective, had created a culture of one dimensional top-down directives, so whilst the chief executive was giving serious messages about the move towards managers' responsibilities for promoting quality assurance, the company had not built in processes to receive key messages from staff. Dixon (1998, p. 65) speculates that:

perhaps what is necessary in organizations is to create opportunities to have frequent dialogue and through that dialogue to come to shared meaning. Then with that co-created meaning as a foundation, individuals and groups could interact in more purposeful ways to make decisions and problem solve.

The absence of regular dialogue to discuss the company's need to improve its quality assurance processes had resulted in some unproductive employee resistance to change. There were tacit assumptions about the need to improve quality assurance, but the lack of participatory communication meant that some key individuals were not given the opportunity to create, invent and innovate together. Communication- based activities were not exploited to manage the change. The consultants employed to strengthen Quality

Assurance procedures were regarded as technical resource experts, but some colleagues resented their recommendations because they were prescriptive and over-directive.

‘Directing employee work activities is quite different from enabling and inspiring appropriate self-initiative’ (Deetz, Simpson and Tracy, 2000, p .44).

Some staff resisted the drive towards improved quality assurance and justified their opposition by claiming that the company was becoming far too bureaucratic and was losing sight of its core values. One colleague declaring:

SLT meeting notes, 27th April 2016

“This is a total waste of everyone’s time here. Why should we be doing anything different than we have always done? We need to say no to all of this bureaucracy because we are not a private business and never want to be. Let’s remind ourselves please that we are a community-based charity”.

At SLT level such resistance to change was rarely challenged in an open forum. Some members of the team were clearly unhappy with the decision to move towards gaining a significant number of ISO (International Organization for Standardization) accreditation to secure greater success in contract acquisition. They criticised the ISO demands and challenged others for being uncritical of the consultant’s recommendations. During meetings they generally made minimal contributions to our discussions regarding effective change and insisted that theories would never help AVCT improve our practice. The rest of the team preferred to maintain an affiliative climate and avoided conflict by not bringing out into the open any resistance to their views. Argyris (1974) recognised this avoidance as defensiveness when managers do not always say what they really mean, and they rarely tested the assumptions that they held about professional practice. Mixed messages were common and the resentment towards recalcitrant SLT members was palpable, but nobody challenged their negativity due to the prevailing culture. Further discontent was generated and obviously this limited the effectiveness of the SLT in creating new quality assurance systems. These members of the team had not found the change process easy, and learning to behave differently was challenging for them. They had engaged positively in the initial

transformation but then became disaffected when the organisation went through the implementation dip. Increasingly, some team members came to be regarded as resisters and their behaviour distracted from the team's effectiveness in managing the final stage of consolidating the change process. I recognised that the team were uncomfortable with inter-personal disagreements, and this became an 'Inefficient team habit' (Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, 2006, p. 172).

Egan's (1993, p. 91) discussions of the shadow side of an organisation came to have real resonance for me. He defines this concept as:

factors that affect, either positively or negatively, organizational productivity and quality of work life in substantive and systematic ways but are not found on organizational charts or in organizational manuals and are not discussed in the formal or official forms of the institution.

Meetings with the SLT were illustrating the power of the shadow side of the company; an extract from my research log reflects this:

Reflective log excerpt 20th April 2016

I did not feel comfortable offering a challenge to Rita and Pat today because the atmosphere was strained and everyone looked so uncomfortable. Very conscious of relationship ethics so I am reflecting on whether I am causing anxiety and negativity in the team by adding pressure onto them in terms of exploring theoretical models which can lead to difficult conversations regarding an individual's role or performance. This is a tough position to be in as most of the team are engaging in the process of self-evaluation and have identified some really important issues that have made them consider how they can improve their own and AVCT's impact. Facilitation wise, I know that I am supporting most of the team's thinking and am happy with that, but I did not expect to face such direct opposition from some. I am deploying process consultancy techniques in order to help the SLT develop self-directed, long term change but not everybody is on board so I am concerned that I have unleashed feelings of resentment.

After mulling over today's events, I am confident that my presence and my actions have not caused the difficult /uncomfortable atmosphere...issues were already there. It is just a case of my facilitation providing a platform for disagreement to be articulated. It would have come to the surface via another medium - so better for it to have surfaced within the SLT meetings so we can try to work our way through it all and reach a point of mutual understanding.

I need time to consider the best way forward to encourage greater transparency and open dialogue from all seven members of the SLT - but, at this moment I am feeling stuck.

Some scholars provided insight into the value of engaging and empowering individuals to embrace change by outlining the importance of atunement, not mere alignment with a company's vision. The first stage of transition had been met with collective excitement as the members had been enthusiastic about the charity's expansion; then as harmony and collective action waned, progress stalled:

Atunement is especially important when the organization is undergoing significant change in how things are done – and is equally critical whenever a vision that built an organization's initial success grows stale and needs freshening (Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee 2006, p. 209).

I reasoned that the SLT members who were most resistant to the introduction of new QA protocols were probably doing so because they felt insufficiently empowered and isolated from directing the change process. The commissioning of external consultants to support fundraising and quality assurance processes disempowered staff who then maybe became resentful. The change process had not focused sufficiently upon staff engagement, and as procedures developed, there was a sense of strategy being imposed upon staff with little appreciation that all levels of the organisation needed to be fully engaged if they were to understand the need for new systems. The lack of participatory dialogue, limited effectiveness and accountability became a common source of frustration as some managers were perceived to be avoiding their responsibilities to drive the new QA systems forward:

If we want to create a culture of accountability, the actual dialogue about the strategy must involve real conversations between people and their leader plus, more importantly, dialogue between and among peers (Block, 2001, p. 289).

The absence of overt dialogue was symptomatic of the overriding culture within AVCT. Any analysis of culture is influenced by the theories of Egan (1993) and Schein (1999) with the former offering the concept of the shadow side (Model D) and the belief that culture is the largest and most controlling element influencing the response to change. Schein moved my understanding of culture from just being linked to shared meanings and accompanying actions and offered three levels of cultural analysis to inform my thinking, promoting the value of trying to understand assumptions. SLT interaction at the weekly meetings suggested that the underlying tacit assumptions within this organisation were a commitment to not challenging the board or chief executive's strategies; which had led the company to a viable and meaningful stage of development. The passive resistance by some members of the SLT towards new QA systems had put a brake on the pace and adaptation of change, but nobody ever brought the matter into a public forum to identify the problem. The lack of control, of free informed choice and of participation in design had left some staff feeling disempowered and their behaviour became obstructive and delaying.

As the company approached what Schein (1999) describes as mid-life, the culture of no challenge or resistance to strategic direction was arresting further development for human resource capacity and growth. The shadow side of not challenging the blockers was, in my opinion, the result of their status as founding members of the charity. The failure to address obstruction caused resentment in others as evidenced in a research log entry;

Reflective log excerpt 27th April 2016

I feel as though things are really coming to a head today as Rita and Pat appear to be more negative and the body language of other members continues to display discomfort and unease. For the first time since recording this log, somebody actually challenged them very forcefully.

John exclaimed:

"When you hold an ISO you insert the registration number on application forms and that means that you have about 20 pages less to complete. Some funders count you ineligible to apply if you do not hold these quality certificates. If either of you had to complete

tender documents you would realise that having all of this so called bureaucracy in place is an essential part of the process and without it we would fall at the first hurdle so where would that leave us funding wise? We may as well give up and say Goodnight, God bless, last one to leave put the light out."

The formal transition or action phase of change is a critical time as frequently inertia, overload or entropy compromise action. Egan appreciated the importance of initial vigilance and follow up vigilance when analysing change efforts to; 'Focus on whatever prevents even good plans from getting off the ground and on whatever tends to make even robust change efforts fall apart over time' (1993, p. 167).

Whilst the first phase of change had been smooth, the organisation had not disciplined itself to remain vigilant about removing barriers to change. This had proved to be the phase requiring considerable skill, as it was here that staff resistance to the imposition of change created a negative climate with accompanying frustration amongst personnel. I concluded that the concept of change leadership within AVCT was extremely difficult to operationalise. My work with the leadership team had given an understanding of change management models and there was a general consensus regarding the company's key development areas. This culminated in the formation of revised strategic action plans which the team were pleased with as they made their roles easier to fulfil. I was unable to encourage two team members to accept that some internal factors were inhibiting further progress; I began to process the conflicting voices and searched for other theoretical frameworks to guide my practitioner research.

3.5 A Learning organisation

An interesting contribution to my thinking was Senge's (1990) concept of a 'Learning Organisation'. His work provides a theoretical framework for decentralising the role of leadership and promoting the capacity of all to work productively toward common goals. There is considerable resonance and stimulus to develop and apply this framework and thereby translate a theory of how things could be into a reality. It offers an alternative to a technical framework of organisational effectiveness as outlined by theorists such as Beckard (1972), Egan (1993), Kotter (1996) and Fullan (2004). A learning organisation offers the

potential for an enterprise such as AVCT to deliver changed outcomes through supporting the involvement of local people in the design, development and implementation of activities to improve their lives. As an anchor organisation, it is well placed to facilitate individual and community well-being. By encouraging the development of a community-based learning organisation, the capacity of all people will be enhanced. Initially this was an attractive model with a clear intention to empower colleagues and build capacity to secure meaningful outcomes. Five principles make up a learning organisation according to Senge (1990) namely; build a shared vision, systems thinking, mental models, team learning, and personal mastery. Once these are fully embedded within a company he asserts that it will secure successful development. In addition, three core learning capabilities would be encouraged; fostering aspiration, developing reflective conversations and understanding complexity.

There was a shared sense of collective pride amongst staff given our contribution over three decades to the well-being of the local community. With this as a positive foundation, I believed that group problem solving and systems thinking processes could transform AVCT into a learning organisation, which could then achieve greater impact upon our community. According to Senge (1990, p. 3) learning organisations are:

... where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.

My practice and reflection had indicated that whilst I personally found Senge's model academically relevant, we would never be able to fully develop the characteristics of a learning organisation within AVCT. The SLT had found organisational frameworks and theories of change interesting, but no approach had been accorded high value. I was becoming very aware of the possibility that I might be imposing my beliefs onto colleagues, so I parked the learning organisation theory with the possibility of re-visiting aspects of the model in the future. My experiences with the SLT team helped me to view Senge's work more critically; developing a theory within an organisational vacuum is futile if one does not pay cognisance to context. This stood out definitively and was another significant aspect of learning. Despite all good intentions to support the leadership team, I had allowed a narrow frame of reference to inform my actions and had been over reliant upon insular

organisational theories. I had missed the opportunity to broaden my evidence base and learn more as a team to improve our work in the community. I reflected on ethical integrity because I had steered the agenda for meetings with minimal consultation with colleagues. Schein (1999) provided some deeper insight by exploring organisational culture and presenting a dynamic model of how culture is learned, passed on and used to promote change. If AVCT's organisational culture could become more inclusive for staff and community members then perhaps this could provide an effective means of improving local outcomes within the community. Dialogue though, would have to be meaningful and participatory.

There is however, no grand theory to explain effective change because that would be simplifying a complex process. AVCT's operationally focused culture had produced impressive short-term results, but these could not be sustained without greater capacity building at all levels. My facilitation had supported the creation of revised strategic plans and the SLT were now more confident to work towards applying these, but my understanding was that the plans could not be sustained and fully implemented without wider staff and community involvement and an engagement culture.

Whilst each organisation's experience of change is unique, I still valued frameworks as a starting point to understand, assess and manage change processes. I recognised that theoretical models provide different lenses through which we can examine organisational change but there is no definitive framework which can be applied with consistent accuracy. The templates can only, in my experience, offer a preliminary tool to analyse structural, human and cultural facets and the inevitable messiness of change, (Egan, 1993) is difficult to predict.

My action in offering challenges did not help much to develop unity of thought within the team. As an internal practitioner, I may have been part of the problem and part of the culture which needed to change. Some of the SLT had come to recognise that they had been too positive about claiming success and acknowledged the need to become more self-aware regarding the Trust's strengths and weaknesses. This was evidenced by one member of the SLT asking:

“Does anyone think that we may have missed the opportunity to be more influential in our work?” (SLT meeting notes 11th May 2016).

Part of the difficulty in understanding organisational effectiveness lies in the complex and organic nature of change. This mind set helped me to anticipate and acknowledge that the change process is beset by contradictions and surprises. The energy which creates anxieties and tension around change can also be channelled to achieve creativity, innovation and adaptation...there lies the paradox of change.

3.6 Creating a Focus Group

Having spent over four months engaging with the leadership team, I resolved to broaden the scope of my understanding by inviting colleagues from across the organisation to join a focus group to explore how to improve our work in the community. Twenty members of staff came forward and I facilitated a morning session to identify ways in which AVCT contributed to individual and community well-being. Conscious of individuals holding differentiated roles, I ensured that each person was given equal airtime and all views were captured. Facilitation techniques such as independent thoughts committed to post-it notes progressed to paired discussions about content, then groups of four prioritised these emerging themes. I drew upon Heron's (1996) suggestions for types and sequencing of facilitation when interacting with this focus group.

3.6.1 Focus Group identifies key strengths of AVCT

Focus Group minutes 16th June 2016

I asked the Focus group to discuss and agree AVCT's five key strengths and the following were put forward;

Pride and genuine care about people

Making a difference in so many different ways such as Education, Health, Employment, Culture and the environment. A plethora of examples of the organisation's impact upon individuals and the wider Community were presented.

Visionary and intuitive

Policies often follow our prototype initiatives such as the Community Health Ambassadors concept and the Teaching Assistants scheme.

Activities and staff selection often intuitively informed on whether it was felt as though the actions and potential staff would make a difference to community well-being.

Risk takers

We punch above our weight and challenge the status quo in order to achieve positive outcomes for people e.g. accepted the challenge to manage two big Sports Centres despite lack of experience but had they closed then community well-being would have been compromised.

Shifting sands

Fluid, flexible, rapid response to circumstances e.g. crisis in education funding and respond with a vocational free school application

Values driven

Recruitment magnet as curiously most staff articulated that they wanted to be part of the organisation because it promoted social justice.

This process had strengthened my understanding that AVCT was a values-based organisation committed to improving community well-being, but the processes which resulted in improved outcomes were difficult to record. Anecdotal evidence was in abundance, but participants struggled to articulate what processes were occurring to bring about change in the community. I had not developed a clearer understanding of well-being or reached an agreement about the best forms of intervention as this was the early stage of the research process.

Ineffable, tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1958) was a recurring theme in which colleagues articulated that “we know what people need and seem to be able to do the right thing”. It was acknowledged that this was a vague, intangible concept and did not help to identify aspects of well-being but could be re visited at a later stage. The Focus Group sessions reflected the current climate within the organisation, in that colleagues articulated concern that our contribution to well-being was being compromised by the bureaucratic and technical demands of funding bodies and the lack of power to develop grass roots based strategies for local issues. For example, we lost a big contract for The Community Health Ambassadors Team which we had created as a pilot and successfully managed for six years.

It was awarded to a national organisation because it could deliver at scale. When I had one-to-one or paired conversations, these did offer a richer picture of qualitative evidence of our impact upon people's lives as a range of exemplars were presented, but then a couple of unexpected outcomes materialised. Colleagues were most willing to share our success stories, but I realised that in doing so they were searching for quick results and a tangible demonstration of our impact to share with funding bodies. Consequently, I had to manage their expectations and explain that my research process would be long term and not tailored to the demands of external bodies.

Another factor was power relationships; I began to sense that colleagues were cautious in their responses given my status and influence within the organisation. This conceptual confusion resulted in them holding different expectations as they perceived me as a more knowledgeable, senior colleague and advice giver. Charmaz (2006) refers to these dimensions as power dynamics resulting from one's professional status. In order to deepen my understanding, I wanted to follow Johnson and Parry's (2015, p. 219) approach with the requirement that researchers need to be 'willing to shed the veil of expertise and take on a facilitative role that is alert and responsive to the voices and knowledge embedded within study contexts'. I believed that I was doing this but some colleagues held a different perception. For example, I assumed that colleagues understood the concept of facilitation but soon discovered this not to be so. Discussions within the focus group indicated that there were many members who held a hierarchical perception of our relationship, perceiving me in a position of power who would be telling them what to do and how to do it. This indicated that we were far removed from the characteristics of an inclusive learning organisation, as so many members were not taking the opportunity or being given a chance to accept the responsibility to learn and grow. If staff regarded me as an internal expert, then perhaps I was part of the problem and part of the culture which needed to change. Some claim that internal consultants can often be ineffective because 'It is hard to be a good facilitator when you have a position. Notice that every once in a while a team will have a player-coach, but they never have a player-referee.' (Block, 2001 p. 275).

An analysis of why colleagues were feeling overwhelmed and disempowered indicated that they felt acutely constrained by the contemporary audit culture embedded within the neoliberal context. Both the leadership team and focus group had suggested that the

increasing demands of contract compliance had compromised their community impact. This was a sobering realisation leading me to question how our organisation could ever hope to improve community outcomes within a climate of constraint. I needed to alter my practice and look beyond AVCT as an organisation to assess how all staff experiences (including mine) were deeply connected to the wider societal context. Recognising the need to move beyond the confines of our AVCT transformed my thought processes. A bigger, significant narrative was becoming evident, and this had only become apparent by holding conversations with staff, who outlined the operational pressures of working within the current political agenda. As Chair of the board of trustees, I would never have been able to understand or empathise with their day-to-day constraints had I not embarked upon a cycle of action research. This had helped me to see a committed, motivated staff being stultified by target driven demands of project delivery. The organisational improvement theories of Senge (1990), Kotter (1996) and Egan (1993) had barely acknowledged these broader contextual challenges, so I resolved to seek a different lens to view and understand AVCT's community impact.

The opportunity arose quite unexpectedly as several colleagues approached me individually to inform me that they were eager to participate in a focus group to discuss how to improve the organisation, but expressed low confidence levels and insecurity when speaking in front of others. I accepted their invitation to speak to them on a one to one basis and noted in my research log;

Reflective log excerpt 16th June 2016

I am amazed having spoken to Ann and Brenda today. They both approached me individually after the focus group meeting saying that they would love to participate in the group but asked whether I think they will be of any help at all. How ironic is this as from my perspective (and the rest of the staff body) these two women are significant individuals who work miracles with individual community members. I never realised that these members of staff were so insecure and lacking in confidence. Their self-image does not correlate with my interpretation of their skill set and influence.

In the past I have suggested to the SLT that we could write case studies around Ann's work on reception and Brenda's role in the library because I know that they have been instrumental in turning peoples' lives around. Clearly, they are not aware of the invaluable contribution they are making so I need to make sure that I capture some of their success stories as part of my research.

The staff voice focus group only convened twice because practical difficulties and pressure of work preventing many staff from attending. We discussed this issue and whilst members were eager to participate and contribute, they could not commit to a long-term process. Given that several colleagues had requested a one to one meeting we agreed to suspend meetings temporarily to allow me to gather data from individuals and share findings with the group for future consideration. Using participatory principles, I met with eight staff and explored personal, individual, and professional experiences within the AVCT community; and connected their narrative to wider social, political and cultural aspects of contemporary society. Analysis of individual stories were captured then assessed to examine how the organisation had enhanced an individual's sense of well-being. These unstructured interviews created a space for individual experiences and narratives to be shared. The process gave me the opportunity to gather perspectives relating to the organisation's culture. The examples provided all had similar themes in terms of community members seeking support and staff signposting them to relevant programmes, activities or events; with regular follow up to ensure that their needs had been met. Staff engaged positively and provided examples of favourable impact within the community, but they also reiterated the barriers they faced administratively and the inordinate amount of 'paperwork' required when delivering community-based projects. There was deep resentment because they felt that such tasks diverted them away from face-to-face community provision.

Another impasse ensued as I considered the theme of community development forming the backdrop to my study, collective action resulting in social change and social justice. I came to see that AVCT staff are so busy delivering and complying to contract demands that there is limited time for reflection and discussions about best practice and impact assessment. This made me feel empathic, as most of my career had been characterised by responding to

external demands and overlooking the value of reflecting upon practice. It was hypocritical of me to encourage greater reflection when I had not been able to engage in such processes. Once again, I pondered over whether we could really know if our work was meaningful and making a difference to people's lives.

3.7 Community Voice

Whilst discussing how AVCT could contribute to improving peoples' lives with one of our librarians, a member of the reading group overheard our conversation and interjected. She suggested that we were doing ourselves a disservice by looking for ways to improve as she believed that the organisation already provided significant impact upon individuals and their well-being. I was invited to sit with her book club and this community member asked the members to tell me about aspects of well-being that they had experienced at AVCT. It was a refreshing and an insightful experience to hear an alternative perspective from the community reading group. My reflective log records this iteration as a significant change in my thinking.

Reflective log excerpt 17th July 2016

Still feel moved by Julie's comments and actions today, totally unexpected and felt like a real curve ball but absolutely thought provoking. There was me and Brenda discussing ways to enhance AVCT's effectiveness in the library and Julie apologises for interrupting saying she had overheard our conversation but thought it important to tell us that she thought we were wrong. She told us that our organisation had made big differences to people's lives and that the book club had often shared such examples during breaks. She took the lead and suggested that we join the table group to ask them for their thoughts. We did so and simply asked the group to tell us what AVCT does to improve their daily lives and sense of well-being. I hurriedly noted their responses on paper:

respect, life changing, welcoming, warmth, dignity, stronger, feel good about myself, positive, honest, humour, time, nothing is too much trouble, care for the individual, know me and my situation, equal treatment, encouragement.

How could I have missed these aspects after nearly six months of research?

Why have they never come up in conversations and discussions?

This is a watershed moment. The session in the library was a breakthrough because it really made me realise that although I advocate equality, inclusivity and empowerment I have actually done very little to put these values into practice in my research. Why on earth did I ever think that new knowledge would be found within one organisation with one staff body? This has been doing research on a community not with the community so this needs inverting. Why did I think it acceptable to allow staff to speak on behalf of community members in a vicarious style?

I actually feel really obtuse having come so far in the research process without considering the views of the community whose lives we were trying to enhance?

It seems as though AVCT (me included) has been happy with the collective contribution made to improving the lives of local people BUT this work has largely been carried out without involving community members in the development of initiatives which could impact positively upon them.

Now there is a need to explore more robustly the aspects of well-being cited by the book club and this can only be done if we encourage a new culture of engaging community members more proactively.

Do I have an understanding of how best to meet their needs? No.

Do I need to develop an alternative approach to my research? Yes.

This serendipitous, significant breakthrough in my thought processes and learning prompted some new understanding. Most notably, the chance encounter with a reading group had not identified tangible examples of well-being such as adult learning, training, employment schemes, health or community engagement activities; these being aspects of our work that staff regarded as high in value. Feelings of dissonance emerged when I compared responses from three different groups, SLT, staff voice focus and the community book club.

3.8 Three perspectives on how AVCT improves lived experiences

This table is an overview of differentiated views of AVCT's contribution to community development and peoples' lived experiences.

GROUP – AVCT SLT (7 members) Devised on 10.02.16	AVCT Focus Group (20 staff) Devised on 16.06.16	Community Book Club (8 members) Articulated on 17.07.16
Asset-based offering a carousel of opportunity	Making a difference in lots of ways (education, health, employment)	Respect Life changing Welcoming
Values-driven	Pride and genuine care for people	Warmth Dignity Feel stronger
Give it a go response	Willing to take risks	Honest Humour Positive
Inspiring opportunity and empowerment	Visionary/Intuition to do the right thing	Feel good about myself Time Nothing is too much trouble
Partnerships	Rapid response to shifting sands	Care for individuals Encouragement Know me and my situation

Table 3 Three perspectives on AVCT's contribution to improving lived experiences

3.8.1 Identifying differences

Members of the community reading group focused solely upon the emotional and relationship aspects of well-being. AVCT colleagues had only made implicit references to these aspects. Focus group members cited intuition and ineffable knowledge as factors contributing to improved outcomes and the SLT did acknowledge the efficacy of relationship

building. These concepts were left in parenthesis for later reflection, and there was an initial train of thought that the theorists who had contributed to my understanding of community development, (Alinsky, 1971; Freire, 1993; Ledwith, 1997) as well as change leadership theorists, (Egan, 1993; Kotter, 1996; Fullan, 2005) had not accentuated social and emotional aspects in their work.

3.9 Conclusion: Setting a new course

As the first action research cycle came to a close, I concluded that a filtration process had taken place, interacting with SLT members, then a cross section of staff eventually led me to recognising the need to assess AVCT's work through an alternative lens; our community. Through my reading and experience in this first cycle, I had appreciated the importance of empowering people to bring about community solutions for well-being, 'Creating opportunities for individuals and communities to set the agenda for change to define local problems and search out local solutions.' (Marmot 2010, p. 151).

The outcome of this first cycle of action-reflection was the decision to establish a collaborative inquiry group within our organisation. Second person research will involve face to face collaborative inquiry with colleagues and community members into issues of mutual concern. This will include exploring cooperatively (Heron 1996) about how best to develop our organisation, so it maximises well-being in local communities. I consider that a research strategy of this kind has the potential to provide the most meaningful new knowledge, as it will give marginalised community members a voice, and invert the traditional power relationship between researcher and the researched (Ledwith and Springett 2010).

Organisational and change management theories had provided valuable insight for the leadership team, but overall, I judged them as being too narrow in scope to impact upon the wider community. With hindsight, I came to acknowledge that I had applied formulaic and mechanistic models onto intricate human systems. Impromptu interaction with the community reading group stimulated a new train of thought and encouraged me to broaden my thinking and move beyond the confines of AVCT personnel.

It became increasingly apparent that AVCT's previous contribution to community well-being was being compromised and indeed threatened by the dominance of competitive tendering processes during periods of austerity. The systems to access funding to deliver improved community outcomes had become more competitive by the year, as social businesses were obliged to demonstrate quantifiable and measurable impact with little cognisance paid to qualitative aspects of people's lives. The autonomy that we used to hold had been eroded by funders'-imposed systems of audit and compliance.

Whilst I was surprised by the fact that community consultation had been limited, I had recognised that the linear processes of funding regimes inhibited opportunities for community dialogue. Ledwith and Springett (2010) suggest that competitive tendering and the audit culture act as barriers to participatory practice. Drawing upon Freire (1993) and Ledwith's (1997) consciousness raising strategies with community members, I resolved to apply these principles relating to the efficacy of dialogue in the reflection-action cycles. A collaborative inquiry method could encourage systematic reflective processes to inform future action. Deeper reading into human inquiry narratives such as Heron (1996) helped me to appreciate that a different approach was required, as action research could be enhanced with a greater focus upon dialogue and shared meaning. Freire (1993, p. 71) believed that the awakening of critical consciousness could be achieved through the investigation of generative themes in which; 'dialogue requires humility, profound love of the world, faith in humankind and the power to make and re make, create and re-create'. I have learnt that I must pursue this approach with community members, so they are not treated as objects but co-creators of knowledge as to how well-being could be enhanced. The collaborative inquiry forum will encourage systematic reflective processes to agree upon the way forward. Also, emancipatory dialogue and 'knowledgeable individual narratives' (Popay et al., 2006) will continue to be encouraged to inform future action.

By the end of the first action research cycle, I had resolved to establish a collaborative inquiry group to reach out into our community to assess well-being needs in a more systematic manner. Most significantly, this decision can be traced back to a challenge of one community member; her interjection had developed my thinking and influenced the

future approach to research in a way that could never have been envisioned. It brought to mind a comment by a South African artist who in 1990 praised Audre Lorde when she declared; 'Thank you...for the pebbles of inspiration' (Kuzwayo, 2024, p.43.)

Julie, a library member had thrown a pebble which sent ripples far beyond the confines of her reading group, ultimately re-directing my research pathway. The core learning emerging from this first action-reflection cycle was a belief that 'my quest for critical insight was out there in the real world, in community, where everyday lives are shaped.' (Ledwith, 2010, p.5).

Chapter 4. Second action research cycle 2017-18: Community Voices

This chapter is an account of the second action research cycle which deepened my understanding of factors contributing to community well-being. Having recognised the need to capture the voice of community members more effectively, I pursued a collaborative inquiry method with six colleagues, all community- based personnel responsible for direct engagement strategies.

Heron's (1996) model was applied as the template for this co-operative inquiry and a systematic process was followed, whereby we agreed and acted upon what needed to be improved then reflected upon our learning and new knowledge.

The process of collaborative inquiry is sometimes perceived as a relatively simple concept to operationalise, yet my experience illustrates the fact that it is a 'formidable challenge in practice' (Reason, 1998, p. 19). Over an eighteenth month period the inquiry group focused upon developing new ways to secure improved lived experiences and more meaningful impact; this involved a consideration of community development theories and definitions of well-being.

Eventually, new knowledge and a richer narrative were gained through the process of community consultation when we invited individuals to identify activities and aspects that supported their sense of well-being. Intentional listening resulted in surprising outcomes; namely, there was a clear recognition that relationships had influenced people's sense of well-being more than any tangible activities on offer. This new knowledge informed our strategic response when devising and delivering a national lottery-funded community initiative.

By the end of this second cycle, I had amassed an alternative knowledge base linked to how AVCT could contribute more meaningfully to community well-being. However, there remained a sense of unease at the prospect of moving straight onto the third action research cycle. There were significant gaps in my knowledge, evidenced by the relentless references from colleagues about the increasing challenges, barriers and obstacles to securing improved outcomes in the community. I came to regard AVCT's context as a microcosm reflecting life in a disadvantaged neighbourhood. The system was broken and in need of repair, but what was

this system and what needed repairing? Feeling that something was missing, I trusted my instincts and decided not to progress onto the third cycle of action research without attempting to answer these questions.

4.1 Introduction

At the end of the first action research cycle, it had become clear that to gain new knowledge I needed to consider ways to engage more directly with our community and listen more attentively. One spontaneous interaction with a member of the community had left a nugget of information and insight regarding the need to broaden relationship, social and emotional aspects of research. Applying first person research and exploring organisational theory to improve AVCT's effectiveness had proven to be too narrow and limited in scope. As a researcher, it highlighted the insularity of my approach and there was mounting feelings of incompleteness as I tried to make sense of AVCT's impact from a purely personal stance. Applying action research based on improving my professional effectiveness had provided an invaluable introduction giving me a basic overview of the organisation's contribution to improved lived experiences, but I needed to move beyond this one-dimensional assessment of its place in the community. Some additional knowledge about action for encouraging well-being or contributing to aspects of social justice had been collated, thus, I sought a different approach in the form of a collaborative endeavour enabling a community of people to make sense of, and act more effectively in their world.

4.2 Establishing a collaborative inquiry group

The second action research cycle was designed as a second person form of research involving face to face collaborative inquiry with colleagues into issues of mutual concern (Heron, 1996). A tighter focus was required as previous attempts to convene a group inquiry had proven impractical given the disparate nature of AVCT's provision. I pursued a collaborative inquiry with six members of the company's community development team (community champions), who were able to participate and attend meetings on a regular basis and research best practice for their community-facing roles. Collaborative inquiry was selected as a distinct form of action research because it represented a means of helping me to understand and improve some of the working practices at AVCT. 'Action research is driven by a commitment to social justice principles of collaboration, co-construction of

knowledge and action for positive change' (Webster-Deakin and Swift, 2024, p. 55). The aim was to seek a form of research which could generate new knowledge relating to how community members interpret well-being. AVCT had six members of staff dedicated to community engagement roles, all were invited to become fellow researchers and consider how to redefine, repurpose, and re-imagine ways to improve our work in the community. It was envisaged that through reflecting upon practice using participatory principles our collaborative inquiry group could co-construct knowledge and theorise what we could do to improve peoples' lived experiences. I was to facilitate the collaborative inquiry processes and enable colleagues to apply cycles of action-reflection to understand how we could enhance professional practice and bring about action for positive change. This method aligned with my core values of social justice and fairness and complemented my work in supporting human flourishing. I sought a cooperative, experiential inquiry method to generate the co-production of knowledge. The decision to adopt a participatory action research approach stems from the belief that 'research for and about participants necessitates a degree of involvement beyond that of informant' (Johnson and Parry, 2015, p.51).

4.2.1 Facilitating a collaborative inquiry

All six community-focused staff volunteered to participate in the research exercise and as front-line staff engaging with the local community, it was believed that this group had great potential to develop new knowledge. My goal was to facilitate a process where we conducted a deep inquiry into professional practice to improve our contribution to community well-being. The remit was to explore cooperatively (Heron 1996) how best to develop AVCT, so it contributes more effectively to improving peoples' lived experiences. This research process would involve several cycles in which members plan, act, observe and reflect. It was to be future-focused and allow members to shape the future as it was grounded in our professional practice. 'Co-operative Inquiry involves two or more people researching a topic through their own experience of it, using a series of cycles in which they move between this experience and reflecting together on it' (Heron, 1996. p. 1). The intention was to reflect with colleagues, how our evolving commitment to community development and well-being could be improved. Group members therefore, were valued as knowledge creators, and I anticipated that the process would involve regular dialogue with

the local community. I applied Heron's staged approach as the core model for collaboration. I wanted to encourage colleagues to come together as co-researchers to inquire into an aspect of our work at AVCT so the commonality of approach that became a central tenet was the commitment to work openly, directly and collaboratively with primary actors.

4.3 Heron's four stages of inquiry model

I recognised that I was significantly influenced by Heron (1996) as his cooperative inquiry model provided a practical and philosophical approach which synchronised with my values. I followed his principles of enquiry when conducting this second cycle of action research with fellow colleagues within AVCT. He espoused the importance of a cooperative form of inquiry being totally open and accepting of challenge. Most importantly he talks about research with people not on them and provides a practical framework for collaborative exploration of issues.

Four distinct stages are followed:

Stage 1. Propositional. The group bring ideas about the project Inquiry by exploring ideas for improvement and agreeing what aspect needs to be addressed.

Stage 2. Practical action. Decisions are taken about agreeing to new behaviour and research actions. Then members engage in the agreed processes and note the findings of this encounter.

Stage 3. Immersion. Members commit to full immersion working on agreed action, new behaviour, practices and processes.

Stage 4. Reflection. The group reflect upon their experiences with cognitive and intuitive forms of knowing to make sense of them and begin to build a theory.

(Adapted from Heron, 1996, pp. 49-50).

Heron's model requires full group collaboration in all stages with genuine dialogue and consultation underpinning the process. I was attracted to its simplicity but still recognised that adopting this form of inquiry would prove challenging and require exemplary facilitation skills. 'Messiness' and non-linear progress are acknowledged elements within action research, but these aspects were exacerbated by the inclusion of participatory and collaborative processes. As an 'insider' researcher I anticipated that inevitably the inquiry

would be diffused and 'messy' (Floyd and Arthur, 2012) but I welcomed the potential for such processes to generate new thinking and knowledge creation. Accessing this model in a written mode imbued me with confidence and renewed motivation to work with community-based colleagues to develop and secure improved outcomes; whilst collaboration was the intent, less easy and unanticipated were the harsh realities and complexities of the whole process.

From the outset I acknowledged that my collaborative action research Inquiry could not be based purely on Heron's Cooperative Inquiry method which suggests that every member of the group is fully involved with the research content and methodological decisions. I had already selected the methodological approach so therefore I was embracing the principles of co-operative inquiry without applying a purely autonomous style. The process needed to evolve through stages of methodological pluralism, and it was important for me to be flexible and help the group guide our own direction setting. The encouragement of group members' autonomous participation was a goal to strive towards, but I judged that in the initial stages the best option would be for me to adopt the role as facilitator to advance the inquiry. I ensured that I paid cognisance to Heron's model of facilitation (1999) which delineates between three modes namely, hierarchy, co-operation and autonomy.

Ultimately, I was obliged to switch positionality between these three modes as the inquiry developed through its various stages; this did not compromise the underpinning principles of co-operative inquiry namely, openness, transparency, parity and self-awareness.

4.3.1 Stage 1 Propositional: The inquiry group agrees an improvement focus

The collaborative inquiry commenced with a meeting in which I shared my research journey to date and outlined the ontological, epistemological and methodological premises informing my work. Over the next couple of weeks, we explored everyone's perception of research and there was an agreed understanding that research was to be defined as 'A systematic process of developing our knowledge of the world and our relationship to it' (Brew, 2001, p. 64). The group's response was positive as most members voiced sentiments about being excited by the prospect of becoming co-producers of knowledge and shared Reason and Bradbury's (2007, p. 8) view, that that methodology which supported self-directed change could lead to the 'pursuit of practical solutions and the flourishing of Individual people in their communities'. These responses led me to believe that our group

was energised and eager to forge ahead and seek new knowledge to improve our work. My vision of our future focus chimed with Heron's (1996, p. 152) description of authentic collaboration:

When initiating researchers launch an inquiry they choose a research topic, invite a number of interested persons to become co-researchers, and then initiate them into the research method. If real initiation has taken place the co-opted inquirers internalize issues to do with the research method. They make the whole inquiry enterprise their own in a vigorous way.

Every group member articulated that they sought improved practice within our organisation and welcomed Heron's model to support the research process. We established group protocols which featured:

- Be physically and mentally present
- Equal airtime
- Honesty
- It's okay to say 'I don't know
- Respect everyone's contributions
- Bring goodies!
- Parity
- Be prepared to support and challenge each other's thinking

Believing that everyone was prepared and ready to start the propositional phase, I invited the group to identify aspects of AVCT's work that required most attention if we were seeking greater impact. I applied techniques that I had used successfully when facilitating educational leadership programmes and after one hour the group agreed upon four aspects of work that could be researched;

1. The effectiveness of the newly structured community development team.
2. The progress of newly-formed community action groups. (education, health and well-being , poverty, business and employment, environment)
3. The impact and influence of the monthly community engagement meetings.
4. How to increase involvement of community members in AVCT's planning processes.

To my mind, these four suggestions were straightforward, and I anticipated that the group would quickly select a specific focus but this failed to materialise. This was probably the result of feeling emboldened by the positive response and introducing different options prematurely. I introduced the team to Heron's autonomous, non-hierarchical, cooperative modes of facilitation, suggesting that perhaps they could choose to work individually or in groups to explore these aspects, then bring reflections back to our group forum. However, this option created some confusion and indecision as individuals began to discuss the merits of each option and no particular one was being accepted consensually. Quite unexpectedly, the conversation went off on a tangent:

Extract from meeting recording 12th April 2017

Pat: I think that we've already got good practice so don't really understand what we are trying to do, this team all know what they are doing and they just do it... and we have Ledwith and Alinsky as examples of good practice.

Brenda: ...and Freire.

Researcher: Okay, so are you saying that we are consciously putting their theories into practice as a way of promoting improved Community outcomes?

Pat: Yes we do a lot of applying their theories.

Pauline: What are we talking about?

Pat: Remember the conference we organised and did a presentation on Freire's banking model of education and the need to be more challenging of the system? Alinsky gave the example of using a single issue to galvanise a community and we did that when Croxteth school was occupied. Now we need to continue to raise peoples' awareness of what is going on and how exploitation occurs.

Brenda: I really enjoy reading Freire and the other theorists but aren't we just making a start with our work by agreeing as a group what to research into? The theorists will become part of what we find out later on.

Researcher: I appreciate the work of the theorists that have been mentioned but maybe they don't have all of the answers, whereas the practical expertise in this group must have knowledge that no book or theory has ever captured?

Pat: Let's face it politics and direct action has to be involved, for example the way the Community saved Our Lady and St Swithin's school recently, those parents did not accept school closure and did something about it. We need to put the word radical back into our attempts to improve Community Development.

Researcher: I am sensing that the group is still unsure about what we are trying to achieve. Are you all happy to continue to agree on just one aspect of work that we want to improve, focusing on one area and do this action research together? Or do you prefer to work as individuals or pairs on your preferred improvement area and bring findings back to this forum?

Brenda: I think that working collaboratively on one area is best and that should be based on getting ordinary people involved with us.

Luke: We can't go forward until we work out our agreed focus with a clear strategy

Pat: Oh we don't need another strategic document, we have got to be more organic and flexible in our approach

Tina: I agree, I am a doer but you like to write everything down as a plan on paper Luke but most of us don't.

Luke: ... and I think that thoughtless action is as bad as thought without action

Researcher: Do we not need to balance the two?

Pat: This reminds me of a detective novel I just read where the trainee detective asked her boss what she should be looking for in a room and he said "If I told you what to look for that is all you would concentrate on so just look and tell me what you see"

This dialogue helped me to recognise that all participants brought varying perspectives to the process and that time had to be given for extended discussions before a joint focus could be agreed. One political activist in the group was advocating direct action to improve

the community; others sought improved practice within newly formed teams or greater community participation to ensure meaningful impact. In my professional practice I have found that community development advocates can usually be grouped into three cohorts; activists, professionals and academics. Our collaborative inquiry group had elements of all three influencing the direction of our research, so discussions were rarely streamlined, and no consensus was achieved.

When one member shared her need for more thinking time everyone readily accepted this suggestion, and the session came to a natural close. Most agreed that we needed extended processing time before making definitive decisions. The following week we convened and reviewed progress agreeing that the group were committed to seeking to improve peoples' lived experiences; what remained undecided was a specific focus for our research. All four suggestions remained, individuals preferred to conduct the inquiry together but still there was an impasse in selecting the aspect most in need of improvement.

4.3.2 Interim reflection

I was most surprised by the group's inability to agree upon an improvement focus because I had anticipated that the first stage of agreeing what needs improving would be a straightforward process, but this was not to be.' The problem of participation is in the main who is to define the issue under investigation, theorising about it and relationships in the process' Adelman (1993, p. 18). I was disappointed when we had not arrived at an improvement focus by the end of our first few sessions but that was probably because I had allowed myself to be constrained by methodological frameworks. I had anticipated a streamlined process, where a committed group met regularly to follow the action-reflection cycles; but we had not been able to reach the first stage of Heron's Co-operative Inquiry Cycle to agree what aspect of our practice needed to be explored. We maintained a generic aim to explore ways to improve peoples' lived experiences and well-being, but this represented the essence of AVCT's work so we remained stuck within a particular mind-set and nothing new was being proposed.

Further reflection demonstrated that in this initial stage I had adopted a deficit model and assumed that my clumsy facilitation skills had been the cause of such protracted and at times, difficult conversations. There was a sense of unease on my part as a facilitator as I

questioned whether I had overwhelmed members with too much information in a short space of time without giving the group sufficient space for processing? Had I failed to recognise that not all group members were aligned in the belief that improvements were required? Heron (1996, pp. 152-153) provided some cautionary words:

If the initiation is more apparent than real, then the co-opted inquirers are merely yes-people, being guided and shepherded into appropriate behaviour, without any real grasp of what they are about. They are just followers of the initiating researchers. Any agreement reached is likely to be spurious. Collaboration is unauthentic. The co-opted inquirers simply rubber-stamp what the initiating researchers get up to.

A real dilemma appeared as the inquiry group divided into a couple who wanted to capture AVCT's impressive work and those who wished to focus on improving aspects of our practice. I wondered why some members had agreed to be participants in the research group if they felt that nothing required improvement. My influence on the research process caused me to experience some ethical tension. It crossed my mind that I may have established a hierarchical form of facilitation that may have blocked new thinking. I perceived all members of the inquiry group as equal in status and genuinely promoted this principle but at times some appeared to accord greater value to my suggestions. It may have been that I had offered an autonomous mode too early in the group's formation, but then recognised that such responses were probably inevitable as participants needed time to explore their own thinking and I appreciated their frank exchange of views? It was reassuring to encounter Adelman's (1993) experience in which he found that agreeing upon an improvement issue is often presented as easily arrived at when the reality is quite the contrary. 'Prior to clarification there is a period of between a week to 3-4 months of awkward talking around anecdotes and images trying to locate key actions and acceptable terminology' (Adelman, 1993, p. 18). His example mirrored my experience of the initial stages of the collaborative inquiry and the issue in need of improvement, it demands more attention than most would envisage. I recalled that at one point when we could not agree on the focus area one participant became impatient and retorted, "Tell us what you want us to do Alma?" This indicated that her perception of my role as facilitator of the collaborative inquiry was perceived in a hierarchical manner. This was an uncomfortable realisation; we were far removed from the characteristics of a co-operative research group. It suggested

that the group expected to be led, so there was a blurring of boundaries, and I recognised that I needed to acknowledge the value of Heron's suggestion of switching between different modes of facilitation. We heard dominant voices from some and awkward silences from others and I found it impossible to reconcile their differences in opinion. I responded by encouraging a lot of processing time and ensured that I managed expectations by reiterating the principles of collaborative research; emphasising that I should not dominate the process. Ethical issues surfaced, as I became more aware of the difficulty in aligning my values with my practice. I questioned whether I was reproducing the power relationships which I was trying to dispel, and whether I was over- influencing the direction of the research. I sensed that some colleagues were cautious in their responses given my status and position within the organisation; perhaps they were telling me what they thought I wanted to hear? This apparent dependency status reflected the social influence process; they held a hierarchical model of our relationship and saw me in a position of power who would be telling them what to do and how to do it. This chimed with Adelman's experience of asking teachers to decide on which issue to explore in their action research but to his consternation they replied 'we thought you would tell us what we would research' (Adelman, 1993, p. 18).

This awareness was again brought into sharply into focus by a second incident. We were discussing ways to improve AVCT's contribution to community well- being and lots of ideas and debate had been generated. The meeting room had pieces of flip chart sheets on tables festooned with post-it notes and energised conversations were taking place. However, when we began to attempt to prioritise the strategies there was some difference in opinion so discussions were protracted. Suddenly one member of staff exclaimed; "You choose what route to take Alma".

Once again, I became conscious of how my status in the organisation was influencing colleagues' responses and therefore compromising ethical principles. Despite my articulation of and intention for democratic participation, my role as Chair of Trustees conferred status on me. This was a difficult moment as I realised that my repeated message that all participants' views, suggestions and opinions were of equal status had not been received as intended.

Charmaz, (2006, p. 27) reminds researchers that during interviews, meetings and focus groups researchers need to attend to; 'the dynamics of power and professional status, gender, race and age'. Perhaps I had not recognised the importance of a strong sense of their pride in the company's work; discussions were replete with anecdotes of successful intervention with individuals and families. There was a sense of members being in a hurry to furnish me with evidence so that I could become the vehicle to record the work of the organisation and present it as a model of good practice for other communities. As discussions became more protracted and repetitive, some group members began to reduce their verbal contributions. 'As well as those who hang back, there maybe those who push forward, disrupting group process by their own distressed agendas'. (Heron, 1996, p. 154). Another approach, therefore, was to think about individual agendas when considering why the initial positive, embracing climate had been so short lived. I concluded that co-researchers' contributions were being heavily influenced by the demands placed on them in their professional role, particularly the pressure to demonstrate measurable impact. The entire group claimed to have understood the parameters and protocols of this research method, but then subsequent dialogue indicated that this was not the case when someone declared:

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"All we just need to do is to write up some case studies which show how we have improved so many peoples' lives and give those to funders. Isn't that what you will be doing Alma?"

Such sentiments reflect how, 'Feelings come first and tilt the mental playing field on which reasons and arguments compete' (Haidt and Joseph, 2008, p. 40). These authors emphasise the importance of intuitive, emotional responses from individuals which often do not feature deliberate reasoning processes. This participant's visceral response appears to illustrate her frustration believing that improvements were being achieved but funding bodies were not accessing evidence which validated this belief. Funders' demands for concrete evidence of impact appeared to be all-consuming to colleagues, so much so that they were not giving themselves the space or permission to reflect upon their professional

practice. The culture within the organisation had developed into a binary mode of rapid action to respond to community issues alongside funders' demands; periods of reflection were infrequent.

Another important dimension was that at that point in time AVCT was experiencing significant challenges because of the government's agenda, so most regarded this period as a crisis point with the company's viability in jeopardy. Changing political landscapes were affecting AVCT's spheres of influence and forces were limiting our potential to contribute to community development; this affected the group's mind-set as participants felt vulnerable. There were tensions between the need for slow reflective collaborative processes and funders' demands for short term measurable outputs and results. There was a sense of staff being pre-occupied with what Green (2016, p.230) terms tool kit temptation. 'Busy people seeking a quick fix of recipes under pressure to get shrinking funding and the need to prove success in a linear manner'. I pondered as to how practitioners could transform in a context of constraint and reduced funding. It was hard to pursue a collaborative inquiry when group members were so demoralised by limited resources and increasing community need during a period of austerity. My response was to put the national agenda in parenthesis because I had no control over external factors and retained a focus on encouraging debate regarding exploring a small aspect of practice to create some new knowledge and understanding about community development practice.

4.3.3 Single and double loop learning

Argyris and Schön's work (1974) helped me to make sense of the group's responses in relation to group interaction with problem solving processes. Their work focused upon organisational and experiential learning. They suggest that everyone has mental models of how to respond and act in certain situations. When something goes wrong people tend to seek a response that sits within the culture of the organisation, this is referred to as single loop learning. Alternatively, double loop learning involves the questioning of these mental models and encourages personnel to reconsider the basic assumptions behind ideas and strategies.

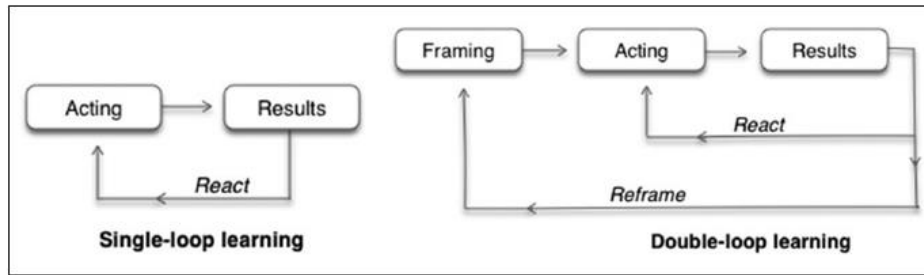


Figure 4 Model of Single and Double-Loop Learning adapted from Argyris and Schön

Source: Witherspoon, (2014, p.263)

Most of the group were adopting single-loop learning processing so that when something 'goes wrong' they sought specific solutions based on the organisation's culture, goals and values. Such thinking tends to be rationale, narrow and defensive. I pondered why some still held the view that AVCT's work required minimal improvement. How could this mind-set be dispelled as it could be maintaining problems and inhibiting new ways of thinking? Such mental models were presenting barriers to systems change. Clearly, one needs to recognise that context is an essential determinant of change so I sought ways to shift the conditions that were holding a particular mind set in place by reflecting upon AVCT in terms of 'the cultural and organisational values, mind-sets, practices, and behaviours that are often taken for granted or unnoticed' (Kania, Kramer and Senge, 2018 .p. 42). I had encountered the shadow side (Egan, 1993) of the organisation during my first action research cycle when colleagues seemed content to deliver strategies without much reflection.

Double-loop learning involves questioning the governing variables and implicit assumptions about your work, so I introduced more challenge to the group by asking why we do certain things and not others. This was an attempt to correct an error in a way which involves the modification of an organisation's underlying norms, policies, procedures and objectives. Thinking of ways to break the cycle away from discussions relating to constraints and external challenges, I shared copies of AVCT'S vision and mission statement with the group;

Vision: Engaged, empowered communities devising community solutions to local problems.

Mission: An enabling organisation promoting individual and community well- being.

Everyone was then invited to populate prepared flip charts with headings such as; local problems, enabling, well-being, empowered, engaged and community solutions. Beneath each title we wrote examples to demonstrate how AVCT contributed to each aspect. The visual impact was powerful as it became clear that the local problems sheet contained a myriad of examples, whilst evidence of empowering, engaging, enabling, community solutions contained far fewer notes and had required longer thinking time before committing them to the chart.

This exercise supported our thinking as there was an acknowledgment that whilst most members of the collaborative inquiry group were familiar with the community development theories of Freire and Alinsky as well as national reports pertaining to improving outcomes in disadvantaged communities, we found it difficult to articulate precisely how AVCT encouraged and enabled our community to devise solutions to local problems. I used their knowledge base as a lever to support the research process by tapping into one member's passion and commitment to well-being. Tina proved to be an influential voice in the group. She was perceived as an experienced and knowledgeable community coordinator who constantly encouraged members to pay cognisance to The Marmot Review (2010) which asserted that 'people with higher socio-economic position in society have a greater array of life chances and more opportunities to lead a flourishing life' (2010, p. 3). She had circulated this report and made regular references to it in our sessions as the concept of well-being is firmly rooted within this report. Tina was convinced that she knew how to improve well-being because of her community connections yet resisted the opportunity to explore the concept in our research group. She believed that our organisation was having a positive impact on well-being and seemed reluctant to discuss any new strategies or processes.

4.3.4 Dimensions of well-being

I interjected by sharing information from The Office for National statistics annual well-being survey (2018) which reported that 'well-being has improved every year since financial year ending 2012 when data were first collected, suggesting that an increasing number of people in the UK are feeling positive about their lives (2015, p.1). I asked whether we could challenge this statement, and this encouraged a wider debate on how to measure well-being using the community champions lived experiences of working in disadvantaged areas. AVCT actively promotes the improvement of well-being, and the group accepted that it was

a real challenge to define the concept. One person instigated a discussion on the meaning of well-being saying that we needed this before attempting to devise improvement strategies within the community. Members took time to explore a range of definitions and members brought the following for group consideration:

The Government's ONS annual survey assesses ten measures of well-being; personal, relationships, health, what we do, where we live, personal finance, the economy, education/skills, governance and the natural environment.

The Liverpool Well Being Strategy promotes 5 ways to achieve well-being namely, be connected, be active, take notice, keep learning and give.

The Action for Happiness organisation (Putting the science of well-being into practice) identifies 10 aspects which will contribute to individual well-being; giving, relating, exercising, appreciating, trying out, direction, resilience, emotion, acceptance and meaning.

Labonte (1995) defines well-being in terms of wholeness with six key indicators; feeling full of energy, good social relationships, sense of control in one's life, sense of purpose, do things you enjoy and experiencing connectedness.

Following a lengthy discussion, colleagues acknowledged that our group held a generic interpretation of well-being as any strategy or action which improves peoples' lives; appreciating that given the range of definitions that there could never be an agreed definition of the concept. With such a diverse range of indicators the concept may be too subjective to operationalise. One member pointed out that she had seen a pattern in the presentations relating to well-being; most of them featured social relationships and connectedness. Another member then linked these to my conversation with library members who had identified similar dimensions. At this point conversation stalled and I sensed that quiet reflection time was taking place. I felt pleased that I had encouraged a re-appraisal of our mission statement by initiating the well-being theme. The group were more comfortable discussing how AVCT contributed to community development and well-being, so this gave much-needed respite from deciding upon a specific improvement focus. This harmony was short-lived though as one participant stated that she thought it would be a great idea to discuss what constitutes community well-being with other people and named

several individuals from the community. This discussion ended abruptly when another member declared:

Extract from meeting recording 10th May 2017

“as far as I am concerned I know far more about our community than any of the people you have mentioned”

Heron, (1996, p. 154) identified the problem of some collaborative processes when he noted that ‘even if all group members contribute fully, influence hierarchies may become established. The views of some may tend to hold more sway than the views of others: everyone speaks but only some are really listened to’. The group member with the least experience as an AVCT employee offered a challenge to everyone’s thinking when he referred to a section in the Marmot Review suggesting that improvements were ‘widespread but uneven’. This stimulated a discussion on how we could assess the community’s sense of well-being as the Marmot publication had stated ‘this indicates increasing inequality in personal well-being’ (2015, p. 2).

The group member continued:

Extract from meeting recording 10th May 2017

“We all know that AVCT has achieved some incredible outcomes for this community and yet we know that well-being is still a concern for so many people. I personally believe that we should all think very hard about how we have a unique opportunity to find out from the local community how their well-being could be improved.

Who else has six Community Champions to call upon to engage with people? Let’s just give it a go then we could see peoples’ responses and check to see if our provision meets their needs. This isn’t difficult to do is it”?

At that point, everyone accepted that our current context is one in which many community members articulate a sense of malaise with their lives despite the range of agencies working towards amelioration. Luke’s iteration proved to be a catalyst which achieved unity of

purpose and the group suddenly accepted that the focus should be to find out from the community, how we could enhance their well-being. Subsequently, without any prompting the group began to discuss different types of activities which could capture the community voice. We had begun to move into stage two, practical action. Other members had voiced similar views on several occasions, yet it was Luke's iteration that had levered progress. Finally, stage one came to an end when we reached agreement that we should improve our work by increasing the opportunities for engaging with the community so that their views could inform strategic plans. Well-being pervades most Government documents but their narrative and approach 'still does not pay real attention to the complexity inherent in how people negotiate their everyday lives' Ledwith and Springett (2010, p. 69).

Reflective log excerpt 10th May 2017

Yet another log which starts with 'what happened there?'

I have struggled trying to understand where I am going wrong as a facilitator. I claim that I am not adopting a hierarchical approach yet the concept of well-being is still something that I initiated. Autonomous style is desired yet not practicable because the group are not ready for this yet. Having re-read chapter 8 of Heron (1996) and recognised that I had paid scant attention to an induction process for the group. I just expected all members to know what to do.

Then bewilderingly, there is progress and seemingly, unanimous agreement that we should be asking community members what contributes to their sense of well-being. This came out of nowhere and I am still unable to trace how this came about. One minute we had group members voicing hubristic views about knowing all about what constitutes community well-being, the next everyone was animated and identifying ways to talk and listen to our community!

Figure 5 Photograph of collaborative inquiry group discussions



4.4 Stage 2 Practical Action: The group agrees new behaviour

Although we had finally agreed to develop new ways to capture the community voice, I was not feeling particularly secure entering the second stage of the collaborative inquiry because the first stage of agreeing a research focus had been so protracted and unwieldy. I was mindful that some unconscious group dynamics could reoccur and see some individuals dominating discussions. The more vociferous members also appeared to be less open to the views of others or to reflect upon current practice. I reminded myself of how Ledwith (2010) had been influenced by Heron asserting that reflection is needed in the process of change (1996) so in this way action is interwoven with story and dialogue. I would need to develop a propensity for greater reflection.

To my surprise and delight there was an instant mood change when stage two commenced and plans began to emerge for innovative ways to consult with community members about what was important to them. Group participants energetically began to consider consultation strategies and minimal facilitation was required as the group became autonomous and self-directed. In contrast to stage one where we spent weeks deciding upon what needed to change, this second phase was completed swiftly. The new behaviour was to be based upon community consultation using mediums such as family fun days, online surveys, social media outlets and the creation of a community newspaper. Throughout the summer of 2017 the collaborative inquiry group conducted new forms of community consultation to inform AVCT's planning processes. Over a six-week period we

deployed a range of techniques to collate stakeholders' views on what mattered to them and how AVCT could improve their sense of well-being.

Meeting notes 24th May 2017

Luke. "One thing that I think we have overlooked is the opportunity that the Lottery's Reaching Communities bid has given us. The work that we need to put into that application will really help to focus our attention on ensuring that we do give a genuine voice to the communities we serve. A key criterion for that application is People in the Lead, so, If the bid is successful we could use the whole initiative to test our effectiveness and assess whether our work is making a difference and building capacity beyond our gates".

The inquiry had begun to adopt an alternative mental model, and different questions were being posed. Rather than present strategies then ask for feedback we were now planning to elicit views from the community and ask them what influenced their sense of well-being.

4.4.1 Outcomes from consultation

The results of this extensive consultation exercise identified three priorities;

1. Social Isolation. 78% of people who had never accessed AVCT's provision highlighted the importance of social activities and requested outlets such as women's groups, intergenerational activities, walking opportunities and coffee mornings. Interestingly most respondents rejected formal learning opportunities such as adult education courses in favour of increased informal social interaction.
2. Mental Health. The most common response was that people felt safer through regular social contact and sought activities which improved their confidence and self-esteem.
3. Capacity building in local organisations. 32% of respondents voiced concern that several organisations had folded so they could no longer access their services. The general feeling was that small organisations were needed to offer bespoke support to cohorts such as the elderly, teenagers, people with dependency issues, the parents of children with SEND and self-help groups.

4.4.2 Group Reflection

The community consultation exercise indicated that a totally different approach was required when planning activities for the Reaching Communities grant application. Contrary to expectations, the process had not identified many formal learning, training, employment or physical health schemes as contributing to their sense of well-being. The group recognised that the most common denominator was the focus upon social relationships, connectedness, and self-efficacy as key indicators of improved lived experiences; aspects which staff had barely recognised. This was a significant breakthrough in our collective thought processes and learning; it prompted some new understanding and resonance with the belief that a new approach to planning provision was required.

4.4.3 Personal reflection

I returned to a reflection upon why the first stage of Heron's model had been so protracted in comparison to the second stage. My awareness was enhanced when I re-read his overview of Co-operative Inquiry and discovered 'two different complementary co-operative inquiry cultures' (Heron, 1996, p. 45). Unconsciously I had been promoting an Apollonian cooperative research inquiry with a linear, systematic, perhaps controlling approach to action-reflection cycles. I had anticipated a streamlined process where a committed group met regularly to follow the action-reflection cycles in order with clear outcomes being achieved at the end of each stage. Re-visiting Heron's seminal work proved invaluable, as there was a realisation that a Dionysian Inquiry culture existed. Tacit, diffuse, spiralling, impromptu responses were equally valid engagement processes, and my research had developed along that route. It was quite liberating to recognise that I was not constrained by the traditional action research framework with a rational cycle of sequenced steps; plan, act, observe and review (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1998). The stages could merge and overlap, which is precisely what I had experienced.

Heron suggests that the Apollonian and Dionysian inquiry cultures both share common ground in that they promote 'the intentional interplay between making sense and action, and the realization that both the meaning and the action need progressively to emerge as the inquiry proceeds' Heron (1996, p. 47). As soon as I came across the concepts of Apollonian and Dionysian forms of Inquiry, I became more assured with the messiness of research and enjoyed the freedom of simply trusting the process to see where it would lead.

Collaborative inquiry is an experiential approach to action research and a growing confidence emerged as I recognised that I was still able to facilitate a process in which participants could go off on tangents and draw upon all dimensions of their experiences in order to eventually arrive at an agreed course of action. Cook (2024, p. 7) claims that when conducting forms of participatory action research without pain, there is no gain. 'The pain occurs during the process of getting into a mess with yourself (and others) as the route to creating new knowledge and understandings'. I only recognised the value of disruption, mess and meanderings having experienced the process for myself; they are core elements of change processes.

4.5 Stage 3 Full Immersion: the inquiry group work on devising programmes in response to community voice

The application to The National Lottery's Community fund acted as the conduit for action and results from the consultation exercise informed the entire content and strategic response for this application. This was a significant departure from AVCT's usual planning meeting style where managers made decisions based upon their perception of need without explicit endeavours to capture the community voice.

Schein (1999) explores organisational culture by presenting a dynamic model of how culture is learned, passed on and used to promote change. My personal belief was that if AVCT's organisational culture became more inclusive for community members, then this could provide an effective means of improving local outcomes within the community. Whilst I was convinced that we were not doing enough to link our community with our provision I did not share this thought with the group to avoid influencing others. It was the collaborative inquiry forum that had created a new dimension to company culture; community views now became the bedrock of an application to the Lottery fund. This third stage of Heron's model saw autonomous processes coming to the fore as the group set about developing activities which promote social, relationship building and self-esteeming experiences for the community. In parallel we explored strategies which could build capacity amongst peer organisations and built them into the grant application. At this juncture I stepped back, as the group responded autonomously drawing up practical details of provision.

4.5.1 Personal reflection

Previously, the mind-set of colleagues and constant demands to measure impact had restricted the potential to develop new knowledge, but the community members' responses proved to be a catalyst with the potential for new knowledge -based upon relationships and emotional dimensions. Believing that people create their own embodied knowledge I was delighted with the stage three outcomes because I viewed the entire application as an example of community-led change. Traditional academics would no doubt dismiss this collaborative form of research on the grounds of the rigour and validity of knowledge, so I prepared for this challenge. Throughout the research process my aim had always been to seek knowledge which would improve action and outcomes, and not just stop at the report stage. Communities need to tell their own stories and create their own futures otherwise others will continue to do so for them. Intentional listening resulted in new departures for AVCT with a five-year Reaching Communities Lottery funded project being devised, delivered and underpinned by community voice.

4.6 Stage 4 Reflection: The inquiry group make sense of new learning and begin to develop a model

The active involvement of community members had greatly influenced the group's thinking and once we had reflected upon the whole experience several issues were noted. Firstly, whilst most of the group said that they could have predicted social isolation and mental health as priorities in need of redress, it was surprising to find so many people seeking opportunities for increased social interaction and relationship building. AVCT had been promoting accredited adult learning courses believing that this strategy improved people's life chances, but this was being rejected in favour of day-to-day social events which gave a sense of belonging. Social activities which enhanced an individual's sense of self-esteem and confidence were favoured as important factors improving mental health. We returned to the subject of my initial discussions with service users in the library who had all emphasised the emotional and relationship aspects of well-being, so a distinct theme was emerging. The third community priority had never been anticipated. The collaborative inquiry group had never considered contributing to capacity building amongst smaller, local organisations but they were meeting peoples' needs, so this also required further exploration. The group's agreed conclusion was that AVCT needed to develop more social activities and specifically

focus upon confidence and self-esteeming experiences with greater awareness of social and emotional aspects of well-being. There was a need to seek more interaction with community members' and move beyond the one-off annual consultation exercises. Intentional listening required attention to make sure that service users are actively involved and not passive recipients of our services; they have the embodied knowledge which supports our professional service delivery. Emancipatory discourse (Ledwith and Springett, 2010) was also to be considered as a means of listening and understanding people's needs. Capacity building processes would be developed to support small local organisations as they were contributing to individual well-being in ways that AVCT could not replicate.

4.6.1 Collaborative action research drives a successful funding application

The group's findings then became the foundation for a National Lottery, Reaching Communities application; we received positive, affirming feedback from assessors who invited us to progress to the next stage of the application process. Their feedback valued our consultation processes which had contributed to greater community empowerment. On 21st February 2018 AVCT received a grant offer from The National Lottery Community fund for £484,528.00 to deliver our five-year Community Solutions project. Members of the collaborative inquiry group would now commence the delivery of the initiative and continue to observe, record and measure the impact of their work. The group were thrilled with this successful outcome and acknowledged that the most significant determinant had been the process of participating in collaborative research to develop the bid.

The inquiry group had worked through Heron's four stages and were pleased to have come to a shared understanding and conclusions regarding the importance of capturing the community voice. We continued to meet to devise detailed plans for the project and all of these were informed by the outcomes of extensive community consultation. The concept of social capital was noted as an essential element which makes a community more than a collection of individuals, it is 'the stock of active connections among people; the trust, mutual understanding, shared values and behaviours that bind members of human networks and communities and make cooperation possible' (Cohen and Prusak, 2001, p. 43). This concept would be explored in greater depth in the third action research cycle.

4.6.2 Personal reflection

By the end of my second action research cycle, I was hopeful that agreed meanings, values and vision accompanied by self-directed change could be the catalyst for securing improved outcomes in our area. Whilst community accountability is a complex and intangible concept to operationalise, an important conclusion from the second cycle is that it could be a pre-requisite for lasting and sustainable change. Some commentators such as Haugh, (2012, p. 12) suggest that although there exists a diverse range of organisations within the community business sector, most hold shared beliefs that local people are best placed to identify needs. Thus, organisations 'led by, accountable to and embedded in the values of the community they serve are best at finding solutions'. The collaborative inquiry had begun to discuss issues relating to accountability and incorporated strategies to promote the practice within AVCT's future provision. 'Change can come from anywhere, especially from the bottom up' (Johnson and Parry, 2015, p. 281). Similarly, Johnson (2014) writes about an individual's potential to make a difference to their own world by making themselves part of solution-focused dialogue. Given that my epistemology is one that values personal relationships and emotions in the pursuit of social justice, I was pleased that my desire to make a difference to peoples' lives and our community by working with them not on them had been applied by harnessing collaborative inquiry processes.

Reason's work (1998) provided support and inspiration for my personal research journey. Reading a range of collaborative inquiry exemplars, had shaken up my old mind set. I was now armed by a range of new thought processes. Up until then I had allowed myself to be constrained by the range of models and frameworks being put forward as templates to follow for collaborative action research, but Reason had shown that one could select an eclectic approach and adopt methods to suit individual contexts. Reason differentiates between dialogic, collaborative and experiential styles of action research but the book's chapters reflect the organic nature of a researcher's chosen methodological approach.

The successful Reaching Communities contract bid was achieved only after some challenging interactions and discussions. Ledwith and Springett, (2010, p. 155) have noted that, 'reflection can be an uncomfortable and challenging process and so can be consciously and unconsciously resisted'. The collaborative effect had proved to be a powerful vehicle in changing the course of AVCT's professional practice; 'group discussion produces data and

insights that would be less accessible without interaction' (Johnson and Parry, 2015, p. 264). The second action research cycle had demonstrated the importance of working relationally with people and this synchronized with Dewey's (1938, p.38) philosophy explaining that:

every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into. Failure to take the moving force of an experience into account so as to judge and direct it on the ground of what it is moving into means disloyalty to the principle of experience itself. The educator is false to the understanding that he should have obtained from his own past experience. He is also unfaithful to the fact that all human experience is ultimately social: that it involves contact and communication.

This reflects the value of ensuring that action is not imposed upon individuals but initiated and generated from personal perspectives.

4.7 Conclusion: Successful yet unsettled

I was pleased with the outcome of the collaborative inquiry and my second action research cycle, because progress had been secured towards co-producing knowledge with our community; local issues could now be addressed and community-led change encouraged.

My initial intention was to move onto the third cycle of action research to compare the impact of a project informed through community consultation with a traditional, pre-ordained format. Something did not feel quite right though, and this was based upon a growing awareness of gaps in my knowledge. There was a lack of confidence surrounding the transition to another action research cycle without committing to deeper thinking and reflection; I changed direction. The sense of unease transpired because most discussions within the collaborative research inquiry usually defaulted to the theme of mounting challenges to colleagues as they attempted to raise revenue and manage the increasing demands of contract compliance. This process suggested that I had failed to appreciate the reality of working within such a pressurised context. In my first action research cycle, I had challenged the SLT's claim that they respond directly to need, because I could see that projects and initiatives were organised on behalf of the community without prior consultation. This was primarily due to expediency and the need for a rapid response to submit applications for commissioning opportunities. The challenges of operating within such a context and climate may have distracted colleagues from the organisation's vision. I encountered a compelling argument explaining how 'Institutional practices create the

conditions for non-participation’ (Ledwith and Springett, 2010, p. 99). Linear processes such as dependence upon short term grants, competitive tendering and the audit culture have reduced the opportunity for dialogue and critical reflection, as illustrated by the reluctance of some members of the collaborative inquiry forum to consider alternative ways of working. The current climate in the organisation saw members articulating concern that AVCT’s contribution to well-being was being compromised by the bureaucratic demands of funding bodies and the lack of power to develop grass roots-based strategies to local issues. There was a sense that the company has lost its way somewhat as it is obliged to work within Government agendas. Staff were able to articulate the company’s vision; Engaged, empowered communities devising community solutions to local problems, but found it difficult to apply this in practice due to extraneous pressures; this became the focus for my extended reflection.

Trustees and the Senior Leadership team have given little attention to reflecting upon improving our effectiveness and for a prolonged period it appeared as though we were content to rely upon soundbites such as the IPPR statement to convince ourselves that we were bringing about meaningful impact. As an influential hands-on director and Chair of the Board of Trustees, I had raised these points with the Senior Leadership team but invariably challenges arose, and the focus switched to day-to-day operational issues or crisis management responses. AVCT has an overarching aim to create conditions in which communities can flourish, and now had designed strategic responses based entirely on community member’s views about well-being. The collaborative inquiry group had made good inroads into participatory practice, but I was not confident that this new approach could be sustained in the future.

This chapter has presented an overview of my second action research cycle and has served as strong evidence that ‘knowledge is built from the lived experiences of people as opposed to distant or objective scholarly claims’ (Johnson and Parry 2015, p. 18). The collaborative inquiry group conducted community consultation exercises to ascertain

‘what would something better look and feel like?’ Participant responses generated new understanding of how to replicate the conditions which engender well-being.

Herr and Anderson (2015, p. 83) once suggested that conducting an action research study could be likened to ‘designing the plane while flying it’. This metaphor was constantly to the fore in this study, as I recognised the challenge of reflecting and improving upon life whilst being fully engaged and immersed in it. Despite the successful outcomes emerging from the second action research cycle, I had become very aware of gaps in my knowledge in need of redress.

Pausing my original research plan will create an extended period of reflection and retrospection, pursued in the hope of gaining greater clarity and understanding of the constraints inhibiting AVCT’s community development work. This redirection of approach raised a host of conflicting emotions; trepidation, insecurity, curiosity and hope.

Chapter 5. Evolving political landscapes: their impact upon my professional practice

This chapter presents aspects of learning from former professional experiences as I began to question why AVCT's progress towards achieving improved outcomes and social change had been slower than anticipated. By the end of the second action research cycle, there was an overwhelming sense of frustration and tension because of mounting challenges to making a difference to the lives of others. Participatory practice had identified development areas, yet structural conditions continued to inhibit change and community-led action. Encouraged by my supervisors, I embarked upon a period of reflection to examine the societal factors inhibiting AVCT's work in the community. Using critical incident reflection as a heuristic device I analyse four seminal experiences as a vehicle to broaden and deepen my understanding of factors compromising my work and efforts to enhance social justice. This extended reflection phase provided time and space to juxtapose some lived experiences with the changing political landscape, this deepened my understanding of societal factors constraining progress. The retrospective analysis helped me to make sense of my experiences and learning was accrued with more theoretical dimensions. In this way I developed a fuller appreciation of how my professional practice had been influenced over time by the neoliberal hegemony. Although not readily understood by many individuals in contemporary society, Harvey (2010), Brown (2017) and Davies (2020) have written extensively on the increasing influence of neoliberal ideology upon policy formation. Monbiot (2016a) believes that the way in which it operates namelessly is indeed a powerful testament to its influence. I have developed a deeper understanding of the dominance of this discourse and now acknowledge that it has influenced most aspects of my professional and indeed, personal life. This chapter demonstrates that my efforts to secure social justice were virtually impossible from the outset because of the political context I was working within. The unfolding narrative represents a personal awakening and the need to view the world through an alternative paradigm.

5.1. Rationale for extended reflection

At first sight the inclusion of a chapter dedicated to contextualising the political context of this study may appear somewhat out of place, however there is a clear rationale for taking this approach. Having completed the first two action research cycles I realised that there could be different avenues to pursue, as I had become conscious of a significant gap in my knowledge in terms of understanding the slow pace of social change. Until this juncture I held an intuitive form of knowing, but the key concept of neoliberalism had remained nameless to me and was never articulated explicitly. For some reason I had resisted examining society at large and opted for a narrow, yet deep inquiry into locally- focused community development. My action research cycles had generated more questions than answers, so this led to my supervisors encouraging me to think more critically about my overwhelming sense of dissatisfaction with the increasing barriers encountered to enhance community well-being.

Chapter three recorded how the first action research cycle illustrated the bureaucratic constraints being imposed upon my professional practice by funding bodies. This had a significant impact upon AVCT's provision and indeed my ability to support the organisation in improving outcomes for the local community. Senior members of staff were increasingly being exposed to an impact measurement industry which focused more upon quantifiable outputs rather than qualitative outcomes. The second co-operative enquiry cycle highlighted the excessive amount of technical and administrative compliance which diverted staff away from face-to-face community development- based activities. Some deep and at times uncomfortable reflection suggested that I had completed two action research cycles in an apparent vacuum, examining AVCT's contribution to community well-being without considering the national and international dimensions influencing our work. The process of studying for this PhD had encouraged me to be more aware of the connections between professional experiences and the political context, hence the importance of examining the correlation between policy and practice. A deeper political understanding was required before I could hope to further improve my contribution to community well-being. The necessity to examine the societal forces that were creating obstacles to AVCT's strategic plans became essential. Some commentators (Ledwith, 2020; Zizek, 2020) suggest that an

analysis of what is wrong with society needs to be assessed before any attempt is made to change it for the better. 'Together we can change anything. But, action for action's sake will not bring about sustainable change. If you want to change the world, you have to know how it works!' (Ledwith, 2020, p. 83). This quotation was a catalyst, as it convinced me of the need to alter the course of the research plan by committing to a broader investigation into societal forces constraining AVCT's mission, before moving onto the final action research cycle. Seeking a deeper level of critical consciousness, I began the process of gaining a greater understanding of contexts beyond the immediate milieu of AVCT.

5.2 Critical incident analysis

The subsequent narrative examines four key incidents experienced during my lifetime that highlight the changing political landscape. Each important event developed and challenged my thinking in terms of understanding the changing structural conditions in society. The process involved recalling autoethnographic experiences which, whilst being very personal to me, also represent significance for wider societal conditions and circumstances.

The four critical incidents were:

1. A local community occupying a secondary school to save it from closure.
2. An Ofsted inspection that placed my school into a Special Measures category with a failing school status
3. The Local Authority challenging my strategy of capturing family voice to devise improvement programmes.
4. £58,000 claw back from a European Regional Development Fund for being in breach of procurement rules.

Tripp (2012) asserts that different people may see different incidents as 'critical' depending on how they experience and interpret situations. These specific examples have significance for me, because each one contributed to my cumulative learning and theorising.

5.3 Critical incident 1

A local community occupy a secondary school to save it from closure (1982-85)

In the early 1980s, I was working in a large comprehensive school in Liverpool when media coverage began to feature items on parents illegally occupying a secondary school in Croxteth, a district in the north of the city. The significance of this action rests on the fact that I interpreted this community activism as unique. Here, were so many people showing that they were determined to retain a school which they valued as their community's key asset. Until that point, I had not witnessed anything similar, so this was a new departure for me. Political campaigns had mostly been generic with national activity promoting aspects such as employment and women's rights. This theatre of action though, was close to home, spatially and professionally; I was heartened by the fact that local people were not prepared to accept a decision to close their school; and then successfully brought about the re-opening of an essential community resource. I recall being surprised, that the Local Authority did not recognise the value of the school to the community, when they were the elected representatives fully aware of the socio-economic conditions in this disadvantaged neighbourhood. This encouraged me to monitor, from a distance, their evolving resistance to the closure of their secondary school and the campaign for re-opening.



Figure 6 Photograph of the school community during the occupation

Source: AVCT archives

To better understand the school occupation, I examined contributing factors creating a form of radical community activism. This helped to deepen my knowledge and thinking.

5.3.1 A school occupation

In November 1981, with no consultation process, the Liberal-led Council voted to close Croxteth Comprehensive School. The school staff and Community only learnt of the decision when it was reported in the local newspaper. The argument for closing Croxteth Comprehensive was based upon demographics and the falling birth rate, resulting in overcapacity in school places. The adjoining electoral ward retained two secondary schools, so Croxteth residents felt aggrieved that their only secondary school had been selected for closure. Market forces and concepts relating to economic viability had crept into the Local Authority's deliberations without recognising the crucial role the school was providing for the increasingly disadvantaged community. A pressure group was formed to re-instate this essential community facility and over six hundred people attended a meeting and formed a pressure group to campaign to keep the school open. On 13th July 1982, parents, staff and community members occupied the school buildings and ran the organisation as an independent school for a period of three years. This round -the- clock occupation and accompanying acts of resistance received much media attention locally, nationally and internationally (Carspecken and Miller, 1985).

Timing was relevant, as the school occupation and campaign to focus upon one aspect of improved community provision coincided with a period of rapid social change in society. Liverpool had experienced extensive job losses (Marren, 2016) in parallel with reduced investment for supporting disadvantaged communities. The action committee that coordinated the school occupation were all political and community- based activists with clear aims of resisting cuts to local services. Alinsky's (1971) model of social change in communities provides a useful lens for interpreting what was happening at the time. He presented a guide for community organisers to empower local communities and effect constructive social change in a variety of issues. His basic premise was to select an issue that would unite the community and encourage direct action to improve their conditions. McAlevey (2016) has criticised Alinsky for his rejection of ideology and over- emphasis upon the act of organising; yet I maintain that the school occupation led to the formation of AVCT, thus supporting Alinsky's premise. The single -issue model of action shaped future development in the neighbourhood; the AVCT organisation was born purely from pressure

group activity to retain the local secondary school. This developed and evolved into an educational charity which had moved beyond Alinsky's initial stages and attempted to enhance the collaborative contribution to community well-being as a vehicle for the promotion of social justice. Carspecken (1991) participated in the school occupation and later examined the nature of power with relation to education. Community folklore still abounds with tales of local people becoming politicised and mobilised to improve their conditions via the process of the school occupation. He asserts:

thus the disadvantaged urban community need not remain powerless, though the case of Croxteth provides no set recipe for community empowerment, but it acted as a foundation and learning experience for future community development (Carspecken 1991.p. 16).

An IPPR report (2010) has noted that whilst neighbourhood indicators can be collated in the form of statistics to evidence improvements, it was qualitative interviews with residents that added important depth to their findings. It was found that community leadership was a key factor securing improved outcomes in several geographical areas. Examples of local action leading to change were highlighted in all of the improving areas by both residents and stakeholders. 'Direct action changed a whole generation of people's lives. They learned about politics, networking and what that could do. In 1980s life in Croxteth was really dire, full of heroin and unemployment, no facilities' (Speke Stakeholder, talking about Croxteth in IPPR North, 2010, p. 64)

I was drawn by the energy and optimism surrounding the school occupation, and the way in which the community continued to address social problems in the area once the school had been re-opened. The resistance and direct action of the Croxteth community was not merely a local incident of interest to me as an educationalist, it represented something much wider and symbolic on a global scale. Reflecting upon my experiences during the tumultuous period of the late 1980s, I came to appreciate the causes and significance of the school occupation more clearly, most notably with the work of Bauman (1998), Tyler (2013) and Giroux (2014) providing explanations for political action. These authors helped me to understand that certain sectors of society are stigmatised and regarded as disposable because they do not serve as functionaries to neoliberal regimes. One contending that 'the

poor are totally useless' (Bauman, 1998, p. 91) because lacking sufficient income renders this group as flawed consumers.

5.3.2 Abject entities

Frequently, commentators have suggested that the widespread disadvantage in Liverpool could be attributed to indolence and placed the blame on individuals; few identified the structural and political processes causing economic and social decline. Throughout my career the image of the city of Liverpool has been portrayed in an unflattering manner. For example, an article in the Brighton Argus (12th March 1987) reflects this; 'Liverpool, a city whose name has become synonymous with the worst excesses of the lunatic Left, with deprivation and unemployment'. The paper dispatched a reporter to Liverpool to examine how run-down life was like in the city; he confirmed that his perception was negative 'my knowledge of the city had consisted of a series of bleak images from the TV screen, the riots at Toxteth...miles of run-down housing estates...the Heysel stadium disaster' (Walker, 1987)

Similarly, the stereotyped image of the Croxteth district was unfavourable, associated not only with extreme poverty as was the case with all Liverpool, but also with extensive crime and abuse of drugs. The Toxteth neighbourhood in Liverpool promoted a robust anti-heroin position as evidenced by common graffiti slogans in the area declaring; 'Newsflash: This is Toxteth not Croxteth, strictly Ganja' (Angiesliverpool, 2024). I now suggest that the treatment of the city and the Croxteth area can be attributed to the resistance mounted against government cuts to services and mass unemployment during the Thatcher era. Such processes are recognised by Tyler (2013) who identifies how abject groups are often scapegoated and derided in order to justify state action. Politicians and media outlets have frequently suggested that Liverpool people are a work shy, feckless, recalcitrant population. Boland (2008) documented the uneasy relationship between the city and some national media outlets in the early 1980s citing content in The Daily Mirror; 'They should build a fence around and charge an admission fee. For sadly, it has become a showcase for everything that has gone wrong in Britain's major cities'. He continued by outlining the deeply ingrained images of residents being 'argumentative, thieving, violent, lazy scroungers'.

This portrayal had a deep impact upon me as I considered it unjust to see an entire city and specific community labelled so negatively. On countless occasions I have had cause to challenge individuals who articulated the generic image of nihilistic communities with self-interested, motivation. One example took place in 2008 when I joined a group of head teachers travelling to a London-based conference; the train was delayed so we phoned ahead to give our apologies. As our contingent entered the auditorium, the chair announced:

“Colleagues, the Liverpool delegates have arrived so make sure you watch your handbags”

Liverpool has historically, and continues to have, an ‘outsider status’ (Ball, 2017, p. 146) and though crucial to the fabric of the country, it never really felt, nor does it feel in contemporary society, a part of England. It was a stand-alone city, one with its own ‘Scouse cultural identity – resilient, gritty and self-consciously Other.’ (Ball, 2017, p. 145).

Frequently, Liverpool has been regarded as a threat to the government for example, as far back as 1911 during a general transport strike, the then Home Secretary, Winston Churchill, placed two gunboats on the River Mersey fearing that the dispute would lead to a revolution. Seventy years later in 1981, Chancellor Geoffrey Howe described Liverpool to the Prime Minister as being the ‘hardest nut to crack’. (BBC News, 2011). Evidence of further abjection (Tyler, 2013) was seen on the day that Boris Johnson became Prime Minister; he refused to apologise for approving a hugely offensive article that had smeared Liverpool and its populace in relation to the Hillsborough football tragedy (1989) and the murder of Kenneth Bigley in Iraq (2004). The death of 97 Liverpool football fans and the kidnapping and murder of a Liverpool-born civil engineer, had been the subject of an article claiming that the people of Liverpool relish being regarded as victims:

Liverpool is a handsome city with a tribal sense of community. A combination of economic misfortune...and an excessive predilection for welfarism have created a peculiar and deeply unattractive psyche among many Liverpudlians. They see themselves whenever possible as victims and resent their victim status; yet at the very same time they wallow in it. (Johnson, 2004)

Over time, the city has developed a status as a blot on the green and pleasant landscape of England, one which became the subject of many jokes regarding unemployment, work-shyness and theft. The Sunday Times described Liverpool as a city with, ‘a majority of

lumpens' (Ball, 2017, p. 160). Having lived and worked in Liverpool my entire life, I had a totally different perception of the city; most people I encountered were warm, diligent, principled individuals seeking social justice for those around them. Unfairness was challenged regularly, and collaborative endeavour was a cultural norm, particularly in the disadvantaged communities in which I worked. I now appreciate the reasons for the inaccurate perception of Liverpool and Croxteth needed to justify state policy; and this thesis disputes the common trope by demonstrating how ordinary people can make history by questioning their circumstances and taking direct action to improve their communities. Tyler (2013) has made a compelling argument purporting that the neoliberal discourse has created certain abject groups who are scapegoated and derided in order to justify state action, which limits their democratic rights and reduces access to welfare system entitlements. She describes the experiences of several abject groups using the term 'waste populations' (2013, p. 20). This term was first used by Bauman (2004) who maintained that neoliberalism creates a strata of people described as 'wasted humans'. Tyler develops this concept contending that 'these "wasted humans" are transformed into national abjects who are employed to legitimize neoliberal forms of governmentality by effecting insecurity within the body politic' (Tyler, 2013, p. 47). Although not featured in Tyler's work, the Croxteth Community could be perceived as an 'abject entity' given the negative press coverage of the community's resistance to central government's cuts to services and mass unemployment. Frequently described as 'smack city', the Croxteth estate became synonymous with poverty, crime and anti-social behaviour. Political and media power often combine to discredit various abjectified groups so that 'national abjects become enmeshed within the interpellative fabric of everyday life' (Tyler, 2013, p. 9). As she catalogued the experiences of abject groups such as travellers, immigrants, disabled and young people, she ensured that for each depressing case study she provided examples of the marginalised group's resilience and resistance to abjection. Her argument was influenced by Giroux's (2007) concept of 'the politics of disposability' where certain sectors of society are deemed worthless because of their limited contribution to market growth and prosperity. Tyler claimed that her work reflects a rising dissent against the neoliberal consensus and sought:

to elaborate a rich account of neoliberal Britain from the bottom up, of the abject forms of inequality and injustice which neoliberalism effects and the resistance and revolt to which it gives rise (Tyler, 2013, p. 3).

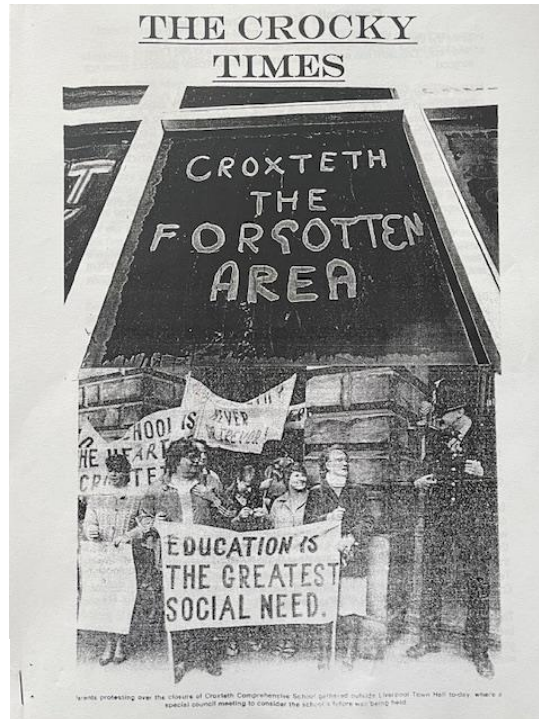


Figure 7 Photograph of parents protesting against school closure outside Liverpool Town Hall

I now interpret the school occupation and Liverpool's challenge to central government as clear forms of resistance from a marginalised, stigmatised, abjectified sections of society.

Giroux (2014) speaks of disposability in relation to residents of certain geographical areas and describes entire communities as zones of social abandonment. His research relates to the U.S.A but clear parallels can be drawn with British examples. Community members in both countries describe a sense of unrest, unease and fear brought on by living in such zones with precarity being a constant theme. This resonated with my experiences of working in deprived communities, but the Croxteth community had not accepted their declining conditions and chose to resist imposed decision making.

I have outlined some of the unflattering tropes of Liverpool and Croxteth which reflect the state's need to adopt abjectionification to reinforce and pursue their neoliberal agenda. It could be claimed that the city was punished for its recalcitrance and resistance. Tyler's work reflects how successive government narratives have featured the theme of losers in society as a means of deflecting public opinion away from the real causes of economic and social inequality. Social problems are attributed to flaws within an individual, with few people recognising that entire economic and political systems are controlled by a small, rich elite, (Ball, 1996; Tomlinson, 2001; Harvey, 2005). Infact, Harvey continued this theme by arguing that neoliberalism is a class project which aims to restore and consolidate class power.

This provided a crucial lens to support my understanding of wider political forces. Giroux convinced me that many people are so occupied with the challenge of surviving at the bottom of a savage neoliberal order that they cannot see through the elite's hold on society. In this way they remain attached to the ideological values of capitalism and unquestionably accept government policies that cause massive hardships and distress. 'Neoliberalism's best trick is to persuade individuals that they should see themselves as solitary agents who can and must live the good life promised by the Capitalist culture' (Giroux, 2014, p. 4).

This assertion mirrors Foucault's (2006) suggestion of the state's desire to encourage the development of docile, unquestioning beings who can be filled with information and controlled. There was an impression of Liverpool and notably the Croxteth community being stigmatised, rendered as disposable and classified as a zone of abandonment with a perception of it becoming a 'no go area'. During Militant's head on battle with the national government, many local politicians articulated the belief that the city of Liverpool had been targeted for the withdrawal of investment by central Government. Concrete evidence of a deliberate strategy to abandon the city later came to light in 2011 when Cabinet minutes were published. The Chancellor, Geoffrey Howe (1981) urged Margaret Thatcher to abandon Liverpool declaring; 'I cannot help feeling that the option of managed decline is one we should not forget altogether. We must not expend our limited resources in trying to make water flow uphill' (BBC News, 2011). This represents convincing evidence of the machinations and manipulative processes being rolled out and damaging whole sectors of society.

5.3.3 Croxteth, a community in decline due to the neoliberal doctrine: 1981

The school occupation was no doubt the result of increasing dissatisfaction with Government policies. Throughout the 1980s, Liverpool experienced acute levels of disadvantage following years of Government cuts to Local Authority budgets (Parkinson, 1985). I recall innumerable conversations with community members bemoaning the fact that the Conservative Government was indifferent to the city's fate. Most felt abandoned by central government as economic and social problems multiplied. Conditions were quite desperate and life was very difficult at this point in time for the majority of community members. Liverpool had been badly affected during the global recession of the 1970s, with over 350 factory closures with the loss of nearly half of the manufacturing employment

outlets by the early 1980s (Frost and North, 2013). Having been elected as Prime Minister of the UK in 1979, Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative party, with a mandate to curb Union power and reverse inflation, rolled out a raft of policies which I now see came to form and characterise a neoliberal agenda. These policies was underpinned by the promotion of the free market unimpeded by government regulation; public spending was slashed and privatisation of state services increased. Monbiot (2016a) claims that since the late 1970s, neoliberalism has been the key ideology governing contemporary societies, yet it is seldom identified and rarely challenged. The concept is not readily understood, and he believes that the way in which it operates namelessly is indeed a powerful testament to its influence. Harvey (2010) states that there is a considerable body of evidence to assert that the years 1978-80 were significant in influencing the course of global economic and social history. They marked the rise of the doctrine of neoliberalism promoted by Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, Paul Volcker and Deng Xiaoping and in successive decades this theory became the overriding basis of economic principles. Such a major shift in world history, which transformed the global order requires closer attention because it acted as the backdrop to the decline witnessed in so many disadvantaged communities:

Transformations of this scope and depth do not occur by accident. So it is pertinent to enquire by what means and paths the new economic configuration-often subsumed under the term 'globalization'- was plucked from the entrails of the old (Harvey, 2010, pp.1-2).

One of the most significant issues detected as I began to explore a wider political viewpoint was the simple fact that neoliberal ideology was founded during the so-called halcyon days of the welfare state's social democratic era. A small number of individuals formed the Mont Pelerin Society in 1947, and this came to symbolise the birth of a neoliberal doctrine. (Harvey, 2010; Mirowski and Plehwe, 2015), traced the origins of this ideology, outlining how eminent characters joined Friedrich von Hayek, an Austrian political philosopher, to articulate their commitment to free market principles and opposition to state intervention epitomised by Keynesian economic models. Hayek noted that, to convince others to adopt the principles of neoliberalism a battle based upon ideas needed to take place; 'It would probably take at least a generation for that battle to be won not only against Marxism but against socialism, state planning, and Keynesian interventionism' (Harvey, 2010, p. 21).

Just thirty years after its formation the influence of neoliberalism had been strengthened having secured political and financial support from significant world leaders in the United Kingdom and the United States of America. The doctrine was formally introduced into the UK political mainstream with the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 and this led to continuous consolidation, and advancement henceforth. Harvey, (2010, p. 2) defines neoliberalism as:

a theory of political economic practices that propose that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.

In practice the doctrine promotes the supremacy of free markets, unimpeded by government regulation. The assumption is that the less the state regulates and taxes people, the better off all members of society will be. It supports reduced public spending, increased privatisation of public services and businesses to be free from social control. Under Thatcher, 'Neoliberal "economism" increasingly dominated the public domain, a discourse of markets and liberty whose lack of intellectual credibility was no obstacle to its propagation and execution' (Mirowski and Plehwe, 2015, pp. 90-91). Neoliberalism first became established and consolidated in the UK and the U.S.A, then its reach was extended, and the doctrine has since evolved into a global phenomenon. Proponents suggest that the market can resolve almost all social, economic and political problems and meet all human needs:

Neoliberalism claims that we are best served by maximum market freedom and minimum intervention by the state. The role of government should be confined to creating and defending markets, protecting private property and defending the realm. All other functions are better discharged by private enterprise, which will be prompted by the profit motive to supply essential services. By this means, enterprise is liberated, rational decisions are made and citizens are freed from the dehumanising hand of the state. (Monbiot, 2016a, p. 218)

The neoliberal claims did not deliver a panacea to meet all human needs, instead it caused an enormous shift of wealth to the upper echelons of society (Harvey, 2005). In the United Kingdom, Thatcher's administration came to be characterised by the privatisation of many publicly owned industries and central government funding to Local Authorities was reduced;

with sectors such as education, and health having greater surveillance, financial accountability and productivity measures imposed. Travers (2013) claims that:

her legacy to local governments was increased centralisation and the willingness of her successors to cap, limit and control local democracy in England. This country is one of the most centralised of western democracies, which is an odd legacy for a politician who so prized individualism and freedom.

Neoliberalism necessitated a range of strategies to free people from the slavery of the state. 'Minimal taxes, the dismantling of public services and social security, deregulation, the breaking of the unions-just happen to be the conditions required to make the elite even richer, while leaving everyone else to sink or swim' (Monbiot, 2016a. pp.218-219)

Labour-controlled councils became a target for the new Conservative doctrine so cities such as Liverpool, Sheffield and London developed into active centres of resistance to Thatcher's monetarist and strict budgetary control systems (Boddy and Fudge, 1984). They suggest that, whilst cuts and controls directed at Local Government since 1979 posed political problems, for most Local Authorities, they were most acutely felt by progressive Labour Councils.

National statistics provide a depressing picture and reflect the dire circumstances experienced by local communities; In 1979 Liverpool and Merseyside consistently recorded double the national average in unemployment rates and in 1981, 20% of the city's workforce were unemployed (Boddy and Fudge, 1984). This period of economic deprivation and joblessness impacted upon Liverpool more than most other contemporary cities, therefore it is not surprising that the city became quite distinctive and associated with the creation of a highly politicised working class. Evidence of resistance to declining living standards and unjust national policies can be seen in the way that the local electorate in the Croxteth community supported radical, left wing municipal politics fronted by the Militant tendency (Marren, 2016). This Trotskyist group within the British Labour party, founded in 1964, came to dominate Liverpool City Council between 1983 and 1987. When the Liverpool Labour party adopted Militant's policy decision to set an illegal deficit budget in 1982 as a means to maintain council services, Labour's National Executive committee responded with a head-on clash banning and surcharging forty-seven councillors, expelling Militant members from the party and the public denunciation of their conduct by Neil Kinnock (Labour party leader) at the 1985 Party Conference. Having experienced these turbulent and

bewildering times, I came to appreciate why so many members of the Croxteth community supported Militant given that so much extreme deprivation existed within the ward:

Croxteth, one of the poorest neighbourhoods in the city, where there was an unemployment rate of 40% and where approximately 98% of the sixteen- to nineteen-year-olds were without work, was especially vulnerable to Government cuts. (Marren, 2016, p. 23)

Marren (2016) outlines 'the peculiarities of Liverpool' when he charts the rise of the neoliberal challenge to post-war consensus through the lens of increasing de-industrialisation. He outlined how 81% of Croxteth residents were in receipt of welfare benefits and resided in some of the poorest quality housing stock, a dearth of community facilities exacerbated peoples' lived experiences. It was clear that disadvantaged communities were receiving inconsistent service provision, and this had an adverse effect upon their life chances and well-being. Within the Croxteth community discussions highlighted the importance of saving jobs and services to avoid a depressing spiral of abject misery. The Militant Labour council refused to set a budget that would harm the most vulnerable sectors of the community, thus heralding a battle of wills between central and municipal government. Whilst not a member of Militant, I supported their resistance to the Conservative party's agenda which had resulted in such a dramatic decline in peoples' lived experiences. In chapter 2, I recognised that official statistics could never provide an authentic perception of community experiences (Lupton, 2003) and this was born out during this period. My interactions with young people and their families, led to the unfolding of a rich narrative outlining rising unemployment levels and deteriorating living conditions; discussions with community members also revealed an increasing sense of malaise, hopelessness and anomie. This insight led me to believe that a paradigm shift had occurred in this period as a new framework unravelled with regards to what people could expect from the state (Bobbit, 2002). My interpretation at this point in time was that Conservative policies were exacerbating the UK's structural decline; and such a pronounced narrow perspective meant that I paid no attention to the forces of neoliberalism and globalisation. My response was to prioritise education and to support successful student outcomes by encouraging young people to take full advantage of the education system as a vehicle for enhanced opportunities.

With hindsight it is remarkable to see how I divorced the political climate from my professional practice. Whilst remaining acutely aware of the damage caused by the Conservative agenda, I remained apolitical, believing that my contribution to education was more valuable for the community that I served. I still naively believed that our formal secondary school system had the ability to empower and develop increased opportunities for marginalised sectors of society.

5.3.4 Neo liberalism: Growing awareness of an unnamed force

Having analysed the conditions surrounding the school occupation as a seminal incident, my critical consciousness was emerging. I realised that across Liverpool and the nation, many communities were experiencing significant disadvantage and decline because of the ascendancy of Thatcher's promotion of the neoliberal doctrine. An important point is raised by the suggestion that decades of neoliberal policies have led to economic Darwinism. The promotion of privatisation, deregulation, free trade and commodification encourages a survival of the fittest mentality. This doctrine now shapes most aspects of life in Western democracies and Giroux (2014, p.3) asserts that this has now developed into; 'a predatory global phenomenon'. Considering the importance of the school occupation, made me question the cause of my previous reluctance and procrastination to understand such a powerful global force. With hindsight, I now recognise that there was overwhelming evidence of the increasing influence of neoliberalism upon my practice. However, I had no conscious appreciation of the concept until PhD studies prompted further investigation. Whilst working towards improved educational outcomes, I was never exposed to the concept of neoliberalism, the term had not entered the general lexicon and would not surface until decades later. The growth of a consumer- based society led to increased demand for material possessions, and globalisation was advancing, but I never linked these developments with the neoliberal narrative. I was unaware of this formidable emerging force, which would not only undermine the Welfare State, but would eventually transform society and my professional experiences beyond recognition.

The doctrine had already been created and articulated but few were aware of the actual term and the associated characteristics. Monbiot (2016a) asserts that this concealment was a strategic decision to prevent the public from understanding what was happening. The lack of critical consciousness regarding the existence and negative impact upon society of

neoliberal dominance is not an uncommon phenomenon; this fact assuaged my feelings of ignorance and inadequacy as I now have greater clarity regarding the strategies deployed to camouflage reality. Over the last twenty years however, a much greater awareness of the neoliberal discourse has surfaced, with many critical accounts (Ledwith and Springett, 2010; Monbiot, 2016a; Brown, 2017; Davies, 2020; Monbiot and Hutchinson, 2024) having been published and debated.

The occupation of Croxteth Comprehensive School represents the period when neoliberalism was in the ascendancy and its impact was acutely felt within disadvantaged communities. The reopening of the school was a positive example of community-led resistance to the effects of the doctrine.

5.4 Critical incident 2

An Ofsted inspection places my school into a Special Measures category with a failing school status (1994-96)

I was appointed as a senior leader in Croxteth Community Comprehensive School with responsibility for the curriculum and community-based provision. Having observed the occupation of this school from a distance, I felt privileged to be offered a position in the setting and to be given the opportunity to work with the same community who had secured a significant outcome in retaining quality educational provision within the neighbourhood. Having been accustomed to schools devising their own curriculum, I welcomed the opportunity to work collaboratively with colleagues to develop stimulating and meaningful programmes of study and promote aspiration and personal efficacy amongst students. The transition to a new school and position coincided with the introduction of the Education Reform Act (1988) with an all-embracing nature that overwhelmed most professionals; inspection visits became an integral component of the policy and represents the second critical incident. Our school's first Ofsted inspection took place in 1994 with the summative judgement outcome of Special Measures and failing school classification. As part of the four-year inspection cycle, any school judged as providing an inadequate standard of education was placed into a special measures category; subsequently becoming subject to regular and rigorous monitoring to ensure that imposed targets and priority development areas were addressed and achieved in a timely manner. The Conservative's party's rationale was that all pupils had equality of opportunity due to following the same curriculum, receiving the same

funding formula and being judged against standardised tests. Therefore, underachievement must be attributed to teachers and schools.’ Student “under-achievement” was blameworthy, and the blame lay with “incompetent” teachers and “underperforming” schools’ (Kushner, 2022, p. 78).

My sentiments surrounding the inspection process at the time was that it felt punitive and created a negative perception amongst people who were not familiar with the school. The Ofsted judgement led to a significant reduction in morale throughout the school community. We found ourselves having to justify our emphasis upon providing a holistic educational experience for students and challenging the inspectorate’s obsession with quantifiable examination results at key stages three, four and five. This event was a turning point, as the criteria used to judge a school’s quality of education did not resonate with my educational philosophy. More importantly, however, whilst we retained the support and commitment of parents, the setting was labelled as inferior when the GCSE school league table results were published; this was a forerunner for increasing control, competition and marketisation. Education had been given a major role by the Conservative regime, as it was charged with improving the national economy. By developing a particular form of education, the quality of the workforce could be improved, and this would then improve productivity and economic growth. ‘A characteristic of post-welfare society is the de-personalisation of people as human beings into consumers, human resources and human capital’ (Bobbit, 2002, p. 6). Schools socialise children so that they enter society as smoothly as possible, and Thatcher’s new right discourse promoted an ideology that told them what to think and encouraged an unquestioning mind-set. ‘We teachers, the experts, deposit information, dole out directions and advice, and ask them (students) to respond on our terms’ (McDermott, 1999, p. 2).

5.4.1 The Ofsted Inspection remit

The Conservative party’s raft of Education reforms from 1988 onwards represents a watershed in British history. The social -democratic post war era 1945-1979 had seen a large consensus for a more meritocratic society (Forrester and Garratt, 2016) with education’s role perceived as the reduction in social inequality and a facilitator of social mobility. Having been re-elected in the general election of July 1987, the Conservative party acted swiftly to introduce an overhaul of the education sector with a new agenda transforming education

into a servant of the economy. Kenneth Baker (Secretary of State for Education) introduced consultation documents centred upon a National Curriculum, school admissions, financial delegation to schools and grant-maintained status. Responses were due by September so essentially the school holiday period was the only opportunity to present one's views on his proposals. The authors of the Act ignored criticism and representations, even though most of the 20,000 responses received were critical of most aspects of the plans (De Haviland, 1988). The Education Reform Act was on the statute book by July 1988. The Education (Schools) Act 1992 and the 1993 Education (School Inspections) regulations set up the Office for Standards in Education (hereafter Ofsted). Most significantly this body was independent from the Department for Education; School inspections were conducted by teams of private inspectors awarded contracts by Ofsted. Whilst 250 Her Majesty's Inspectors (hereafter HMIs) were retained under the new arrangements, their remit changed into an administrative and supervisory role. Previously HMIs had led independent inspections dispensing advice to schools and government officials. The system was applauded internationally for supporting school standards and providing independent advice to Ministers. Assessing the new arrangements for school inspections, the outgoing Chief Inspector of Schools, HMI, Eric Bolton denounced the new systems: 'In Britain by an act of careless vandalism, driven by ideology and ignorance, we have enacted a small but important tragedy and destroyed it' (Bolton 1994, p. 127). This is powerful testimony to the Thatcher administration's disregard and disrespect for educational professionals, parents, Local Education Authorities and HMIs.

Without doubt, the Education Reform Act (ERA hereafter) epitomised the key tenets of neoliberalism with control, market forces, competition, and individual interests at the centre of everyday life. The Welfare State and accompanying post-war shift towards meritocratic and egalitarian values was in decline. Wider opportunities had been given to previously marginalised groups, but this process now stalled. A myriad of education policies were introduced in the eighteen years from 1979-1997: these gradually moved provision away from comprehensive education towards greater selective schooling, thus re-enforcing existing social divisions. Tomlinson (2005) highlights how Thatcher's educational policies increasingly favoured groups already privileged or those aspiring to secure enhanced mobility and status.

5.4.2 Inspection and failing school status.

I had not anticipated the impact of the suite of legislation contained in the ERA and the way in which it would create a hiatus in my professional practice; the underpinning rationale being diametrically opposed to my core values. Initially, our newly re-opened comprehensive school had autonomy to design its own curriculum, so the educational offer was community-based and focused upon raising aspirations and the development of the whole child. There was freedom to pursue values-based practice, so I encouraged working relationally with young people to increase their engagement, motivation and aspiration. Having harnessed the bespoke curriculum offer and hidden curriculum processes quite successfully, we improved progress and attainment amongst learners. Most of the school's governing body was composed of former action committee members from the school occupation, and they articulated the belief that education was the most effective vehicle to promote improved life chances. Influenced by Paulo Freire's seminal work 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1993), they had encouraged learner-focused provision as a means of addressing some of the social problems in the area. Freire advocated a new form of education to encourage active participation in shaping one's world. Freire's basic assumption was that man's ontological vocation is to be someone 'who acts upon and transforms his world, and in so doing moves towards ever new possibilities of a fuller and richer life individually and collectively' (Freire, 1993, p. 14). Carspecken explored the concept of community education as a vehicle for improving outcomes in disadvantaged communities and proposed an alternative model:

since the bulk of working class children have to face futures within deprived communities, a different type of education, geared to making empowered adults capable of changing their environment is justified (Carspecken, 1991 ,p. 6).

My attempts to develop a bespoke community-based curriculum were thwarted by the introduction of the ERA's National Curriculum component imposing programmes of study and attainment targets for each of the ten prescribed subject areas; this can be seen as a representation of Freire's banking model of education where students 'memorize mechanically the narrated content' (1996, p. 53). He outlined how knowledge could be seen as a commodity or gift to be bestowed to the less knowledgeable, and explains the

oppressive nature of such a system with its emphasis upon uncritical acceptance of the status quo.

As the curriculum lead, I attempted to work around the conditions by encouraging colleagues not to simply follow the imposed schemes of work in a slave- like manner but to ensure that students were offered stimulating provision with a myriad of opportunities to understand their world. I placed an emphasis on pedagogical processes which encouraged more critical understanding of society. Initially there were few barriers or challenges to this professional practice, because we believed that the way we taught could still offer student-centric provision. I encouraged colleagues to work collaboratively sharing a commitment to social change and the belief that education could facilitate social mobility, leading to improved lived experiences for our working-class students. The environment enabled an application of a humanising educational philosophy (Freire, 1985) and the promotion of my long- held values of equality and social justice. Although there was no alignment with any distinct educational discourse, my overall aim was to develop child-centred, experiential provision (Dewey, 1944) to encourage growth and fulfilled potential. Essentially the intention was to develop self-esteem and self-belief amongst students, so that barriers to learning were minimised and aspiration augmented; the National Curriculum compromised our established school practices because it was forcing us to deliver the narrow, prescriptive, stultifying schemes of work to prepare students for public examinations. Staff voiced concern about the unprecedented central control of the curriculum and assessment systems; commentators fulminated against the constraints imposed by state- sanctioned knowledge but Thatcher's administration did not alter their course of action. Bourdieu (1977) claimed that educational settings are sites of social and cultural reproduction, this was seen in the way the policies imposed on schools were transmitting a new ideology. Whilst neoliberalism remained unnamed in my daily practice, the impact of this doctrine's policies was felt, experienced and endured:

Education was in future intended to be a commodity, with parents supposedly free to choose the quality, location and amount, and the best quality education was, as in pre-war Britain, to be a positional good which must be competitively sought (Tomlinson, 2005, p.32).

In 1994 a team of ten inspectors arrived at the school and spent a week observing lessons, interviewing SLT, subject leaders and examining whole school policies, curriculum plans, Key Stage 3 Standard Attainment Tests (SATs) results and key stage 4 GCSE outcomes. The decision to judge the school's educational provision as inadequate was based upon examination attainment, attendance and punctuality outcomes falling below national averages. There was no mechanism to challenge their judgement, so I complied with statutory conditions, but continued promoting a humanist form of education. The school's action plan was approved, and two HMIs were assigned to monitor progress.

Following the publication of our Ofsted report, the school was derided in the local press (along with other working -class comprehensives) for remaining close to the bottom of examination-based league tables, published with the intention of informing parents about standards and overall quality of education. This was an extremely challenging period, as the school community attempted to argue that indicators of educational quality do not rest solely on attainment outcomes. All judgements are subjective, so it depends upon the criteria used to assess quality. Ofsted were reliant upon measurable examination results whilst I held a more holistic approach. Kushner, (2022, p. 93) captures this distinction:

If, say, we value the creativity, independence and individuality of each student, then we are likely to look for classrooms to meet criteria quite different from those that signify order, compliance, measurement against a common standard

Croxteth Community Comprehensive School, though, was singled out and subjected to local press coverage, claiming that we were a Militant based establishment with parents running the school instead of professional educationalists. This false representation further abjectified the community, and an extremely negative image became attached to the school and the area because of the attention drawn to our poor Ofsted judgement. 'Failing' schools, those falling short of the required standards and located towards the bottom of league tables, were thus readily identifiable and could be 'named and shamed' (Forrester and Garratt, 2016, p. 14). For a while, the school community was concerned about the cumulative effect of negative media coverage and increasing pressure for schools to develop successful marketing strategies. Many believed that the student-centred values would be compromised but this did not transpire. We continued to prioritise the establishment and

maintenance of positive, trusting relationships with families; and parents retained the view that the school offered a quality educational experience for their children.

5.4.3 Competition and choice.

The special measures inspection judgement could have been easier to address had some additional adjuncts not been in place. Thatcher's justification for a robust inspection process was based upon the tenets of accountability and parental choice. Changes were made to school admission procedures so that pupils were enrolled up to a relevant standard number. However, governors or LEAs could set higher limits. This practice of open enrolment was a further stimulus for the marketisation of schools and continues to be a powerful neoliberal force in contemporary society. Schools were obliged to compete with one another to maintain sufficient numbers on roll and ensure financial viability. Local Management of Schools required a steep learning curve for school leaders to secure value for money and financial efficiency. This brought about a drive for augmenting numbers on roll, through a sustained focus upon pupil recruitment and marketing strategies. One day at a busy road intersection, I observed scores of secondary pupils waiting at bus stops. Eight different school uniforms were counted; students travelling to various parts of the city in search of 'good' schools, evidence of the success of marketing strategies, but also evidence of the demise of local community -based comprehensive education.

Image and perception are powerful influencers but happily, our numbers on roll remained stable. The school then rose up the local league table as increasing numbers of students secured qualifications and national attainment targets. Colleagues were heartened by the school's upward trajectory in the local league table, however, I was very uncomfortable with the whole process as it pitted school against school and discouraged cooperative endeavours. Most of our students lived locally; very few originated from wards beyond the immediate community because of the negative stereotyped image linked to the district of Croxteth. As long as our school was providing a quality learning experience for pupils, and stakeholders continued to support the school philosophy and underpinning values, then I assumed that we could remain autonomous. Having developed a powerful, trusting partnership with our parents, we were confident that we could remain viable without resorting to competitive marketing campaigns to attract more students.

The fallout following the special measures classification was burdensome as the staff body continued to focus upon establishing positive relationships with learners and encouraging greater aspiration, whilst simultaneously chasing short term attainment and attendance targets imposed by Ofsted. The one act of successful resistance to the Ofsted monitoring arrangements was to insist upon retaining all staff and to work collaboratively to improve learner outcomes. Very few schools were able to achieve this without discarding members of staff deemed to be securing poor results with pupils. My ability to do so affirmed my leadership skills and demonstrated the efficacy of participatory practice with staff, students and parents. HMIs went on to praise our provision, removed the special measures status, and sign posted other school leaders to our school in order to explore the impact of community-focused educational provision to raise standards.

5.4.4 ERA...Hidden motives.

The 1988 Education Reform Act incorporating the Ofsted inspection regime, became a landmark piece of legislation transforming school practices, procedures and processes. As previously outlined, the new statutory provision soon affected daily school life, yet I continued to attempt to circumnavigate the conditions, believing that this was transitory in nature, and that eventually there would be a return to a more humanist form of education under an alternative government. This critical incident helped me to recognise that this single Act contained core elements of the neoliberal doctrine, most notably; 'educational goods such as qualifications, curriculum provision, establishment reputation and expert labour were branded in order to attract clients' Hamilton and Tett (2020). When considering the growth of neoliberalism, I must emphasise that even at this stage of my career, (I was now a senior school leader), I was unaware of the term as a concept, and equally never detected the presence of neoliberal forces or characteristics. Professional practice involved determined efforts to comply with statutory legislation, but continuing to offer student-centred education; in addition, the school forged increasing connections with the local community to re-assure everyone that Croxteth Community Comprehensive School provided a good education. At the time, I failed to accept that the political context of schools was heralding continuous tension and challenge. I continued to try to retain humanism in the classroom. Dewey's (1994) promotion of prioritising the experiences and autonomy of learners was harder to attain, when so much emphasis was placed upon quantifiable examination results and government-imposed knowledge. Our focus remained

on empowering young people through learning, and an insistence upon outcomes being related to the broad social values that education provides. We retained our commitment to values-based practice. Gramsci's (1971) concept of ideological hegemony helped me to appreciate the command-and-control nature of Conservative education policy. If preparation for the workplace and serving the economy was their priority, then young people needed to be persuaded to accept the values, practice and legitimacy of the ruling capitalist elite.

This ERA legislation resulted in a new discourse being imposed upon schools and other aspects of society, and yet that discourse remained nameless. For the last two decades of the twentieth century, the neoliberal ideology had been strengthening its dominance in the United Kingdom (Mirowski and Plehwe, 2015) yet the term neoliberalism was itself still little known. Monbiot (2016b) maintains that this was a strategic decision to prevent the public from understanding what was happening. He claims that the movement lost its name in the transition from social democracy to neoliberalism.

This mirrors my experience as I had commenced a professional career in a social democratic era, yet Thatcher's legislation between 1979 and 1997 represents the first phase of the unfolding neoliberal narrative, the movement was in an ascendancy. Charles Koch, (one of the richest men in the world who co-founded the Tea Party movement), in establishing one of his think tanks, noted that 'in order to avoid undesirable criticism, how the organisation is controlled and directed should not be widely advertised' (Monbiot 2016a).

5.4.5 Competition above collaboration

The changing educational landscape during the Thatcher years prioritised individual achievement and competition above collaboration. A low trust environment grew up, whereby school stakeholders were judged, and monitored by external bodies. Educators, students and families had been persuaded to see failure as the responsibility of the individual, not the system. Ofsted inspections embodied the neoliberal tenet of rewarding winners and punishing losers; special measures status reinforced the stereotyped image of Croxteth being an undesirable place to live, because it was widely reported that the local secondary school was not providing a good education for pupils. The main criterion for judging quality was performance in attainment tests, published annually in the form of league tables. Examination results and other performance criteria reduced learners to the status of units to serve the economy. The prescriptive knowledge-based curriculum and

prioritisation of high stakes test results marginalised classroom interaction and relationship working. Staff invariably resorted to teaching to the test, chasing short term targets and allowing themselves to prioritise quantifiable outcomes above the holistic development of individual students. Competition between schools increased and staff were obliged to focus upon increasing pupils' examination performance to secure as high a position as possible compared to their peer schools and strove to avoid the humiliation of being placed at or near the bottom. Collaboration waned as competition intensified, reflecting the divisive nature of the legislation.

The ERA had set the foundations for preparing young people to become efficient, creative workers for a globally competitive market. In this way, claim Hamilton and Tett, (2020), knowledge-based narrow provision reduced participants to mere economic actors, ultimately detrimental to an individual's wider social and personal goals. Schools continued to be important determinants of life chances, and despite the relentless monitoring by Ofsted, they invariably failed to secure positive outcomes for subordinated groups such as those living in disadvantaged circumstances. 'There can no longer be any doubt that schools do seem to be institutions of economic and cultural reproduction' (Apple, 1982, p. 1). Critical reflection on the manner in which teaching and learning processes serve to oppress and subordinate the working classes is an important issue to discuss. Neoliberalism had encouraged a market- based system within schools: 'the mechanisms of social control and how these mechanisms function to legitimate the beliefs and values underlying wider societal institutional arrangements' (Giroux, 1997, p. 4).

The introduction of market forces and competition, the license given to people to pursue personal and familial profit, and a diminished emphasis on redistribution, equity and social justice resulted by the 2000s, in a dramatic increase in social and economic inequalities and enhanced disadvantages for particular groups (Tomlinson 2005, p.3).

5.4.6 Autonomy gives way to control

Despite the challenges of being placed in a special measures category and being monitored to ensure compliance with the ERA, I continued to battle against the neoliberal forces to retain autonomy and provide educational provision to empower students. This had been a core educational value, yet at the time I was unaware of the political dimensions and implications of Freire's work. Like so many other educationalists, I had assimilated an

unproblematic view of pedagogy rooted in common sense assumptions rarely challenged by teachers or students (Giroux, 1997). The global political character of school processes never featured in my thoughts; I recognised that the social order was reproduced through the formal and hidden curriculum, and that the education system was failing students who came from marginalised groups within disadvantaged communities. This was an incomplete picture, because I was viewing Thatcher's education policies in a silo and failed to perceive how similar developments were taking place beyond the United Kingdom. My first critical incident based upon the school occupation, took place against a backdrop of economic decline in the UK exacerbated by Thatcher's economic policies. This second critical event is evidence that neoliberalism is not merely an economic theory but an all- embracing ideology with associated values and practices. Monbiot (2016a) highlights how successive Government agendas and economic principles have been sustained by the corporate press, spin doctors and lobbyists. In this way the demands of big business and the elite are projected into policy making through neoliberal think tanks, such as the Adam Smith Institute. He believes that neoliberalism is such a powerful narrative that it has come to dominate our norms and values over the last forty years, so much so that 'we are all neoliberals now' (Monbiot and Hutchinson, 2024, p. 6).

5.5 Critical incident 3

The Local Authority challenge my strategy of capturing family voice to devise improvement programmes (2000-2006)

I became Director of an Education Action Zone (hereafter EAZ) in 2000 under new Labour's Excellence in Cities initiative. My tenure commenced with personal feelings of excitement, passion and overwhelming optimism, as the remit was to develop innovative strategies to improve educational outcomes in a disadvantaged area. A key tenet of my approach was to create parent, staff and pupil forums to inform the zone's strategic responses; I envisaged returning to the development of people-led activities that could contribute to greater social justice and positive outcomes within the local community. I was convinced that there was significant potential to make full use of the opportunities provided by the new Labour administration with a budget of one million pounds and the autonomy to allocate this according to local wishes. My collaborative work with a wide range of stakeholders had been successful, but I soon encountered obstacles from the Education sector of the Local

Authority. Each EAZ was an independent entity, mirroring schools with elected Governors responsible and accountable for strategic direction setting. Our board actively engaged with parents, pupils and staff to inform policy, and we had autonomy to apply these locally devised strategies. This gave me an immense feeling of freedom and relief because the zone could promote collaborative and humanistic approaches to educational initiatives. However, whilst unable to block any of the zone's plans, some officers from the Local Authority continually questioned and challenged our approach. I selected this event as a critical incident because I could not comprehend why I was facing so much opposition which necessitated regular justification and defence of strategies that had been created by stakeholders in the local community.

5.5.1 The introduction of Education Action Zones

Tony Blair led Labour to success in the general election of 1997 with a commitment to attack systemic disadvantage and poverty in a more coherent manner. In a Fabian society pamphlet, he had previously claimed that he did not want to 'run a Tory economy with a bit of social compassion...the public is once again ready to listen to notions associated with the left, social justice, cohesion, equality of opportunity, and community' (Blair 1994, p. 2).

The first major initiative attempting to address the lack of impact from the policies of preceding governments was the launch in 1997 of the Social Exclusion Unit (hereafter SEU) attached to the cabinet office. There was a commitment to 'ensure that combating social exclusion would be a key part of urban policy' (Tallon, 2010, p. 78). The SEU's key objective being, 'joined-up solutions to joined-up problems' (Morrison, 2003, p. 141)

This represented a new direction; most significantly the party pledged to place communities at the heart of regeneration initiatives with a commitment to build for the future by developing sustainable neighbourhoods. This was a key shift away from previous urban regeneration policies highlighting the need to address the problems of the most deprived neighbourhoods in England. While previous governments had provided funds for urban redevelopment, New Labour's approach turned its emphasis away from property and towards social factors such as education, capacity building, and behavioural change. This broad brush policy was implemented through a variety of area-based Initiatives such as Action Zones for Education, Employment, Health and New Deal for Communities (1998). I

welcomed the commitment to the creation of 'a Britain from which no-one is excluded from opportunity and the chance to develop their potential' (Blair, cited in Tomlinson, 2005, p.91)

EAZs became a key component in new Labour's Excellence in Cities policy. Blair (2003) famously declared that his government's priorities were: 'Education, Education, Education', and EAZs were symbolic flagships to support such claims. The eight most disadvantaged cities were accorded Excellence in Cities status. Additional funding provided a raft of strategies to improve the educational outcomes for a city's most deprived wards. Initiatives included EAZs, school-based learning mentors and City Learning Centres for Information and Communications Technology. The dramatic shift in the scope and scale of New Labour's attempts to reverse the fortunes of the most deprived places (SEU, 1998) represented a period of ambitious planning in which urban regeneration would be developed through a more inclusive and integrated approach (Clark, 2002). Their plans were targeted to address deprivation and social exclusion through tenure diversification, social capital, community empowerment, partnerships, mutually supportive relationships and increased aspirations. This framework formed the basis of the EAZ initiative. It was acknowledged that no single government department or new policy directive had the capacity to reverse the fortunes of the most deprived places (SEU, 1998) so the coordinated action would take the form of several bespoke initiatives. In this way the SEU would need to, 'look upon the (old) problems of poverty, inequality, and so on in a "new" way, by targeting other societal problems that are perceived as "joined up to poverty"' (Morrison, 2003, p. 141). In developing a more holistic approach to regeneration, their agenda reflected a real shift away from previous problems and failures, by targeting policy effectively at areas of most need, whilst ensuring a more sophisticated process that addressed underlying causes of deprivation. (Syrett and North, 2008)

This filled me with overwhelming optimism, as I anticipated a return to liberal policies with a focus upon decreasing socio-economic inequalities and the dissolution of divisive, market-driven educational policies. More significantly though, the suggestion that a more sophisticated approach was required to understand the underpinning causes of disadvantage stood out above all else and influenced my practice within the EAZ. Recognising the causes of deprivation and addressing them at a local scale was a key aim of New Labour's urban policy. I welcomed the pronouncements prioritising greater

involvement from local communities, because such an approach was effective in terms of overcoming entrenched problems. There was a commitment to move away from simply addressing the symptoms of disadvantage, and action zones were to be the vehicles for developing community-based responses to address deprivation and social exclusion.

5.5.2 New directions: Leading an Education Action Zone

With this contextual background, I embraced the opportunity to coordinate neighbourhood-based educational initiatives through participatory and collaborative practice which recognised that: 'Action needs to be joined up locally, in a way that is accountable to communities and encourages them to take the lead' (SEU, 2000, p. 28). With the new administration's commitment to improving educational provision, it was anticipated that collaborative working practices and effective partnerships could enhance outcomes, despite the constraints of the established system. From the outset I endeavored to adopt a collaborative style of leadership with school leaders, pupils and families. Ledwith and Springett (2010) believe that community groups can solve their own local problems, and I promoted this approach within the EAZ. Our three key objectives were; Improve pupil progress and attainment, encourage increased attendance, and establish parental links to raise overall aspirations within the community. The priorities had been identified by the head teachers within the zone and my role was to coordinate and apply the strategic response. Forums were developed to represent parents and families, pupils and staff; their views informed the overall response, and elected governors ratified the action plan. The range of activities were primarily based upon the promotion of developing positive relationships and self-esteem for young people. Emboldened by the counter narrative to the prescribed programmes of study that affirmed and recognised the importance of the increasingly excluded personal and emotional aspects of teaching (Ball, 2003), we stressed the value of a humanist education and of linking the classroom to life experiences. The zone recruited a family links coordinator, a therapeutic counsellor, organised residential study weekends for students and parents, delivered emotional intelligence training for school staff and organised peer support to improve literacy and a Saturday morning enrichment hub. These strategies had all been designed to meet the needs articulated by the group forums. One example of such an activity was parents identifying mental health challenges and the family links coordinator arranging a weekly forum with a therapeutic counsellor. Feedback

reflected the significant improvement generated by this approach and the numbers of family members participating in these sessions grew week by week. It came as a surprise, therefore, when I was contacted by a Local Authority officer to raise a concern regarding the counsellor's employment. The objection was that his web site featured the term 'cosmic traveller' and far too many references to spirituality. It was suggested that he should not be permitted to offer therapeutic intervention to children because of the contents of his web site. Ironically, at the same time as justifying his employment to the Excellence in Liverpool personnel, I was encountering Head Teacher's pleas for the counsellor to provide additional sessions in their school. They outlined his beneficial impact upon children and gave examples of some vast differences to emotional well-being which had led to improved progress and attainment.

A further example of having to combat resistance to locally devised initiatives was based upon an initiative proposed by the student body, namely pupil partners. Secondary students were trained to support Key Stage 1 children during lunch breaks, in this way oracy and linguistic skills were augmented amongst targeted early years pupils. An unexpected outcome was that the secondary students developed important soft skills such as confidence, resourcefulness and teamwork. Despite being able to demonstrate improved oracy throughout the Key Stage 1 school cohorts, and the British Telecom funder's positive evaluation of the scheme, the Local Authority still attempted to persuade me to emulate models used elsewhere. I faced increasing pressure to commission literacy and numeracy consultants, and was constantly reminded at inter-zone meetings that ours was the only one who had failed to commission external subject consultants to raise student attainment. My belief, though, was that the multi-dimensional influences upon children's learning could not be reduced to pedagogical formulaic techniques such as the daily literacy and numeracy hour strategies. The Local Authority continually challenged our zone's emphasis upon family voice and the promotion of social and emotional aspects of learning. Few outside of our zone valued the contribution of sub-groups such as pupils and parents who were charged with the creation of innovative approaches to meet their own needs and meet the zone's objectives. Parents sought techniques to encourage increased application amongst their children and they developed a Saturday morning school to work towards this objective. It felt as though I was constantly clashing with the Local Authority and having to justify my

leadership style and rejection of the rationalist, technical approaches to improving core skills through a formulaic intervention. The national literacy and numeracy strategies that were being cascaded throughout schools led to a situation described by Toulmin (1990) as knowledge being decontextualised from daily life.

A deliberate strategy was devised to develop meaningful dialogue with family members (Ledwith 1997; Freire, 1982) and in doing so encourage a move towards problem solving, whereby members became more critically aware of their current situation before identifying potential solutions. There was increasing recognition of the need to position local peoples' lives in the wider political context, and encourage an approach where one works together, alongside community members to facilitate transformational change. To promote the importance of acknowledging and valuing the lived experiences of each individual that we teach, it is essential to ensure that 'our relationship with the learners demands that we respect them and demands equally that we be aware of the concrete conditions of their world' (Freire, 2005, p. 102). My practice was intuitive, but now I see how I was drawing on Ledwith's (1997) ideology of ensuring parity and valuing community members and workers equally. My tenure with the EAZ was not based on a power relationship with me working for the community in a benevolent or patronising style but rather working with people in the community to foster social change. This approach seemed to pose a threat to some education officers, and I always felt as if I were a thorn in their side. At one national EAZ conference in 2002, David Bell (Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools) was the key-note speaker. As delegates arrived, we were informed that free seating arrangements were in place and by chance, our zone's family links coordinator sat next to him and chatted about her role and work encouraging parents to support their children's education. I was delighted to hear that the Chief Inspector of Schools had been interested in the Zone's approach to parental engagement and improved learning provision. Later however, an alternative view emerged when members of our team informed me that a ripple of disapproval had circulated throughout the conference room, they had overheard many delegates questioning her right as a parent to sit next to the Chief Inspector of Schools!

A further example of a clash of values and educational philosophy occurred when Zones submitted their internal impact reports to the Excellence in Liverpool officers. Ours was criticised for prioritising descriptive (qualitative case studies) data over quantitative. This

made me realise that very little had changed since the early 1980s when some research had been conducted to ascertain adolescent views of careers and unemployment. Academics had forwarded a report which identified how policy makers could learn from these conversations with young people who had provided details of their lived experiences. At a meeting with senior inspectors and ministry officials in the Department for Education and Science to discuss the research findings, it became clear that they did not value the narrative style contained in the report, 'one official threw his copy across the table to us angrily, "What do you expect us to do with this-it is just a bunch of stories!"' (Kushner, 2022, p. 156). Those in power, no doubt, prefer a one-size-fits-all approach because it makes their job easier if all educational settings behave in a prescribed way; this, however, removes individuality and lessens the opportunities for thinking critically about situations. Apple (2008, p.254) contends that:

acting on one's deeply held ethical, political and educational commitments to building an education that responds to all of us, one that embodies a vision of the common good that says it needs constant criticism and revision to keep it alive, can be threatening to people in power.

5.5.3 The illusion of equality

I felt at odds with most other educational professionals who accepted national strategies uncritically and conformed accordingly. I was convinced that our collaboratively devised local plans were having good impact and could not understand why others were not taking similar approaches. Before long, my enthusiasm for New Labour's education policies waned because I found them to be only marginally distinguishable from the previous administration. Despite representing a refreshingly new approach, actions zones achieved limited impact on the ground. Suffering from limited resources and short time frames, they were able to impact upon individual lives but lacked the ability to transform areas of deprivation and social exclusion (Health Development Agency, 2004). Ultimately, their ambitious aims were not achieved; intended as five to seven year initiatives, in reality many were ended after four due to their lack of impact (Bauld et al., 2005). EAZs initiated a wide range of actions on the ground yet failed to deliver systemic change. It is sobering now to reflect upon case studies which attest to the positive impact upon individual people's lives yet failed to make a cumulative difference to the transformation of whole neighbourhoods.

The New Labour government had placed communities at the centre of their regeneration policies aimed at addressing disadvantage. It was envisioned that communities could be rebuilt through processes including increased social capital to support community empowerment, increased aspirations and widespread mutually supportive relationships. They asked to be given ten years to judge their impact; however, there was little empirical evidence that this Third Way of a modernised form of socialism (Giddens, 1998) was transforming the lives of the most disadvantaged. Whilst coordinating the EAZ I was still not familiar with the growing global phenomenon of neoliberalism. My community was still experiencing economic and social disadvantage, yet I believed and argued that the decades of limited progress was attributable to:

too little investment in people; the by-passing of communities; a lack of mainstreaming; excessive managerialism; a profusion of initiatives; and a lack of coordination and joined-up working (Shaw and Robinson, 2010, p.127).

The free- market economy had created a plethora of social problems, so it was important to engage in dialogue regarding their lived experiences to reduce apathy and encourage increased engagement. Ledwith and Springett (2010) have presented numerous examples of taking effective action in the community to contribute to a more just and equal society. They advocate a form of community development which is committed to the pursuit of social justice through a process of critical education, to kick start the process of personal empowerment; and focus upon the transformative rather than the ameliorative potential of participatory practice. The parents' group helped me to appreciate the multi-layered issues affecting people's attitudes to formal school- based education. Members shared feelings about feeling marginalised and excluded from their children's school lives. They wanted to support and encourage greater motivation and engagement but often felt ignorant about the formal processes such as how to measure children's progress. It was through this medium that I was able to link people's deeply personal little stories to the profoundly political context, (Griffiths, 2003). I came to understand the value of listening to parents and families in a new way by sharing everyone's hopes and concerns; in doing so it was recognised that the school culture was an essential element in the raising of aspirations, 'The culture of the school has to be different-when you have autonomy around curriculum or around budgeting and around staffing wonderful things can happen' (Warren and Mapp, 2011, p. 57). The EAZ deepened the trust between parents and teachers as a relational

culture was established, and partnerships steered an alternative approach to improved outcomes. Meanwhile, teachers continued to work within a climate of low trust, the statutory, standardised competencies reduced their role to an emphasis upon technical efficiency. The EAZ milieu could be viewed as an anomaly given our promotion of what Ball (2003) describes as a counter discourse that affirms and accentuates the social, personal and emotional aspects of education.

Initially, I fully subscribed to the laudable policy objectives, believing that EAZs and similar area-based Initiatives had the potential to bring about many positive changes within disadvantaged communities. Disappointingly, the impact was negligible. Some commentators were swift in identifying the flawed policy and ambitious claims:

The well intentioned palliative policies of Sure-Starts, Education Action Zones and New Deals appeared unlikely to affect class divisions in the labour market and create high skill employability for all (Tomlinson, 2001, p.267).

In reality, New Labour continued with the divisive policies established by the Conservatives in that although they articulated a rhetoric of inclusion, they actually pursued exclusionary policies. No serious attempt was made to level-up disadvantaged groups and the class structure remained largely unchanged. Such was the power of a privileged elite to maintain and reproduce their own class advantages. Tomlinson (2001) was convinced that Labour's commitment to inclusion, equality and the eradication of social class was unachievable, when you consider the ruthless determination of privileged and aspirant social groups to maximise the reproduction of their own class advantages. New Labour's innovative social policies had minimal impact upon the status quo and power elites, as upper- and middle-class groups continued to dominate society through their access to public schools. Ball (1996) supported this opinion when he suggested that social class differences enabled the more privileged sectors of society to be more selective between schools; teachers were judged and schools with negative characteristics could be avoided due to open enrolment. New Labour's market-based policies were imposed upon the Education system and these created further divisions and inequality. Ledwith (2020) expressed her sense of irony having noted that social justice rhetoric was simultaneously incorporated into national education policies which created divisive conditions. New Labour continued to promote market policies, parental choice and competitive ideology fuelled by the league table of

examination results, specialist schools and a relentless drive to raise academic standards. Educational settings came to resemble private businesses, market-driven by consumer demands. Tomlinson (2001) argues that between 1997 and 2000 the class structure remained relatively unchanged under New Labour, mostly because the curriculum, assessment system and Inspection regime continuing to prop-up and condone inequality. Social reproduction continued and improved prospects for poor sectors of society did not materialise because the government advocated inclusion but pursued exclusionary policies. The upholding of an emphasis upon measurable, quantifiable outcomes resulted in pedagogy becoming impersonal and over technical in nature. It was not surprising, therefore, to witness a crisis in confidence amongst so many colleagues who could be perceived as becoming ontologically insecure because, 'neoliberal policy and its performative technologies changes not only what people do, it changes who they are' (Ball, 2003, p. 215).

I have found it challenging to establish causal connections between New Labour's policy and neoliberalism. Had Blair failed to understand the power of neoliberalism or simply been complicit in the promulgation of the doctrine? Condemnation of the new administration's promotion of competition and the dominance of market forces came late in the day. This begs the question as to why so many individuals, myself included failed to recognise the continued dominance and impact of neoliberal ideology. New Labour's strategy of identifying and targeting groups and areas in most need, then providing redistributed resources is characterised by the Sure Start initiative, Health, Employment and Education Action Zones. I was involved with most of these initiatives and with hindsight I view them as nothing other than an attempt to ameliorate the most negative effects of neoliberalism's promotion of market forces. New Labour's agenda has since been described by Gewirtz (2002) as a contradictory phenomenon given the conflation of neoliberal, authoritarian and humanistic policies. This period was unusual as Blair's administration was applying managerial approaches as a vehicle to secure increased social justice. By juxtaposing professional practice alongside the bigger social, political and economic context, I have come to appreciate factors which were helping to maintain inequality and disadvantage amongst particular groups. Davies (2017) provides valuable insight with regards to this new

phase of capitalism when he distinguishes between economic inequality and the elite's processes of converting their economic power into political and cultural power:

...following 1989, the popular critique of inequality shifted from a socialist denunciation of economic "monopoly" to a liberal denunciation of "dominance": economic inequality was tolerated, but only on the basis that it was "meritocratic", enabling "social mobility", which required a separation of the market system from the political and educational systems (Davies, 2017, pp.40-41).

He continues by proposing that this moral-political economy epitomised New Labour's governance with a liberal promise of capitalism promoted through legislation during an era which he terms as a Belle Epoque. Ultimately New Labour has come to be associated with centrist politics having an illusion of equality, improvement and the end of class. Many contradictions were evident with wealth condoned and poverty condemned. Market forces continued to dominate, so neoliberalism thrived, and this provided the conditions for extreme inequality to continue to develop. Clinton and Blair blended Keynesian and neoliberal elements to form the Third way which 'was little more than a rhetorical device used to justify and disguise the capitulation of the left to neoliberal forces' (Monbiot and Hutchinson, 2024, p. 25).

No genuine change was perceived, and very little opposition was presented to raise public awareness of the advancing influence of neoliberalism. I was clearly not the only individual to believe that Blair's administration could make a difference to peoples' lives. It was only professional practice that altered this initial optimism and confirmed by Thatcher's memorable response in 2002 when asked what her greatest achievement as Prime Minister had been and gave a surprising answer; 'Tony Blair and New Labour. We forced our opponents to change their minds' (Resnikoff, 2013).

No systemic change was secured by New Labour, in fact, income and wealth inequality rose. 'Without exception, all previous Labour administrations had left Britain a more equal place than when they had taken power. New Labour left it more divided' (Dorling, 2019b). During this phase, neoliberalism expanded and consolidated with a competitive culture gradually permeating practically all aspects of life. Current commentators could be criticised for arguing that neoliberalism was developed through deception, promoting the rhetoric of opportunity as a deliberate technique to hide the machinations of a very small and powerful

interest group. Such beliefs have been disputed by Davies (2017, p.40) who reminds us that: 'the policies and economic rationalities that facilitated this rising inequality were scarcely kept secret or developed behind people's backs'.

In examining the political context of working collaboratively with community groups, Ledwith and Springett (2010) developed my thinking when they argued that frequently, whilst being so focused upon improving outcomes, people could be unable to perceive the wider structural changes being rolled out. It could be that some dimensions of community development are just placatory and may even reinforce social injustice. With hindsight, I have come to view the EAZ as a sticking plaster bringing about some improved provision alongside increased parent and pupil engagement; but all of this was temporary and short-lived. Autonomy and the incentive to work collaboratively to advance community-led change was ephemeral. More importantly, my experience with the EAZ had shown the power of relationship- working to secure positive outcomes. Neoliberalism was becoming entrenched in the national psyche and radically altering working conditions, leaving individuals feeling isolated and vulnerable. The decade from 2000 to 2010 saw me as an enthused professional developing an EAZ with limited appreciation of how the national agenda was influencing what happened in the community. My awareness evolved and I began to be more conscious of the intertwining relationship between political contexts and professional practice. I have come to appreciate Ledwith's (1997) insistence that we need to consider what is relevant and possible to achieve; we all face different issues because the forces around us change:

Local action has to be mindful of national and global forces. Their effects penetrate the lives of the people in local communities everywhere. Acting locally without any analysis of external forces limits the potential for change (Ledwith, 1997, p. 17).

I have deepened my analysis of how extraneous elements limit the potential for change. My professional practice was too narrow in outlook, as I had not given sufficient consideration to structural barriers such as power relations when working towards transformation. Too much focus had been accorded to an interpretivist model in which reality was seen as being constructed in the minds of individuals. Until I encountered challenges to my suggested approaches from educational hierarchies, I had been quite blind to the macro perspective. Gramsci (1986) has written extensively on the subject of superstructures, most notably

illustrating how a process of cultural hegemony maintains power relations and subordination in society. Having worked within and through New Labour's evolving policies for over a decade a depressing train of thought began to dominate my overall perspective with recognition that perhaps, 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (Lorde, 1979, cited in Rendell, Penner and Borden, 2003, p. 55).

5.6 Critical incident 4

£ 58,000 claw back from a European Regional Development Fund for being in breach of procurement rules (2014-15)

From 2010, AVCT had begun to evolve into becoming a much larger enterprise with a wider, diverse remit. As Chair of the Board of Trustees, I recognised that the swift pace of changing conditions was a challenge; thus, I offered to facilitate some development programmes for staff. The Senior Leadership Team (SLT hereafter) believed that the company would benefit from improved collaborative working amongst staff to agree and plan direction setting. As an experienced process consultant in leadership, I anticipated that a bespoke programme could motivate staff and help them to address changing landscapes competently and confidently. I believed that this facilitation would be 'effective in bringing about self-belief, hope, courage and action' (Connor and Pokora, 2007. p.7). The process commenced, and the senior team explored person-centred concepts such as emotional intelligence, self-directed learning, coaching and professional development opportunities; these would then be applied in the programme management of various contracts

It was not until I commenced supporting the SLT that I became more aware of the mounting pressure and unrealistic demands being made by funding bodies. Circumstances had changed since my time in educational leadership; nothing in my career to date could have prepared me for the culture shock that I experienced as an insider witnessing the increasing dominance of a new mode of audit and compliance culture. As a school leader, I had experienced several financial audits without questioning the deeper significance of compliance and audit processes. Power (1994) highlights the growing reliance and pervasive nature of audit culture across society, suggesting that it is based upon unproven assumptions and appears to be mostly a case of 'policing the police'.

Before long I recognised that the bureaucratic demands and constraints of contract compliance were inhibiting the company's effectiveness. The daily observation of

operational activities highlighted a target driven, mechanistic approach with scant attention paid to relational aspects of AVCT's work and how this empowers individuals. I found strong evidence to show that outputs were prioritised over outcomes, and the administrative procedures required to demonstrate compliance were regarded as time wasting and energy sapping amongst the staff body. The last thirty years have seen a veritable explosion of the proportion of 'working hours spent on administrative paperwork, at the expense of pretty much everything else' (Graeber, 2015, p. 78). I began to appreciate the implications of such a view when AVCT's 'Intermediate Labour Market' (ILM) project was subject to an Article 13 audit in May 2014. This European Social Fund (hereafter ESF) initiative aimed at securing employment outcomes for 19-24- year- olds who had been out of work for more than one year. The funding contract was based upon organisations sourcing employers willing to give a six-month employment contract to a young person, who had been unemployed for over a year and was experiencing barriers to gaining work. The employer was only expected to fund 27% of the salary as the Government provided the remaining 73%. As the accountable body, AVCT recruited reputable employers who were in a position to support and develop individuals from this disadvantaged cohort seeking employment, in anticipation of offering them a permanent contract upon completion of a successful six-month probationary period. The success rate was such that over 75% of our beneficiaries progressed into employment. Their feedback confirmed that it was the commitment of AVCT staff working with them as individuals that had made the most difference to their success. They voiced appreciation for non-judgmental, supportive relationships in building their confidence and self-esteem to enter the workplace.

5.6.1 Experiencing an audit explosion

This success story led me to the fourth critical incident because it symbolised that an audit explosion (Power, 1994) was being imposed upon community organisations. AVCT staff were subject to three full audits of European Structural and Investment Fund (ESIF) programmes within one calendar year. In May 2014 an Article 13 audit was conducted on the Intermediate Labour Market project (ILM hereafter) and it was found that some participants had only provided two instead of three recognised forms of identification thus rendering them as ineligible for support and funding. Suggested items being passport, driving license, identity card, bank account details, utility bill and proof of address,

communication from the DWP to reflect that they were unemployed and in receipt of welfare benefits. The auditors found it hard to understand the circumstances of some of our most needy and vulnerable participants. The concept of couch surfing at friend's houses and young people failing to claim benefit because Grandparents supplied their food, money and accommodation were just too far from the auditors' experiences; thus they interpreted the lack of such documentation as a failure on AVCT's part to fully investigate whether they were truly workless. We knew categorically that these individuals were not in work, our staff could have taken the auditors to interview the young people, but they could only evidence eligibility through official documentation. The project team had worked hard encouraging beneficiaries to become economically active, but this was never acknowledged by the auditors who seemed more satisfied to have unearthed noncompliance. A clawback amount was identified and AVCT responded by making representations, which happily were accepted so repayment sums were minimal. I came to see that bureaucratisation and audit had done nothing to improve the lives of people whom the grant was designed to help; similarly, AVCT staff were 'punished' by being obliged to complete additional work to present a case explaining the eligibility errors to retain the allocated funding.

The next audit experience caused intense pressure and anxiety amongst AVCT colleagues when Article 16 audit of a European Regional Development Fund project, 'Making Business Work' took place in April-May 2015. The aim of this high value contract was to support Merseyside-based companies to build capacity and improve employment growth. AVCT was the accountable body leading several partners to secure the agreed outcomes. Business advisers were commissioned to support companies and the audit involved intensive investigation into all transaction sheets for claims from these individuals. The outcome was nothing short of an existential crisis; the auditors announced after one day that there was the potential of the full contract value having to be repaid, £2.2 million! A list of errors was shared with the realisation that everything spent against an error could be reclaimed. Overnight, the team examined the list and found errors identified included branding and publicity contravention such as using twisted or incorrectly sized logos and failure to publicise the funding body in marketing materials and on social media. Other examples were defrayment errors between banks. One individual had been accepted as a business adviser, but his application form had been received two minutes after our publicised

deadline of noon, so all his payment claims were to be paid back. The most serious issue became one of breaching procurement rules; our person specification included the phrase 'knowledge of the Merseyside region' as a desirable aspect. Auditors deemed this as being discriminatory towards citizens of other European Union countries. The regulations offered us the opportunity to put forward a case to appeal against the identified errors, but this had to come from a legal representative. The project manager responded to each error and a solicitor altered the wording slightly; the European Commission then adjusted the clawback sum to £58,000. This was still a substantial loss of income, but AVCT had not folded so it proved to be a successful outcome, yet staff had experienced intense pressure and additional work loads. The Assistant CEO managing the project captured the impact upon herself:

24th January 2019 Transcript from an interview with the Project manager

As you know, I have complained about audit procedures on previous occasions as the tasks seemed so pointless and I was growing more frustrated because the evidence they requested was readily available. Electronic versions had already been submitted on the claims portal but each audit insisted that I collate all relevant documentation and deposit reams of paperwork in one central office. All I could think about was that audits were actually preventing me from getting on with more important work. I discussed the process on an online peer- to- peer forum and without exception other project leads agreed with me.

But when the ERDF auditors informed me that the whole contract sum was in jeopardy, this was beyond belief. That evening I ended up in the garden with my head in my hands saying to my husband, "I have had the worst time ever, we will close and all jobs will go. Everything that I have done just seems to be wrong"

When I first met the two auditors and they were outlining the arrangements one said, 'We start with the premise that fraud has taken place so it is our role to identify if this is so'. This too was unbelievable and showed a total absence of trust. I kept saying to myself "We have not done anything wrong, why would they think we had?"

David, (CEO) joined the team meeting to support me when I had to communicate the outcome of the Article 16 audit and loss of much needed revenue. He reiterated the

company's thanks to staff for working so diligently on the initiative in such a professional manner and made a point of emphasising that the financial claw back was not due to any poor practice on their behalf.

I remember him asking whether any of the auditors had enquired about the project outcomes and what difference it had made to individuals and various companies; silence ensued, nobody commented.

"Thought not" exclaimed the CEO and he left the room

5.7 Audit, monitoring and compliance culture

The workplace has been overwhelmed by a mad, Kafkaesque infrastructure of assessments, monitoring, measuring, surveillance and audits, centrally directed and rigidly planned, whose purpose is to reward the winners and punish the losers. It destroys autonomy, enterprise, innovation and loyalty, and breeds frustration, envy and fear (Monbiot, 2016a, pp. 16-17).

This quotation resonates with the depressing reality of contemporary work-based practice. Whilst it could be claimed that 'Evaluation, assessment, checking and account giving are part of everyday human interaction' (Broadfoot, 1996, p. 3) this incident reflects the deeper, complex and hidden significance of audit which I came to regard as a tool serving the interests of the neoliberal doctrine. It is claimed that that we can no longer think of accountability without elaborately detailed policing mechanisms so much so that 'there is a real sense in which Britain has become an audit society' (Power, 1994, p. 1). Auditing processes are 'rituals of verification' and whilst outlining the positive experiences he had as a financial auditor, Power, (1994) states that he never really knew what auditing was for. When told that the process was a matter of common sense, he questioned whose sense was it and how common was the belief? Current auditing practice does not provide a basis for discussion, it is assumed that the processes are to be trusted. Outcomes of audit procedures are more opaque than commonly admitted. They have come to take place as part of the tacit understanding which constitutes social life so 'if account giving and auditing in a general sense are a deep part of the social fabric, it makes no sense to be against them on a priori grounds alone' (Power, 1997, p. 142).

This critical incident was my initial encounter with the new wave of audit and compliance processes; now clearly recognised as adjuncts of neoliberalism. Audit culture is Newtonian

in character as it systemises procedures with a sense of certainty and encourages a mechanistic way of thinking (Toulmin, 1990). Auditing language features terms such as neutrality and objectivity and these are powerful symbols suggesting impartiality and superiority in Newtonian epistemology.

I came to understand how auditing procedures are a challenge to anyone working in a relational, person-centred, participatory mode with others because they prioritise product above process. Universal competition is fundamental to the neoliberal model; Verhaeghe (2014) has outlined how this is accompanied with closely associated processes such as monitoring with comparison, evaluation and quantification. The generic term for such processes has come to be known as audit culture. It was in the late 1980s during Thatcher's era when auditing processes and compliance began to take on new forms promoted in a wide variety of areas such as education, health and social services. A paradox arises though as the neoliberal system is based upon reduced state intervention, so I needed to examine why an audit culture grew up in tandem with new market forces. The fashion for auditing signifies a distinctive phase in the development of advanced economic systems, as they grapple with fiscal crises and the need for control, all under the umbrella of accountability. Checking or auditing varies considerably and much depends on what society demands and this in turn is a function of what it is prepared to trust and the types of risks to which it feels vulnerable. The perception of what constitutes auditing procedures is ambiguous and the practices associated with the label are extremely diverse and significantly they all are influenced by very different bodies of knowledge. There is a cluster of definitions which overlap but are not identical so there is no precise agreement about what auditing really is compared to other types of evaluative practices such as inspection or assessment. Audit is not restricted to financial matters alone but increasingly is based on accounting for a particular activity not just in terms of money spent but also in terms of the activity itself, was it carried out efficiently and did it achieve its goals? Governments must be able to justify their expenditure in the public realm so hence the advance of stricter control mechanisms. For the purpose of this discussion, I use the term audit as signifying any compliance or monitoring regulations demanded by funding bodies. Most emphatically there needs to be a system of accountability for organisations such as AVCT so they can evidence how public funded contracts have been delivered and critically assess whether the

project goals were achieved and what difference they made to the communities they serve. Checking these issues are a prerequisite for our work but the difference in opinion lies in the way in which auditing procedures have become far removed from ideas relating to effectiveness and quality. Power, (1994, p.48) illustrates this point when he explains that:

Audits are not passive practices but strongly influence the environments in which they operate. Instead of involving direct observation, audit is largely an indirect form of “control of control” which acts on systems whose role is to provide observable traces. In a number of areas this results in a preoccupation with the auditable process rather than the substance of the activities. This in turn burdens the auditee with the need to invest in mechanisms of compliance, a fact which has produced a consistent stream of complaint. Concepts of performance and quality are in danger of being defined largely in terms of conformity to auditable process. Indeed, the construction of auditable environments has necessitated record-keeping demands which only serve the audit process.

Power is critical of the claim that audits improve accountability, efficiency and quality as he believes that there are flimsy intellectual foundations for the audit explosion. I concur with his beliefs as the priority should be concerned with creating qualitative services rather than just policing an organisation’s systems. He goes on to assert that audits frequently do not deliver what they set out to do as so often they exacerbate the problems which they seek to address by creating a culture of distrust. His key premise is that:

A pervasive feature of the new wave of audits is that they work not on primary activities but rather on other systems of control. Audits are often not directly concerned with the quality of performance, whether environmental, educational or financial, but rather with the systems in place to govern quality (Power, 1994, p .6).

This confirmed my observations that auditing procedures had not benefitted the lived experiences of any beneficiaries. The Government presupposes the necessity and benefits of auditing in its variety of forms, but it is difficult to ascertain if the increasing scrutiny was a deliberate policy. Few officials commit to a critical inquiry of auditing processes so greater transparency is required to ascertain the methods and criteria applied to define performance and quality. The checking process appears to be institutionalised, and most individuals never question whether any alternatives are available. Lynch (2014, p. 1) argues that new managerialism represents the organisational arm of neoliberalism as market principles of efficiency and productivity dominate ‘giving primacy to product and output

over process and input'. This was evidenced by the auditor's insistence upon the recording of administrative and financial details above monitoring the impact of the project on young people. It is suggested that the increasing bureaucratic demands are so pervasive that most people simply accept them without question:

Bureaucratic knowledge is all about schematization. In practice bureaucratic procedure invariably means ignoring all the subtleties of real social existence and reducing everything to preconceived mechanical or statistical formulae (Graeber, 2015, pp. 62-63).

The way society holds organisations and individuals to account says a lot about the social and economic values. Dysfunctions exist within audit therefore processes need closer scrutiny. It appears though that any audit failures are met with demands for more robust auditing practice; evidenced by the high-profile case of 'The Kids Company' charity which closed in 2015 following a scrutiny of their funding, performance and management. This led to the introduction of more rigorous compliance measures for all charities. Renewed regulatory scrutiny was initiated by the supplementary provisions to the 1992 Charities Act which sets out accounting guidance specifically geared to the sector. In the early 1990s only 11% of charities registered with the Charities Commission submitted accounts to them then by 2019 all charities with an income above £10,000 were required to submit accounts and Trustee reports; Income above £1, 000000 necessitates a full independent audit of accounts.

The £58,000 repayment to ERDF exemplifies what Bourdieu (2019) describes as *habitus*, the way a person of a particular background perceives and responds to the world. This concept resonated with my personal experiences of auditing procedures. The professional auditors viewed the social world quite differently so they could not empathise with the lived experiences of the cohorts for whom the funding was designed to support. In this way they developed a certain *habitus* typical of their position as their cultural background did not align with the beneficiaries. The critical incident also served to epitomise how the audit culture can demoralise everyone:

The result is that workers, job seekers and public services of every kind are subject to a pettifoggish, stifling regime of assessment and monitoring, designed to identify the winners and punish the losers (Monbiot, 2016b).

Power, (1997, p. 14) claims that most audit reports communicate little more than that an audit has been carried out; then the 'epistemological obscurity' of audits is reflected and reproduced in the varied form of reporting which it generates. He continues by describing audit processes as 'certificates of comfort' and asks, whether claims about quality are just cover up for increasing mediocrity? Audits can be viewed as a form of emerging image management and submission to audit has become a benchmark of institutional legitimacy. Any resistance or complaint about the audit process could be regarded as an attempt to cover up poor practice through the maintenance of secrecy and lack of transparency. A report on audit insights from the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales acknowledges the complexities and clutter often present in Charities Annual Reports and assert that: 'The focus should be on providing meaningful and relevant information that demonstrates a charity's impact' (ICAEW, 2017, pp. 8-9). In the interests of democracy, trust and transparency, AVCT continually works towards an honest assessment of the impact we are making; it is ironic therefore that auditors have yet to pursue a self-evaluation of their work to show the difference they are making:

many charities already have good systems for capturing the positive nature of their work but not necessarily the positive outcomes and impacts their work leads to. Impact measurement is often difficult and sometimes cannot be assessed in the short term. But at the very least charities should provide more information on their activities, their outcomes and an honest assessment of the impact they are making. For some, this may mean early planning of how to assess their performance, then putting the processes in place that show the difference they are making. (ICAEW, 2017, pp. 8-9)

AVCT has been attempting to capture meaningful and relevant information to demonstrate our contribution to community well-being but in effect, it is the funders' monitoring systems and audit culture which contain an over reliance upon quantifiable, short-term measurement and compliance tools. This technical rationality underpins most government policies, Elliott, (1991) suggests that this explains why so many organisations are operating within a restrictive paradigm that presents challenges to improving outcomes; 'the audit explosion, driven by programmatic commitments to greater accountability is far from contributing to transparency and democracy' (Power, 1997, p. 13).

5.8 Whose knowledge is it?

Power (1997) points out that the rise of the audit society is linked closely to the sociology of knowledge so epistemological concerns are voiced. He says that it is hard to imagine a society without any checking at all, a society of pure trust where all financial accounts and professional outputs are taken at face value. Most people think that checking and monitoring is justified but he says that we need to combine the checking with trust. He witnessed an increasing emphasis upon time management and client servicing with a view to creating further fee earning opportunities, so he questions what has happened to knowledge in these circumstances. We have witnessed spectacular failure within high profile auditing companies such as KPMG who were subject to several fines yet still failed to identify the financial crisis facing Carillion Construction. 'Despite crises and scandal the lid stays on the black box of auditing practice because it has become essential to programmes for control and public accountability' (Power, 1997, p. 40). I came to believe that the surveillance aspect is more about control rather than evaluating the effectiveness of an organisation's work.

Witnessing the Article 16 audit and the elements of surveillance can be linked to Foucault's (1977) concept of docile bodies. If a group of people are so accustomed to being observed and controlled, then the required discipline can become internalised. In this way their capacity to resist wanes and docility becomes the norm. Constant surveillance means that power can be exerted over a group without needing to take much action. The more powerful and controlling group can make harsh and public examples of those who do not conform. This audit experience developed my thinking, as it demonstrated how colleagues had complied with all necessary reporting demands so resistance was never considered, as the price to pay was too high as funding would be withdrawn. I questioned the auditing processes because they were distracting effort away from our primary activities.

Power says we could look beyond audit and the idea that accountability can only take the form of independent scrutiny. This is just one value amongst others; audit displaces trust from first order to second-order verificatory activities and external forms of audit are complex and labour intensive. 'We need to reposition audit as a local and facilitative practice rather than one that is remote and disciplinary, so as to enable, rather than inhibit

public dialogue.’ (Power, 1994, p.49). An alternative to external forms of audit could be more modestly conceived:

This will require a broad shift in control philosophy: from long distance, low trust, quantitative, disciplinary and ex-post forms of verification by private experts to local, high trust, qualitative, enabling, real time forms of dialogue with peers. In this way we may eventually be in a position to devote more resources to creating quality rather than just police it (Power, 1994, p.49).

As seen with education legislation, charities and social businesses are not the only sector experiencing intensive scrutiny. Individualisation and fragmentation are imposed upon most systems such as schools, health, social welfare and police; all are ruthlessly assessed and quantified. Ball, (2013, p. X1) believes that we have experienced an era of ‘hyperactive policy change’ and this process is accompanied by more rigorous accountability and audit systems. This is part of what Power refers to as ‘the apparatus of justification’ and the ‘infrastructure of persuasion’ which sustains the dominance of the neoliberal doctrine. ‘The central concern however is that the audit explosion has made it difficult to think of alternatives to itself’ (Power, 1994, p. 8).

The significance of this event was that the neoliberal culture had created a stultifying system of compliance, quantitative impact assessment and an audit explosion, all of which distracted staff away from working with people and resulted in mostly tick box exercises. The dominance of bureaucracy and constant surveillance served to divert staff away from person-focused relational work and failed to promote the human dimensions involved in project management. This deepened my understanding of the need to challenge the status of knowledge and the accompanying power dimensions. Relationships and collaboration have been marginalised by the monitoring and audit process and now need to be re-asserted. Lynch, (2016) has shown how criteria and yardsticks used to measure performativity usually fail to reflect the core values of the work undertaken; hence the compliance demands from the experience of the Article16 audit paid no cognisance to the impact that positive relationships had contributed to successful employment outcomes. This fact chimes with Putnam (2000) who contends that society atomises individuals, and the reduction in opportunities to build social capital create less meaningful life experiences. This critical incident emphasised how audit systems regard individuals as units with little regard for their humanity, needs, hopes and happiness. AVCT’s data manager once attended a

training course to support project management, and she returned incensed by an incident that she had experienced. Shortly into the presentation, she asked the facilitator what the units were that he was citing, *“Learners are units as they bring you your income”*. The staff member politely excused herself from the session and returned to work articulating her objection to learners only being referred to as units. This to me was further evidence of the prevailing culture of atomisation and the de humanisation of our neoliberal context.

The £58,000 clawback for the ERDF project helped me to understand that society cannot be rendered fairer and more socially just, if positive outcomes are only judged on outputs and compliance without considering human dimensions. The process of examining incidents retrospectively offered invaluable time to reflect upon how changing political contexts and the increasing dominance of a neoliberal discourse created insurmountable barriers which committed, community-focused personnel could not break through. Finally, the European audit experience even made me question the issue of collusion; I had inadvertently operated within the neoliberal competitive culture and condoned AVCT’s efforts to access funding streams to support local improvement projects. I questioned whether alternative approaches existed.

5.9 Reflections

These four critical incidents represent my lived experience of the growing power and domination of neoliberalism. At the commencement of this thesis, I only had a limited understanding and awareness of societal factors influencing my work. This extended period of reflection has prompted deeper thinking into my professional practice, and it was only through this process that I came to understand the significance of what was happening and the causal factors inhibiting social change. I am so grateful to my supervisors for continually questioning my reluctance to venture into national and global dimensions. Initially, I eschewed their suggestion because of my belief that this could create too broad a narrative which risked straying away from the original research question. Interestingly, at the time I believed that moving beyond the confines of the AVCT organisation would weaken the research process; but to my astoundment, the long-term reflection resulted in the development of significant learning which served to strengthen the analytical findings. In hindsight I have considered other possible reasons for the reluctance to explore on a wider scale and arrived at one key explanation, cognitive dissonance, which I regarded as an

inability to hold two opposing thoughts in one's head. Festinger (1957) asserts that it is a psychological state that occurs when one is presented with evidence that is incompatible with a strongly held belief. An individual is unable to accept two contradictory beliefs; perhaps my close involvement with AVCT had created a dilemma or contradiction in terms of finding it hard to acknowledge the barriers to our work at the same time as working indefatigably to promote improved community outcomes. Aronson, (1969) suggests that the level of dissonance one experiences is proportional to the effort they have exerted in their behaviour. I now recognise that most people involved with AVCT were so busy 'doing' that we had not built in opportunities to consider the true extent and significance of the challenges being faced. This outlook could be likened to a Japanese proverb which states that; 'the Frog in the well knows nothing of the sea' (Speake, 2008). So frenetic and intense was the effort to improve conditions in the local community that I had lost sight of the causal connections creating the challenging conditions for so many individuals. I now acknowledge that my research could have been compromised had I chosen not to try to understand and make sense of societal forces impacting upon my work.

Key learning from the analysis of four seminal events revolves around the way in which each incident represents different stages of the development of the neoliberal hegemony. I grew up during a period characterised by the expansion of the Welfare State (1945-1979) and assumed that a social democratic political system would always form the backdrop to my professional practice. The era of marketisation and a neoliberal ascendancy took place with Thatcher's administration (1979-1997), which is when I witnessed resistance to a school closure and experienced the punitive effects of an Ofsted inspection. The opportunity to coordinate an EAZ during New Labour's Third Way discourse (1997-2007) presented challenges to my preferred working practice and educational philosophy. Finally, the phase from 2007 onwards came to be viewed as, 'reconstituted neoliberalism with an austerity narrative' (Rudd and Goodson, 2016, p. 8) and it was here that I observed excessive bureaucratisation in European audit procedures with little discernible positive impact upon individuals. Neoliberalism has grown stronger, become more pervasive and gained increasing momentum at each successive stage of my career. The most striking aspect of examining wider societal forces has been to highlight how my values- based practice has been continuously compromised by the characteristics of neoliberal ideology. I have come

to apply the metaphor of Sisyphus to explain my professional response to the relentless and increasing force of neoliberalism. In Greek mythology he was condemned to push a boulder uphill for eternity, only for it to roll down again when he reached the top; as an educationalist and community development proponent, I have tried to circumnavigate key aspects of neoliberalism but with limited success. This thesis represents a critique of neoliberalism by situating some professional experiences in their wider political context. An examination of broader political influences has synthesised my knowledge and understanding of an organisation's capacity to bring about change within the community. Reflection upon the changing political contexts provided an invaluable opportunity to be more critically aware of how my suppositions have constrained the way I viewed AVCT's contribution to community well-being. This process was uncomfortable at times, because I recognised that I had been viewing our organisation in a vacuum without fully appreciating the influence of societal forces. This generated an emotive response and feelings of inadequacy and disbelief at not recognising the impact of neoliberalism earlier in my career, but such is the power of the doctrine to convince society that the tenets are the norm:

We cannot conceive of alternatives within the discursive possibilities we currently inhabit. We are bound by epistemic rules and closures that enable and constrain us to think within certain versions of what is and might be true ... (Ball, 2019, p. 134).

This chapter commenced with a statement suggesting that before we attempt to change society one must first understand how it operates and consider how we are connected to wider processes and structures. Some significant personal learning has resulted, and despite the seemingly insurmountable obstacles to the promotion of participatory, democratic, socially-just practice, there is continued resolve to make a positive difference to community well-being. The neoliberal ideology represents a powerful narrative which has come to dominate our norms and values over the last forty years. This is so much the case, that it has been described by Brown (2017) as 'a stealth revolution' and there appear to be no signs of abatement even within the post pandemic context. Boris Johnson (former Prime Minister) urged the country in 2021 to seize the unique opportunity to 'Build Back Better', by outlining strategies for re-starting business and levelling- up peoples' lives. Such an approach only pays lip service to the seismic change required to secure increased equality and justice, because inequalities are in fact the product of a structural process of unequal

distribution of income, resources and power (ETUI and ETUC, 2021). Gramsci's (1919) concept of a changing world order and interregnum where 'the old is dying and the new cannot be born' appears more relevant in our contemporary context. Bauman, (2012, p. 7) reinforces this view:

those extraordinary situations in which the extant legal frame of social order loses its grip and can hold no longer, whereas a new frame made to the measure of newly emerged conditions responsible for making the old frame useless, is still at the designing stage, has not yet been fully assembled, or is not strong enough to be put in its place.

Over the last two decades we have experienced a series of economic, social and humanitarian crises which have disrupted and questioned the status quo and the dominant neoliberal narrative. These represent Gramsci's (1971) belief that such conditions will emerge and be characterised as 'morbid symptoms' of transition. Some believe that we are experiencing a harsher form of neoliberalism characterised by greater inequality (Piketty, 2014), whilst others suggest that we could be witnessing the demise of the global phenomenon. Davies, (2014) questions whether the doctrine can continue in its current form. Ultimately, we can harness hope in this endeavour; people created the neoliberal discourse so others can discredit the narrative and devise alternatives. This is a prescient time, therefore, to take advantage of the current level of concern and instability by considering the possibility of achieving more radical social change through an alternative discourse. In this way it is envisaged that we can 'write the poetry of our own future against the background of the rapidly evolving contradictions of capital's present' (Harvey, 2014. p. 99).

To strengthen my current knowledge of differentiated outcomes when applying Newtonian and participatory paradigms, a third cycle of action research will now commence to explore the outcomes from two different world views. Drawing upon the work of several authors who have recorded examples of resistance to neoliberalism, including Raworth, 2017; Tett and Hamilton, 2019; Ledwith, 2020; and Zizek 2020, I aim to demonstrate that incremental change is possible even within the current dominant neoliberal climate. Rudd and Goodson (2016) assert that refraction can explain variations with supra- level global trends being interpreted differently at the national, institutional and individual level. This reflects my micro experiences as the macro and meso forms of neoliberalism impact upon practice.

People respond differently, and I have observed both compliance and resistance to the dominant discourse. Rudd and Goodson (2016) highlight how structure and agency are both competing and complementary forces with power structures having regulatory effects upon action (Bourdieu, 1984). They claim that an analysis of variation can help to understand how neoliberal reforms may be stifled, rejected, resisted or reinterpreted; this will support the potential to imagine future possibilities.

In the next chapter, I present my final action research cycle by examining community-focused projects with different objectives and accompanying approaches. One is a traditional government-based adult learning initiative, and the second is a bespoke project targeted at community empowerment. The two schemes will be examined to assess their effectiveness in terms of improving individual lived experiences. The comparison will represent a case study to explore the impact of increased participatory practice, social connectedness and a more just, equitable society. People who find themselves in precarious circumstances are rarely given the opportunity to participate in processes which can shape their own lives so this third cycle will explore paths to promote empowering strategies to redress this imbalance.

The critical incidents examined in this chapter have shown the consequences of the neoliberal hegemony which has rendered significant challenges when working towards social justice and improved lived experiences. A plethora of obstacles and barriers have been catalogued to demonstrate the subjective experience of one individual when attempting to secure improved well-being and greater justice within the confines of a neoliberal world. It is far more challenging to pursue and promote a fairer society, because social justice principles have been marginalised in the current political, economic and cultural climate, (Raworth, 2017; NEF, 2024). Naturally, it is easy for fatalism, pessimism and hopelessness to become dominant mind sets, given that the influence of neoliberalism is so overwhelming. At several points, I have questioned my own practice and considered whether any real, positive difference could ever be secured. Happily, entrenched core principles always provide optimism, energy and resilience. My prevailing

values have never altered, systems have changed and moved away from a co-operative, socially democratic climate, yet despite the constraints I cannot relinquish the drive and passion to secure improved outcomes for local communities.

The critical awareness of the impact of neoliberalism forms the key aspect of my new learning, this, in turn, deepened my understanding of how ontological and epistemological perspectives inform our beliefs and ways of seeing the world. Such realisation highlighted how the participatory and Newtonian world views are irreconcilable given the challenge to work inter-connectedly within a dominant neoliberal discourse. The rational, objective, scientific way of doing things often ignores other aspects of our existence which characterises the complexities of human life. Albert Einstein regarded the intuitive or metaphoric mind as a sacred gift and suggested that the rational mind was a faithful servant. It has been suggested that in the context of modern life 'we have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift' (Samples, 1976, p.26)

The enhanced awareness of how neoliberalism being underpinned by the prevailing Newtonian world view was accompanied by a growing awareness of an alternative, participatory paradigm. This new knowledge represents an awakening as it helped me to develop a theoretical framework for the growing evidence which demonstrates the benefits of relational ways of working. This became a watershed in the research process because of the development of my thinking. Henceforth, I recognised the polarisation of the Newtonian and participatory world views. The learning gained from critical incident analysis will support my continued endeavours to integrate principles of social justice more effectively into my professional practice. Undoubtedly, this new learning has contributed towards my adoption of participatory worldview as espoused by Wheeler (1994) and acknowledging the inter-connectedness of the physical and social world.

A counter- narrative is possible which can be promoted by demonstrating examples of the efficacy of participatory and relational processes 'history is punctuated by moments in which people overcome these collective action problems, when they rewrite the rules and change the game...of course, the result will not be perfect justice, but some differently imperfect arrangement' (Fraser 2008, p.159).

I have come to regard neoliberalism as the antithesis of social justice because it has changed the world into a place driven by the excess and greed of the rich. 'Founded on profit as the indicator of progress, its inevitable consequences have been extreme inequalities within and between countries that privilege the rich at the expense of the poor' (Ledwith and Springett, 2022, p. 9). The prevalence of the neoliberal discourse has weakened connections within communities and exacerbated the problem of social isolation. Going forward I aim to re-imagine approaches to community well-being in order to make a more meaningful difference to peoples' lives. This work has always been a priority, but I am now thinking differently with an altered mind-set. Ledwith (2020) contends that at such a pivotal time in world history, it is still possible to work towards the creation of a more connected, just and equitable society.

If society is a powerful force in social life, as it surely is, then we have to understand it and how we are connected to it. To do this, we have to change how we think about it, because how we think affects the kinds of questions we ask, and the questions we ask in turn shape the kinds of answers and solutions we come up with. (Johnson, 2014, p. 27)

Chapter 6. Third action research cycle 2019-20: Doing things differently

The process of extended reflection outlined in the previous chapter had deepened my thinking; it enabled me to make use of cumulative learning to explore different strategies to be applied to AVCT's practice.

This third action research cycle is an extension to the second cycle in that a collaborative inquiry group convened to compare two community projects, one funded by The Department for Education, the second by the National Lottery. Both initiatives aim to improve outcomes for individuals living in areas of disadvantage. I examine aspects such as application processes, delivery methods and the impact and difference the projects made to peoples' lives. The funding bodies for both projects applied different criteria to evaluate impact, therefore the aim of this chapter is to analyse the perceived outcomes as reported by participants in the projects. The project funded by a government department represents characteristics associated with the Newtonian world view, whilst the National Lottery initiative contains elements akin to a participatory paradigm. The lottery funded project gave my organisation the autonomy to deliver and evaluate project impact using our own criteria, whilst the DfE contract prioritised employment and skills- based outcomes as key evidence of positive impact.

At the end of this cycle I conclude that the participants benefit from activities which focus on participatory and relational ways of working, underpinned by principles associated with positive and humanistic psychology. This comparative inquiry provides convincing evidence supporting the belief that participatory practice and working relationally with individuals is the most efficacious way to apply principles of social justice to one's practice and promote community well-being.

6.1 Introduction

Since the late nineteenth century, successive British governments have introduced a raft of social policies aimed at improving the human condition particularly for those living in disadvantaged circumstances. It is evident however, that limited progress has been secured, chiefly because very little has been done to challenge the negative impacts of globalisation. Many millions of people still lead lives of extreme deprivation with accompanying insecurities and inequalities; the United Kingdom is not exempt from such extremes of human circumstances (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009; Raworth, 2017; Dorling, 2019a).

It has been seen that when social policy fails to improve the lives of community members, many individuals come together to take collective action to try to generate solutions to common problems. The community in which my research is located has been subjected to a plethora of policy initiatives, aimed at improving a range of outcomes such as education, employment, health, housing, regeneration and community cohesion. Inadequate progress towards most of these outcomes led to the foundation of Alt Valley Community Trust which acted as a conduit for community-led change to improve individual and community well-being. Our work has always been rooted in the sphere of community development to empower community members and create stronger, more connected neighbourhoods. This holistic approach is grounded in principles of inclusion, social justice, human rights, self-determination and collective action (Kenny and Connors, 2017). As my research progressed, I became more convinced of the need to ensure that community members were fully involved in developing new initiatives which could impact positively upon their lives. Appreciating the importance of Community-led change, I selected to examine community learning provision in this third action research cycle. The intention being to explore two different projects targeted towards improving lived experiences and assessing strategies that local people perceive as evidence of positive impact, upon their lives.

Having examined some key critical incidents in my professional life, and re-assessed events that I had experienced, my thinking has developed significantly. I had not understood their relevance at the time but now acknowledge the pervasive dominance of a Newtonian worldview and its accompanying neoliberal discourse; and I have come to view the world through a different lens as I continued to promote social justice and improved futures. With this newly acquired knowledge, it was a prescient time to move on to my final action

research cycle where two projects would be analysed to assess the effectiveness of different approaches to securing positive community outcomes. Both funding bodies expected applicants to provide opportunities to improve people's future life chances. Whilst similar in overall aims, it transpired that different objectives, application processes, delivery methods, monitoring and evaluation systems produced significantly different outcomes. A glaring omission, in most projects designed to improve the lived experiences of people in disadvantaged communities, is that of affective relationships. This dimension is a key contribution to knowledge as I intend to demonstrate that community well-being and social justice can be significantly enhanced by working relationally with others.

6.2 What will be examined?

AVCT has been leading on numerous strategies that I believe have made an important contribution to improving the lived experiences of community members. However, there is an overwhelming sense of frustration and powerlessness because the rate of improvement has been slow. The impasse in progress affected me deeply, and I sought new knowledge to influence my thinking and inform future action. Colleagues within AVCT shared similar sentiments; slow progress has created widespread feelings of frustration, confusion and resentment. The previous chapter questioned what was going wrong and concluded that the neoliberal hegemony presented the most significant barriers and challenges to improvement. By selecting community education programmes as an aspect of anticipated improvement, I wanted to examine whether differentiated outcomes occur if Newtonian and participatory paradigms were applied. Two projects are analysed to ascertain whether new knowledge could be acquired when community members are involved in developing community education programmes for themselves. In addition, I would continue to consider what constitutes the essential characteristics and dimensions of community well-being.

6.3 Third action research cycle: Project comparisons

The previous chapter examined four critical incidents in my professional life; these helped me to appreciate the entrenched nature of the narrative with its accompanying Newtonian world view. I demonstrated that AVCT's previous contribution to community well-being was being compromised and indeed threatened by neo liberalism. The systems to access the funding needed to improved community outcomes had become more brutally competitive year on year. Social businesses were now obliged to demonstrate quantifiable and

measurable impact with no attention paid to whether there was any improvement on the quality of people's lives. The autonomy that we used to hold had been eroded by bureaucratic and mechanistic systems of audit and compliance.

Armed with this new insight, the third action research cycle investigates differences in approaches to community learning provision. One project funded by the Department for Education, with prescribed objectives, the other funded by the National Lottery where applicants developed their own project objectives. By comparing two interventions targeted at improving lived experiences, the collaborative inquiry group would assess which model secured the greatest benefit for participants.

The first two action research cycles had generated evidence that people valued the quality of relationships and connections with others above formal learning or development opportunities. As part of the second action research cycle, outlined in chapter four, a collaborative inquiry group conducted extensive consultation to identify community members' views on how best to improve their lived experiences and well-being. The results were surprising as we did not anticipate that social relationships and connectedness would dominate so significantly. Three key priorities emerged from the community consultation process: social isolation, mental health, and capacity building for smaller community groups. By starting with people themselves it became clearer what was regarded as well-being, so by advancing their interpretation the strategies came to be owned and valued by them. 'Community well-being is the combination of social, economic, environmental, cultural and political conditions identified by individuals and their communities as essential for them to flourish and fulfil their potential' (Wiseman and Brasher, 2008, p. 358). This can be interpreted as a flexible working definition of the concept of community well-being and AVCT's extensive consultation exercise had demonstrated that community members sought the emotional and relational aspects of well-being. The three priorities emerging from this process, informed the planning for the application of a National Lottery grant 'Reaching Communities'. The DfE contract was to deliver Adult Community Learning in our neighbourhood and objectives were pre-determined by the funders. Having secured funding for two diverse project contracts we had a unique opportunity to do things differently, and to assess the efficacy of the two initiatives and to make sense of professional practice using conceptual tools of analysis (Ledwith, 2020).

The third cycle was steered by a collaborative inquiry approach and the decision to compare the two projects was a swift one requiring minimal discussion. We did not adopt Heron's (1996) model for this cycle because there was a unity of thought in terms of wishing to expedite a comparison between two modes of community learning initiatives. I analysed the factors creating this smooth segway from cycle two to three concluding that it had originated from the contemporary context and three main influences. Firstly, Adult Community education policy was undergoing a national review, aimed at seeking programmes that would bring about optimum benefits to individuals. Secondly, the National Lottery fund was offering organisations the opportunity to design their own approach to improve the lives of local people. Thirdly, much discussion was still taking place at a national level regarding how best to address problems associated with disadvantaged communities. David Cameron (Prime Minister, 2010-2016) outlined the reasons why the life chances of the very poorest should be improved using economic, social and moral justifications for helping adults reconnect with education. Primarily because:

The economy can't be secure if we spend billions of pounds on picking up the pieces of social failure and our society can't be strong and cohesive as long as there are millions of people who feel locked out of it (Cameron, 2016).

This is further evidence of neoliberal rhetoric which attempts to claim the moral high ground, when really the stability of the economy appears to be Cameron's key motivation for advancing improved adult learning opportunities.

Delivering two projects in tandem was a unique opportunity to assess the outcomes of an imposed, formal adult learning curriculum offer, with programmes of activities devised in consultation with community members, as ways to enhance their lived experiences. The unifying factor for both projects would be opportunities to participate in community learning activities. Seizing the opportunity to analyse two distinctively designed projects with colleagues, to identify what aspects of delivery and impact proved most beneficial to community members. Critically, I sought knowledge for improved action not simply reflection as this would inform the organisation's future strategic response.

As outlined in Chapter two, the choice of adopting an action research approach was above all, an attempt to improve the well-being of future communities and ensure that they could flourish. Action research methodology is grounded in relational epistemology and rejects

Newtonian positivism because this mechanical, reductive worldview does not align with a participatory paradigm. In addition, action research methodology supported my values and principles of social justice, equality and fairness. More significantly it is a:

combined methodology and worldview that demands of researchers a focus on engagement/entanglement with research participants, thereby explicitly questioning systems of injustice, being an ally and advocate for the dispossessed, and relentlessly striving toward a more just world. (Johnson and Parry, 2015, p. 149)

Social justice has many dimensions, and a generic interpretation features an interest in what is thought to be right, fair and good for a society (Griffiths, 2009). Previous chapters feature discussions relating to the lack of social justice and increasingly I have come to see that relational and participatory ways of working are rarely applied within Government-funded programmes. It was an appropriate time to drill- down into how community well-being and social justice could be enhanced through a greater understanding of the effect of working relationally with individuals. Ledwith (2010) provided a useful theoretical lens, as she advocated knowledgeable narratives to understand community views and emancipatory dialogue to raise the consciousness of a community. My research was based firmly upon this premise, as her work had become increasingly resonant. She urged researchers to value what the community was saying, because this contributes to social change and improved outcomes. Deep-seated expertise can be found many 'levels' down from those responsible for policy making, but power structures generally distort and overlook the value of community-based knowledge. Several colleagues joined me in the third action research cycle to consider how to redefine and rearrange conditions which engender well-being through community learning programmes. The two projects were delivered as part of AVCT's provision and operational strategy. The only additional element was that the key staff formed a collaborative inquiry group and I was one of the participants. We held weekly sessions to write the bid applications, review delivery, observe impact and reflect upon our collaborative learning. Most of the group had been involved in the second cycle of action research, which had organised a large community consultation exercise to identify priorities for improvement. The inquiry team consisted of five members with roles incorporating two community champions (outreach workers), community learning coordinator, the business adviser coordinating the bid writing and myself as facilitator.

6.4 Two successful applications

Both the Government funded, and National Lottery contracts were based upon competitive tendering processes that the AVCT team was accustomed to. The Adult Community Learning Programme was funded by the Education and Skills Funding Agency, which is an executive agency sponsored by the Department for Education (devolved through Liverpool City Region Combined Authority). The ESFA is essentially an arm's length body of the DfE and provides funding for Community learning to the city of Liverpool's Adult Learning Directorate. This sector then invites organisations to subcontract, on an annual basis, to deliver neighbourhood provision for Adult Learning programmes. Henceforth, to avoid confusion, I shall refer to this contract as government funded. AVCT was awarded £142,500 for the 2019-20 timescale to deliver non-accredited local provision for 500 learners aged 19 years and over. The clear intent being to progress individuals on to further learning and accredited programmes of study or employment.

The Reaching Communities project was funded by the UK National Lottery Communities fund. This organisation had over twenty funding programmes all targeted towards supporting people and communities to thrive. AVCT was awarded £484,528.00 from the Reaching Communities stream. The project duration was February 2018- March 2023 so during the research period the team had an allocation of £109,000 to facilitate community learning opportunities. The intent was to develop activities imagined by community members. The National Lottery's strategic framework reflects an alternative approach to the more common, top-down directed style of project procurement:

When people are in the lead, communities thrive. People understand what's needed in their communities better than anyone. We listen, collaborate and fund so that good things happen. That's why we're proud to award money raised by National Lottery players across the UK. (National Lottery, 2023)

The application process, overall aims, delivery method, monitoring, and evaluation of impact were markedly different for each type of project. The Government funded bid followed a reductive format demanded by most funders, with prescriptive aims and quantifiable outputs to achieve. On the other hand, the lottery funded initiative was atypical, it applied a broad, open-ended approach asking applicants to explain the difference that the project would make to their local community. From the outset there was a schism

between the constraints of a government- directed contract and the autonomy accorded by the Reaching Communities project.

6.5 Stage 1 Examining project objectives and the application process

At the first research session the group reviewed both application forms to identify the key differences in rationale. We noted that the Government funded tender consisted of a twenty-page service specification, outlining all relevant compliance and regulatory processes. This was accompanied by an application form with sections containing details of how our organisation would meet the needs of employers and address local skills gaps. Applicants were asked to demonstrate how they would be Industry-facing and mindful of employer feedback; provision was to be underpinned by the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority's growth, skills and employment strategy. In addition, applicants had to outline the approach to delivery, the learner journey, plus ways to meet the programme outputs of engagement, assessment, attendance and progression to further learning or employment. The group consulted and discussed the aims and objectives of the Government funded tender and agreed that the overriding objectives were to prioritise programmes that would support people to progress into work and deliver learning and skills programmes that were responsive to employer's needs. The guidance material did cite the importance of meeting the needs of local people so that provision led to greater aspiration, equity, economic outcomes and social well-being. Subcontractors were expected to target unemployed, economically inactive residents who were the furthest away from the job market and classified as socially and economically disadvantaged. Other conditions included the requirement to ensure that learners were made aware of who was funding the courses.

When the team drew up the timetable of provision, we recognised that approval would only be granted to courses that developed skills for job readiness. There was no opportunity for interest-based programmes, as the contract's focus on employability necessitated a narrow, employment-skills based agenda. A creative response was developed by turning interesting activities into potential employment outlets, the curriculum offer included starting your own business, driving test theory, introduction to Social Care, event management, face painting, first aid, basic Maths, English and introduction to digital skills. Each programme was a ten-week duration with twenty guided learning hours of tuition. One member of the collaborative inquiry group declared:

Meeting notes, Friday 8th August 2019

Steve; *“How crazy is this system? Talk about putting square pegs into round holes. Most people just want to come in and get involved in an activity that interests them. What has happened to classes such as music or art?”*

Don’t we all think that it is wrong to just put on courses that are supposed to get people to get into work or more learning? Why can’t we put classes on that are not strait jacketed by skills for jobs”?

Brenda responded:

“Totally agree with you, in fact we all do don’t we? But we have no choice because if you don’t play their game we lose the funding and that means jobs will go”

This segment of interaction was important because of the contradictions it exposed. One member was uneasy about devising courses in an artificial manner just to comply with the funder’s employment-focused criterion: another accepting the requirements to prevent AVCT job losses. The group accepted that principles were being compromised but felt that AVCT staff were best to deliver the adult education programmes because they would promote a positive and aspirational learning environment by working relationally with individuals, despite the imposed restrictions and dominance of a skills-based agenda.

In contrast, the Reaching Communities application contained just four pages of guidance outlining that applications would be assessed against four criteria and the response to the following questions:

1. Have people with an interest in your project been significantly involved in its planning, have they influenced its design, and will they continue to help shape its delivery?
2. Will your proposal enable people to address a clearly defined need that matters to them, and does it seek to fill a gap or complement other services and activities?

3. Will the activity make a positive difference in your community?
4. Is your organisation best placed to deliver and achieve the proposed outcomes, and does it have the appropriate links within your community?

In addition, they looked for ideas that would support:

- Communities to develop happier and stronger relationships with each other
- Lasting and sustainable changes to improve the places and spaces that matter to communities
- Help more people to reach their potential, by supporting them at the earliest possible stage and focusing on the root causes of social problems.

The application form contained open ended questions allowing AVCT to describe the issues in need of redress, what difference the activities would make to people's lives, how the project would be run, budget profile, monitoring and evaluation procedures. A key aspect of the bid was the requirement to demonstrate that local communities had shaped the project and a range of collaborative partnerships had been secured. The difference was palpable when the research group examined the Reaching Communities rationale and proposals for assessing impact. The whole narrative felt so reassuring and trusting. This was a unique opportunity to work according to my values and a participatory mode of working. The National Lottery promoted the importance of community-led projects because they believed that social connections and community activities were the basis of the creation of healthier, happier lives and a flourishing society. Their priorities were community-based and people- focused with a commitment to support communities to thrive by funding projects that empower groups and build from the strengths of individuals and communities. There was a real sense of valuing local people's abilities, and they prioritised collaboration, partnerships, and participatory practice, Immediately, it was evident from the two project guidance materials that different thinking underpinned the funders' objectives. The research group conducted a more formal exercise by reviewing both project's guidance for the application process and created a word cloud

A word cloud visualization of the 'Learning to Work' strategy. The words are arranged in a circular pattern, with 'Learning' and 'Work' being the largest and most central. Other prominent words include 'Skills', 'Employment', 'Outcomes', 'Wellbeing', 'Economic', 'Social', 'Support', 'Learners', 'Employers', 'Progress', 'Ambition', 'Provision', 'Positive', 'Employability', 'Disadvantaged', 'Journey', 'Digital', 'Equality', 'Needs', 'Promoting', 'Maximising', 'Level', 'Resilience', 'Change', 'Diversity', 'Attitudes', 'Market', 'Previous', 'Negative', 'Limited', 'Job', 'Succeed', 'Unemployment', 'Lead', 'Confidence', 'Qualifications', 'Supporting', 'Lower', 'Appropriate', 'Inclusive', 'Fundraising', 'Maths', 'English', 'Head'.

Figure 8 Government funded project word cloud

Figure 9 National lottery funded project word cloud



National Lottery funded

6.6 Stage 2. Programme delivery

Once the community learning contract commenced the research group focused on fact-finding exercises where we reviewed the Adult Education programme from a tutor's perspective. AVCT tutors had been recruited because they had the ability to engage community members and work relationally to encourage and support them to complete the full ten-week course duration. A crucial discovery was that the Government contract incorporated multi-faceted layers of bureaucracy. The frustration of tutors and learners can be well understood given that the sessions are intended to stimulate an interest in lifelong learning, and to help individuals progress with increased ambition. Most tutors who delivered programmes complained about the excessive amount of record keeping and administrative tasks incurred on the short courses claiming that they distract time and attention away from the pedagogical processes. The Teaching course folder contained records of all attendance registers, with withdrawals and absences, course information, induction checklists, Health and Safety procedures, risk assessment for each programme, group profile, ground rules, scheme of work, lesson plans, learner assessment records with

initial diagnostic assessments, inventory of resources, learner voice records and individual learning plans. One tutor (Joanne) epitomised the frustration experienced as follows;

Extract from a discussion with a tutor, Friday 25th October 2019

“The amount of paperwork that you are expected to complete is unmanageable and mostly irrelevant. It takes away the pleasure of teaching. You always feel like you are being judged and regarded as unprofessional when managers come in and point out that records in some learner files are incomplete. They just want to cover themselves and make us go through a tick box exercise. We have no say though, I have been observed twice by external managers but never been given a copy of the lesson observation or any feedback. That in my opinion is unprofessional and certainly not good practice. When we do peer observations within AVCT we always provide verbal and written feedback to each other and discussions take place about how we could improve things for the learners. Sorry to say that I think most tutors feel resentful when external managers observe us because it feels as though they are just going through the motions to show somebody like their line manager that they have completed some lesson observations. Most of us think that they are not the slightest bit interested in the learners and always seem in a hurry. Some give out such negative body language as well (feel as though they are looking down on my learners)

I moan a lot about the paperwork we have to do and the instructions to get learners to complete so much worthless admin, but you know, I love being a tutor and meeting so many different people and seeing them enjoy their learning”.

The extract above mirrors experience of European audits where staff described being overburdened by bureaucracy with minimal assessment of the quality of provision. Power (1994) helped me to understand that frequently, these processes are not directly concerned with quality, process and input, but rather to check that organisations have controls and systems in place to assess quality. The lesson observations marginalised pedagogical issues

and personal motivation by resorting to an audit check list to evidence record keeping and procedural domains. This was a further example of Power's (1994) suggestion that such apparatus of justification does very little to improve performance, and I could also see that such systems sustain the dominance of the neoliberal doctrine. Rather than examine the overall impact of a learning programme upon students, this contract separated elements into quantifiable areas such as attendance, retention and success rates for external, independent observers to audit.

Looking from the learners' perspective members of the inquiry group brought many examples of participant feedback to discuss. Most learners regularly voiced their dissatisfaction to tutors, they were critical of the amount of paperwork they were asked to complete. Phrases such as a waste of time, tick box exercise, boring task, useless, treating us like idiots were articulated frequently by participants on the Government funded programmes. Surveys, interviews and regular dialogue were collated to provide insight into ways to improve our provision, most, however, requested a broader range of courses with less form filling. Whilst critical of the bureaucratic demands of the courses, learners were swift to commend the tutors, emphasising that it was their inter-personal skills that had kept them on track and had motivated individuals to engage in learning and complete the course.

We examined all templates that learners are expected to complete, one central record was a Personal learning plan (PLP). This was to be completed at the first session and updated on a weekly basis before being submitted to project management for monitoring at the end of the course. The PLP template consisted of thirteen pages with categories including, learner agreement, induction, initial assessment, career/future plans, positive progression in ten outcomes such as employability skills/confidence, course goals, personal goals planner, learning diary, mid and end course reviews. This document was used by the Local Authority to monitor progress however, learners were generally unwilling to complete these records because they saw limited relevance in the exercise. When AVCT personnel submitted completed PLP documentation for auditing reviews at 'scrutiny meetings' they were usually informed that practice was inadequate and insisted that we should have ensured that learners complete their plans. Every course was for a ten week duration so it is understandable that learners found the exercise onerous and difficult to complete within

the two hour timing of sessions. All learner representations regarding the futility of completion and a distraction from learning has to date, gone unheard as the same systems are rolled- out year upon year with increasing insistence to evidence assessment processes for all non-accredited courses. One incident recounted in the research sessions involved a teacher who enrolled for a face painting class. At the first session she was asked to complete an initial assessment to benchmark her practical skills at the start of the course. She questioned whether she needed to take part in the exercise and upon hearing the tutor's explanation concerning prior learning and the importance of evidencing progress the participant politely stated that she heard all of those arguments in work and simply wanted to learn face painting as a leisure pursuit and to unwind from her daily routine.

In contrast, the Reaching Communities project was far less prescriptive and gave organisations the autonomy to identify areas of need, devise strategies, and then assess impact using community- devised criteria. The extensive community consultation exercise carried out as part of the second action research cycle had identified three key areas of need: social isolation, mental health/well-being and capacity building to support smaller organisations. These priorities underpinned the planning processes and devised the following outcomes for the Reaching Communities application.

Outcome 1 Social Isolation (250 to 500 residents are less socially isolated as a result of engaging in peer support, community networks and social events.

Outcome 2 Community mental health and Well-being Activities (Up to 1000 residents report improved health and wellbeing from their participation in physical, social and community activities)

Outcome 3 Community Leadership (20 to 40 community groups are better able to meet residents' needs as a result of improved skills, capacity and sustainability through AVCT's training and support)

Outcome 4. Community Education (200 to 400 residents participate in community- based learning and 100 progress into further education, training and employment)

Figure 10 Photograph of a working wall capturing community suggestions for improved well-being



It is important to reiterate that the four outcomes were based on the priorities that community members had identified and so were most of the activities. We were not constrained by prescriptive, skills and employment outcomes but rather had autonomy to deliver a breadth of strategies that would support local communities to flourish and thrive. Appendix 2 contains further details of specific activities and the team's evaluation of the Reaching Communities project. The lottery initiative offered AVCT the opportunity to deliver holistic activities without the constraints of laborious monitoring activities or bureaucratic form completion requirements. Monitoring of the project was very 'light touch' and consisted of bi-annual reports submitted to a National Lottery project manager; more significantly though this individual visited AVCT regularly to observe activities in situ and gain direct feedback from community members. Throughout the project's lifetime our community team expressed greater satisfaction and enjoyment because they were doing what they excelled at, grass roots community development.

6.7 Stage 3 Assessing impact

The Government contract adopted quantifiable and measurable impact with little cognisance paid to qualitative aspects of people's lives. 'Success' was assessed primarily through quantifiable outputs and targets were given as a means of evaluating performance.

500 adults needed to be recruited, 70% of these had to be new learners and residing in designated post codes. Attendance and achievement targets 95%, a minimum of 30% to progress onto further educational programmes, 15% into volunteering opportunities and 15% into employment.

Bennis and Nanus (1985) once suggested that leadership is about doing the right thing whilst management is concerned with doing things right such as adhering to a compliance regime. This generated an interesting group discussion questioning whether we were compromising our principles for the sake of contract acquisition. I have witnessed the targets, and bureaucratic constraints grow more rigid and atomised year-on-year. The collaborative inquiry group acknowledged that discussions amongst AVCT's education team had transformed from providing courses that the community desire to how far we are from reaching various, usually untenable targets. All members objected to the extrinsically based, target driven government programme yet we continued to apply for a contract thus becoming part of the problem. It became clear that, as a society we now pay excessive attention to rigorous output monitoring so much so that we have lost sight of the purpose of our work and ways to evaluate the outcome of interventions. There are tensions between the need for slow reflective processes to assess improvement strategies and the neoliberal demands for measurable impact and accountability to funders. The autonomy that we used to hold for community education programmes has been stripped away by bureaucratic, imposed systems of project delivery and compliance. Increasingly it had become apparent that AVCT's contribution to community well-being was being compromised by the increasing market-driven, economic, national agenda. Contract compliance was presenting challenges to AVCT's principles of valuing the individual and addressing their needs. One member of the group made a contribution which helped us all to accept that despite the narrow skills and employment-based criteria, it is still possible to work relationally with adult learners and create conditions for a more favourable life. Group reflection agreed that whilst we do not favour the prescriptive, output-focused style of provision, we would continue to so because it was felt that we could still offer valuable opportunities to community members. The following exemplar was shared:

Extract from an email sent by a tutor. Friday 13th March 2020

Emma enrolled on a Driving Test Theory with Adult Education. In conversation with me as her tutor she disclosed that she had recently lost her job as a dental nurse because she had failed her level 2 mathematics qualification. The organisation delivering her apprenticeship training informed her that she was no longer on roll as her funding had finished. The young woman resigned herself to being unemployed.

I sought permission from AVCT's Education Manager to offer Emma some additional tuition and to fund the examination fees. I then gave two weeks of intense support (face to face and via Zoom) in my own time; consequently, Emma passed her Maths Level 2 accreditation. This boosted her confidence so much so that she made contact with her former employer who re-instated her. Emma's family thanked me for giving so much time to help her and for AVCT funding her examination. They even organised a party for her because securing a full-time job as a dental assistant was an exceptional achievement given that she had an EHCP (Education Health Care Plan) and found assessment exercises very challenging.

The intervention highlights the importance of connecting with individuals and working with them to meet their needs. I believe that we all have to show that we care for our learners and need to keep an eye open for when additional support is needed. I actually emailed our Education manager to say:

I'd like to personally thank AVCT for allowing me to help such a lovely young lady when she had so clearly been let down by other similar organisations.

The research forum agreed that Emma's exemplar would be the norm under the Reaching Communities intervention but unfortunately the bureaucratic demands of Adult Education usually reduce the opportunity for tutors to develop positive relationships with learners because of time constraints. However, this exemplar is a simple reflection of tutors' recognition of the importance of working relationally with learners. The tutor had made time to discuss the learner's situation and quickly recognised that although the Maths

accreditation was not linked in any way to the Driving Test theory course it was a barrier to an improved future. The PLP had not identified the learner's situation, it was face to face conversation between student and tutor during a break. If this tutor had been more concerned with compliance, he may have suggested that learners complete their administrative records during break, thereby reducing opportunities for engaging in dialogue. The linear processes embedded within the government-funded project reduced the opportunity for dialogue and robust reflection, whilst the Reaching Communities style encouraged community members to engage in participatory and critical assessment of the impact of activities. The Reaching Communities project proved to be a refreshing and liberating change for the AVCT because it expected local communities to identify needs, devise strategies to address issues, then evaluate them according to community-led criteria. The Reaching Communities project group completed their own evaluation of impact (see appendix 2) set against the original four outcomes and submitted this to the funders. The style was mostly qualitative evidence and included examples of participatory practice impacting positively on people's lives. Another important point is that when the global pandemic occurred and 'lockdown' procedures were introduced, the National Lottery allowed AVCT to switch provision from the original plans in order to address changing community needs.

Table 4 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs with examples

Source: Ngwenya, N., Kingston, P., and Mills, S. (2018, p. 79).

Needs	Example of Deficiency	Example of Fulfilment
Physiological	Hunger, thirst, fatigue, illness, homelessness	Physical well-being, comfort, relaxation
Safety	Insecurity, fear, sense of loss, obsession	Security, balance, calm, tranquillity
Social	Emptiness, isolation, loneliness	Free expression of emotions, sense of warmth, renewed sense of life
Self-esteem	Inferiority feelings, negativism	Self-respect, Self-esteem, Confidence
Self-actualisation	Boredom, limited activities, no meaning in life	Pleasurable work, Creative living, having potentials

One group member instigated a discussion of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs model. Everyone agreed that it was most relevant to our discussion regarding the importance of staff working relationally with individuals and how this leads to positive outcomes.

Conversations concluded that basic needs of human beings are easily identifiable and not complicated. Most people in our community have the first levels of physiological and safety needs in place and AVCT supports gaps in these areas through sign posting services and interventions to assist with aspects such as food poverty, referral to domestic violence support and employment prospects. It was the third level of love and belonging that our forum concluded was the most important to the community because connections, family and friendships were the most referenced need evidenced by our community consultation exercises. 'The most proponent goal will monopolize consciousness' (Maslow, 1943, p. 394). Everyone needs to know that there are people who have affection for them and that they are worth caring for. The Government-funded project was focused upon tangible outcomes of improved skills for employment without paying cognisance to people's psychological needs in the form of love and belonging. By prioritising employment-focused outcomes, a huge raft of positive psychology characteristics was being overlooked and marginalised, 'Who is to say that a lack of love is less important than a lack of vitamins?' (Maslow, 1943, p. 394). Only when one has a secure foundation of safety and connection can an individual grow in self-esteem, confidence then achieve self-efficacy.

This third action research cycle revealed another example of the importance of working relationally with individuals. It illustrates the complex interactions, moments and ways in which unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1961) can influence an individual's sense of self-worth and encourage a more positive attitude to the challenges being faced. The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski once referred to 'the imponderabilia of everyday life' (cited in Young, 2020) suggesting that there are important aspects of data that could not be sourced from books or interviews. It has come to be seen as the routine and habitual actions that go unnoticed by those who do them, contributing valuable insights into a society's culture. Obviously, whilst this research is not an anthropological study the concept has relevance because so many staff within AVCT demonstrate a 'way of being' imperceptible to themselves yet recognised by others. To support this suggestion, I

recounted an example of a community member who had once been supported by AVCT staff:

Researcher's recollections: 19th March 2019

A middle-aged woman approached AVCT's reception to make enquiries about basic computer courses. Our receptionist noticed that she was looking rather upset so asked whether everything was alright with her. The woman broke down in tears declaring that she had just been 'treated like dirt' in the Job Centre. She had been instructed to go on an IT course if she wished to make a claim for Universal credit as applications were all done on-line. The staff member got someone to cover reception so she could take the woman into a private room, give her some refreshments and re-assured her that her issues could easily be sorted. The IT tutor joined them, and he carefully explained how to enrol onto a beginner's class. He reassured her that she would be fine in his class and used humour to alleviate the clear signs of anxiety she was displaying. The woman completed some IT sessions which enabled her to claim benefits. Then the receptionist invited her to join the drama group at AVCT as so many community members were enjoying writing and performing their own plays.

After one month the woman returned to full time employment but still participated in evening drama classes. She would always make a point of chatting with our receptionist and remind her of how she had 'stopped her from having a real melt down'. She told the receptionist that she trusted her because she knew she was not judging her and genuinely wished to help.

The group acknowledged that it was the emotional intelligence competencies of a receptionist and a tutor that had supported one community member in reframing her outlook. We also recognised that most AVCT staff were applying intuitive practice on a day-to-day basis in the way they applied moral purpose, care and compassion and relationship working with others. We speculated as to why there were so many barriers to participatory practice and working relationally with individuals in today's society. I reminded colleagues

of Ledwith and Springett's (2010) belief that competitive tendering and the compliance-based audit culture were all inhibiting relational working with individuals; experiences within AVCT confirmed this.

6.7.1 Different styles of audit and evaluation

The dominance of bureaucracy associated with audit and accountability within funding contracts is now commonplace, many of us articulate dissatisfaction with the status quo, yet it remains deeply ingrained and few alternatives have been proposed.

Power's (1994) framework proved to be a valuable vehicle to compare the two project's evaluation processes. This acted as a conceptual tool (Ledwith, 2020) to analyse the differences. He suggests that there are two styles that could be applied to assess the impact and quality of provision. Power, (1994, p. 8) outlines these as:

Style A

Quantitative

Single measure

External agencies

Long distance methods

Low trust

Discipline

Ex post control

Private experts

Style B

Qualitative

Multiple measures

Internal agencies

Local methods

High trust

Autonomy

Real time control

Public dialogue

Encountering these two styles created instant resonance and recognition that to date, style A had been the dominant form of audit experienced through European-funded projects and Community learning provision. Funding regulations applied to AVCT are overwhelmingly underpinned by the characteristics of style A and this was the case with the government

contract. Formal, quantitative scrutiny of rates of attendance, retention, completion and progress to further training or employment were the dominant criteria used to judge the impact and quality of provision. A culture of low trust was established as providers were obliged to participate in scrutiny meetings to assess compliance with maintenance of records and target outcomes. External managers conducted lesson observations on AVCT tutors and consultants were commissioned to facilitate improved Quality Assurance processes. Staff would note that most of the time they felt that things were being done to them not with them. Frequently some AVCT practice was used as exemplars to be applied across the city, yet the organisation was never credited for their ideas and suggestions. The group shared many examples of how style A was difficult to work under and a clear clash of values was recognised as evidenced by AVCT's Community Learning coordinator:

Collaborative research group meeting notes: Thursday 5th December 2019

I remember being notified by the LA that an external consultant was going to come to AVCT to complete a formal observation of a Mosaic workshop class. We were told that this was an important exercise to judge the quality of our provision so to make sure that everything was in order.

The consultant arrived and I welcomed her with the usual offer of a drink and a bit of background to the community centre. She just asked to see the schemes of work and to be shown the classroom. I took her in and was so pleased because there was about ten people of different ages all busy working at tables with small tiles, sketches of designs, tile cutters, and vases. They were at different stages and the tutor was just going around each of them to help and offer advice when needed. The atmosphere was lovely, and the group were chatting as they worked.

Then came the shock, the consultant took me to one side and asked why there was a child in the room. I explained that it was half term so one of the learners had brought her ten-year-old daughter in because of childcare issues (she was sitting next to her mother and was helping to pass tiles and discussing colours and designs)

The consultant announced that she could not do a formal observation because of health and safety concerns. She believed that the presence of a child with scissors, glue and tile cutters was in contravention to the Service's Health and Safety policy.

I looked at the interaction and class activity with pride and the consultant viewed the scene as a problem. I escorted her from the premises and when I returned a colleague asked how the observation had gone, I remember replying; "she hasn't got a clue!"

'Much evaluation is undertaken to prove something works or has an impact, often according to criteria determined by someone outside a local project, a funding agency' (Ledwith and Springett, 2022, p. 174). These authors contend that some forms of evaluation have now moved beyond numbers to explore underlying assumptions to capture the nuances of local contexts and relationships. This was the case with the National Lottery project which did not follow the most common route. 'The institutional power and dominance of the first mode has resulted in a situation in which proponents of alternative styles have found it hard to gain an audience' Power (1994, p. 9). The Lottery contract was unique as it evaluated impact by applying the characteristics outlined by Power (1994) as style B; an alternative trust-based model with localised and face-to-face accountability. This emphasised the use of lived and learned evidence to share what has and has not worked. Autonomy was given to AVCT, so we communicated impact in a style agreed by local community members. Sharp (2023) claims that people say they want evidence to generate change but seem stuck with notions of rigour that assume quality arises from the engagement of an external, independent evaluator rather than a process of collective engagement and inquiry. According to Ledwith and Springett (2022) the idea that external evaluation is superior is outdated because a central concern should be to ask whose values are being used to evaluate an initiative and this involves changing the lenses through which we view reality. They encourage community-based personnel to re-frame their thoughts on evaluation processes being onerous in our non-participatory world because the processes can act as a vehicle for critical reflexivity. This helped our research group to understand the value of clarifying criteria by which initiatives would be judged.

6.7.2 Human needs

The value of participatory practice and relationship working came to the fore when assessing the difference that the Reaching Communities activities had made to people's lived experiences. The element that had made most difference to individuals was to work relationally with someone and have unequivocal regard for them. The most common descriptors articulated by community members being care, respect, support, time to help, non-judgemental, humour, patient, genuine, valued, confidence and belief. Most AVCT tutors delivered classes for both the government and lottery funded activities so they always prioritised positive relationship working. The narrow, instrumental, government programme with excessive bureaucracy and time constraints did not offer much opportunity for tutors to work in a relational and participatory style; yet feedback confirmed that this was a priority and valued the most by the community.

I found in this third action research cycle that the most dominant need associated with psychological well-being was based upon a person's sense of connection and relationships with others. A substantive body of research argues that community development initiatives should prioritise well-being programmes (Johnson and Parry, 2015). Clearly, the concept of well-being is a dynamic one and includes subjective, social and psychological dimensions (Ryff, 1989). There are different forms of knowing, inner ways of knowing, deep sources of knowing which are extremely difficult to describe in a cognitive, rational manner. In sharp contrast though, there is an immediate, instinctive, intuitive visceral response when people are asked to assess their well-being:

If social policy is motivated by a thin conception of need, neither the individual nor the community in which the individual resides are well served. Attention to a thick conception of need incorporates a better understanding of the significance and synergy between individuals and communities in terms of relationships and support (Casto et al., 2016).

6.8 Reflections on community learning provision

The opportunity to compare two projects highlighted the constraints of technical rationality of Government-funded initiatives against the Reaching Communities provision, which accorded greater autonomy for community members to secure improved outcomes in their lives. The key finding has been that the application of humanistic principles and unequivocal respect within relationships leads to greater personal flourishing, a sense of well-being and

social justice. The most successful ways of working with members of the community was participatory and relational because they said it was these aspects that made them feel respected, valued and more positive about their future. Having been closely involved with Adult Education delivery for over forty years I had witnessed a dramatic change in objectives underpinning provision. Initially, organisations were charged with delivering programmes of Adult Learning which met the needs and interests of the local community. In the 1980s, people enrolled in classes such as Introduction to languages, machine knitting, keep fit, car mechanics, and guitar. Since then, a seismic shift has occurred given that today all funded courses must have employability, numeracy, literacy, and digital skills at the core of the provision. The White paper 'Skills for jobs; Lifelong learning for opportunity and growth, 2021' is evidence of the DfE adopting a market-driven culture to prioritise addressing skills gaps and the needs of employers. Research indicates that there is a wealth of evidence reflecting the benefits of adult education and how it adds value to individual lives, local communities, and the UK economy (WEA, 2015). However, as illustrated in the action research process, economic and progression to employment considerations dominate most discussion. The direct economic effects of lifelong learning potentially include impacts on earnings, on employability, and on the wider economy. Since higher incomes or steady employment tend to have further effects on health, well-being and sociability, it also follows that the economic effects of learning have indirect outcomes (Field, 2012). Furthermore, it transpires that most published research into the importance of Adult Education has an economic, labour orientated bias, which seems to only view learning opportunities in instrumental terms. Issues relating to psychological well-being and self-actualisation are invariably marginalised and viewed simply as adjuncts to formal learning sessions. Policy discourses work to privilege certain ideas and topics and exclude others. This can be seen in the transformation of Adult Education provision in which people have become 'obliged to live as appendages of the market and of capital accumulation rather than as expressive beings' (Harvey, 2010, p. 185).

Hughes, Adriaanse and Barnes, (2016) identified the benefits of adult education for individuals, employers and communities, particularly the most disadvantaged in society. Their work represented the first report to be commissioned by the All-Party Parliamentary group for Adult Education (APPG). Whilst it suggests that there is increased awareness of

the benefits that Adult Education can bring to the country's health and well-being, it focuses more upon economic dimensions. The report outlines the economic and social costs to not providing basic skills, and significant gains in providing them. It calls for a new national strategy and the introduction of coherent adult education policies which are vital to bring disadvantaged adults back to learning and into the workplace. 'Adult Education: Too important to be left to chance' is a report from Hughes et al., (2016, pp. 60-61) that made the following recommendations:

- A new strategy: establish a national and regional strategy for adult education, health, employability and wellbeing.
- Redistribute resources: Re balance resources more equitably to focus on life skills and prosperity for adults across different life stages.
- Improve awareness: Provide careers information, advice and guidance in local communities and building capacity in the adult education workforce to make greater use of labour market intelligence and midlife reviews.
- Data and evidence: Identify and gather more evidence on the full impact of adult education, including the voices of adults and their needs.
- Private sector support: Encourage more employers to step up and offer opportunities to adults to improve their skills and productivity, particularly older adults keen to remain active in employment

Despite the noble sentiments espoused by the report's title, the recommendations fall far short of the advancement of lifelong learning as an empowering process benefitting individuals, as they were dominated more by market and economic considerations. In my opinion, the report's recommendations were practically identical to the current system in place. This signifies that the Government still retains an extrinsic and instrumental view of the role of community education in society, with skill augmentation, employability, and productivity prioritised above the intrinsic and empowering value of learning. The recommendations have now been absorbed into DfE policy, as all tender specifications for Adult Education continue to promote the needs of the market and employers above the psychological, emotional, relationship- focused needs of individuals. Essentially, they have

adopted a human capital discourse which sees education as an investment in individual skills to make one more productive and employable. Klees (2016) asserts that policy makers see adult education as a means of addressing the triple challenge of job creation, elimination of poverty and the reduction of inequality. They do so without recognising how global capitalism created such problems, not individuals themselves. There are clear limitations to adopting a job supplying, market-forces, capitalist approach to adult education. Such an outlook assumes a deficit response in terms of blaming individuals for their disadvantaged circumstances and contributes to disempowerment, 'individualisation and fragmentation of the system, the dominance of benchmarks and indices, the expectation that education can simply be a servant of the economy' (Ball, 2013, p. X1). Local and national policy makers continue to adopt this reductive human capital theory which assumes that more skilled workers will lead to more skilled jobs and greater productivity. Lupton (2019) argues that the perception of education in purely economic terms has resulted in a rigid narrowing of educational provision and reduces the potential for community transformation. According to Hughes, Adriaanse and Barnes (2016), a common theme voiced by adults not engaged in learning, was a desire for more tailored and flexible local provision that meets their needs. The Reaching Communities bid gave me the opportunity to test whether different thinking and outcomes could be generated through a co-construction of strategies from the bottom up. The prescriptive, target-focused dimensions of the non-accredited adult education project has a major design flaw, namely, it fails to fully understand human needs. Dean (2020) differentiates between thick and thin dimensions. If one adopts an instrumental view of adult learning being targeted towards employment prospects, then that represents a very thin conception of need. Alternatively, thick needs can be optimally defined and 'Include the things that may be necessary for a person to truly flourish and to share a good life'. (Dean, 2020, p. 2). Greater insight was gained through examining funders' vision and objectives. The process helped me to move beyond processes and activities that offered tangible outcomes towards recognising that so many individuals have unmet needs in their lives. An expressed need had been identified and that was grounded in relational aspects of psychological well-being. Wilkinson and Pickett (2020) claim that the decline in social relationships concerns most people so these need to be re-built. Johnson and Parry (2015) believe that well-being can be improved through increased social contact and a person's mental health, confidence and self-esteem will also become enhanced.

According to Argyle (1987) and Putnam (2000; 2005) participation in social activities and community involvement are linked to higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction. The Reaching Communities project demonstrated the importance of reducing social isolation to enhance well-being.

Education is still a key political issue for the UK Governments as it is seen an essential factor in ensuring economic productivity and competitiveness. In previous chapters I have demonstrated how children have been turned into learners and parents into consumers. Entry level adult learning is now dominated by skills for employment. However, there is disconnection between the conflicting needs of families and communities on the one hand, and the economy and state on the other. Whilst the government funded Adult Education project adopted a prescriptive, narrow, target -driven output-focused mode the Reaching Communities initiative accorded autonomy to community groups and empowered them to drive improvement themselves. Current formal adult learning provision is dominated by imposed criteria and output measurement; these represent a rigid dichotomy to the autonomous and participatory style of the Reaching Communities project. The prevalence of Newtonian rationality places relationship working on the periphery. I contend that such a mechanistic view of reality and reductionism are counterproductive as more beneficial results can be achieved for people living in disadvantaged circumstances through participatory and relational ways of being. The Reaching Communities project gifted high trust and autonomy to local people and valued the range of qualitative case studies submitted as evidence of positive outcomes and impact.

There appears to be very little scope to challenge or change the community education national agenda because social policy is still motivated by a thin conception of need (Dean, 2020). The Adult Community Education sector made representations to the Conservative government in 2021. This was in response to the proposal that from 2024 onwards, funding for all courses that are not directly linked to employment outcomes, would end. Consultation convinced the DfE to revise course outcomes and reinstated improvements to health and well-being, family learning and community integration as acceptable objectives. It could be argued that the Government had listened and recognised the importance of wider outcomes such as mental health and well-being which helps to support so many

vulnerable groups in disadvantaged communities. However, the dominant narrative within the 2021 White Paper 'Skills for jobs; Lifelong learning for opportunity and growth' is still skewed towards a market-driven agenda with funding linked primarily to improving an individual's job readiness and occupational capacity. The wider outcomes cited above will be referred to as 'tailored learning' and providers will be given a maximum threshold they can spend on tailored learning provision:

while the purpose of the tailored learning element of the new adult skills fund will primarily be for progression to employment or further learning, it can also support wider outcomes such as social well-being and mental health (Chowen, 2023).

This is further evidence of the marginalisation of community well-being. The vision for qualitative community learning is fractured due to rapid policy change and the deeply ingrained neoliberal discourse that promotes market-driven reform above the needs of individuals. One time Skills Minister Robert Halfon (2022-24) asserted that 'Social Justice must be the beating heart of our education policy and delivering a brilliant skills system is key to this.' (Halfon, cited in Chowen, 2023). Here we have further examples of the skills agenda being associated with social justice, just as employment is equated with well-being in current adult learning programmes.

6.8.1 Revisiting knowledge to assess impact

The cycle of reflection and action necessitated a return to the nature of knowledge as an important dimension because the Newtonian world view suggests that there is one superior form above others. The Adult Education courses were evaluated using mechanistic, reductionist, output-based criteria. Today, we have limited conceptions of knowledge and learning which prevail and propositional knowledge is accorded status because of its claims for universal truth and generalisability. Eraut (2000) has demonstrated that the Greeks developed a broad view of the concept with several different aspects such as episteme (theoretical), sophia (wisdom), techne (practical), phronesis (experiential) and metis (craftiness). Over time, propositional knowledge came to dominate over all other forms and there is now less attention paid to practical, experiential knowledge. Schön (1983) criticised the tendency towards technical rationality when he drew attention to professional artistry and more intuitive forms of practice. He preferred to use the concept of practicum as the main arena for developing professional expertise. This involved seminars and tutorials

where professionals talked about practices in which they engaged in and of the concerns which arose out of their current work. This professional thoughtfulness and reflection are very different from the demands of the compliance and evaluation procedures imposed by most funders. Eraut proposes an alternative approach to defining knowledge by focusing upon usability instead of truth and generalisability. He defines professional knowledge as 'what people bring to practical situations which enable them to think and perform' (2000, p. 2). So, knowledge is acquired through learning to use publicly available propositional knowledge alongside personal experience and reflection through social interaction. Much of the knowledge gained through experience remains in tacit form, so knowledge is used intuitively most of the time, but is difficult to reflect upon or integrate with more formally developed ideas. It is also challenging to integrate different forms of knowledge and convince most funders of the positive influence of affective relationships on well-being and lived experiences.

Many practical principles and theories of action are developed or learned through a community of practice; Eraut (2000) claimed that learning takes place in the workplace and that most people have considerable experience of different kinds of knowledge to use. Ontologically, subscribing to the view that ordinary people possess knowledge which explains the world resonates with Pearce (2013, p. 8) when she asserts:

Universities are not alone in producing knowledge. Community and social activists produce knowledge, for example, in the process of acting on the world around them. The propositional knowledge generated in the academy is very important: a systematised form of knowledge based on many years of study, analysis and validated methods. However, experiential knowledge is also extremely valuable: a non-systematised learning from everyday life which guides many people in their understanding and analysis of the world and builds the grounds upon which they act in it.

This community-based research process has combined theoretical knowledge with the experiential knowledge of those experiencing the consequences of social inequality. Darder, (2015) urges community activists to enter into critical engagement with the complexities and nuanced ways in which hegemony impacts our lives. In this way knowledge has been co-constructed to advance change. By working in collaboration with community members, we identified ways in which lives can be enhanced. This participatory paradigm promotes the

value of relationships, equality, care and compassion. Community members articulate experiences that reflect the value accorded to connectedness and relationships, but these are rarely acknowledged by funders. Quantifiable, measurable tools still prevail and underpin most government practice when assessing impact. Elliott (1991) has outlined how technical rationality underpins most government policies, so we find ourselves operating within a restrictive paradigm.

The subjective nature of knowledge is evidenced by the way in which academic research (Hughes et al., 2016) is still suggesting that enhanced basic skills will improve the lives of those living in disadvantaged circumstances. This propositional knowledge interprets well-being through prosperity and life chances linked with employment. By rejecting the views of academia in favour of local people's knowledge, the Reaching Communities project secured more valuable outcomes to community members. Participants in the Reaching Communities project provided rich narratives of how, by working in a participatory and relational manner they grew in self-confidence and self-esteem; this in turn provided greater motivation to improve their own lives in whichever way they chose.

6.9 Relational aspects of community well-being and social justice

Participatory ontology has relational processes embedded within professional practice. Above everything, it was relationship working that became the decisive criterion for impacting positively on others. Before analysing the impact of two different project types the AVCT team had relied upon embodied knowledge (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) to inform decision making. A common view was that people were most capable of taking responsibility for their own lives, and for influencing the lives of others in the community in a positive way. Individuals were not regarded as passive participants or patronised because of their life circumstances. Participatory practice identified some significant needs then facilitated strategies to address these. Thus, the participatory Reaching Communities project supports Ledwith and Springett's (2022) belief that community-based action can contribute to transformative change. Moreover, it demonstrates how 'the richness of our lives is determined by the quality of our relationships...But this is barely acknowledged in some areas' (Ledwith and Springett, 2022, p. 23). These authors suggest that scientific papers in health sciences are stripped of the relationships at the centre of the health care process, and my research demonstrates how similar situations are mirrored in the Adult Education

project, which judges success primarily in terms of progression to other training, learning opportunities or employment:

Yet, as we know from our experience of the recent pandemic, a hug, a smile, a pleasant word from another person is fundamental to our well-being, as is our relationship with nature. Participatory practice is a manifestation of the relational: co-creation, co-learning and critical pedagogy. It promotes genuine authentic relationships and represents the strong link between individual responsibility for ourselves, for each other and community well-being (Ledwith and Springett, 2022, pp. 23-24).

During discussions with funding bodies, I have regularly cited the efficacy of relationship working for improving community well-being. For the most part they respond with a Semmelweis reflex:

a metaphor for a certain type of human behaviour characterised by reflex-like rejection of new knowledge because it “contradicts” entrenched norms, beliefs or paradigms, “despite adequate evidence” (Gupta et al., 2020).

Tangible outputs still dominate and suggestions about connections, care, respect, inter-personal relationships and so forth are marginalised. In the pursuit of social justice there are a myriad of considerations to examine, and the concept is not limited to just inequalities in wealth, status and power captured in Rawls’s (1971) ‘Theory of Justice’. Equally, however social justice issues cannot be confined to aspects such as representation, recognition and redistribution which Fraser (2008) prioritises. Lynch (2012) asserts that affective relations should be accorded political importance because they are important aspects of social practice that interface between redistributive, recognition and representational realities in generating discrete forms of inequality:

The affective worlds of love, care and solidarity matter also for what they might generate politically in terms of heralding different ways of relating beyond separateness, competition and aggrandisement (Lynch, 2012, p. 61).

The Reaching Communities project highlighted the importance of affective relations; it demonstrated people’s need for love and genuine care for and from others. It confirmed that humans are relational beings, yet, so often in political and policy making spheres, there is a denial of the importance of affective relationships and emotions (Lynch, 2012). In a similar argument White (2017) asserts that there has been a dramatic decline in social

interaction, so much so that people are encouraged to depend on the system rather than upon other people. She advocates prioritising relational well-being to challenge current discourses and promote a more socially inclusive society. Jung captured an important paradox by declaring that ‘we need others to be truly ourselves. “I” needs “We” to become fully “I”’. (Cited in Handy, 2002, p. 42).

Community members expressed a clear desire for mutuality and increased inter-connectedness because many believe these attributes to be diminishing in today’s world:

One must say yes to life, and embrace it wherever it is found-and it is found in terrible places...For nothing is fixed, forever and forever,it is not fixed;the earth is always shifting, the light is always changing, the sea does not cease to grind down rock. Generations do not cease to be born, and we are responsible for them because we are the only witnesses they have. The sea rises, the light fails, lovers cling to each other, and children cling to us. The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out (Baldwin, 1963 cited in Popova, 2020).

The aim of this chapter was to demonstrate that the evidence gained through community interventions, particularly sourced from the third action research cycle, upholds my view that positive outcomes can be secured for community members by applying participatory practice. Well-being improves and social justice is enhanced when connectedness and relational working is prioritised. The choice of an action research method aligned with my core values of social justice and fairness; it complements my collaborative approach to enhance human flourishing. I applied a cooperative, experiential inquiry method to generate the co-production of knowledge. I am now acutely aware of gatekeepers controlling the status of knowledge and understand that if communities do not represent their own stories and create their own futures then others will continue to do so for them. Because of this research cycle, I have a deeper understanding of the importance of working relationally with individuals. This new knowledge stemmed from authentic community voices that highlighted affective aspects as important factors influencing their sense of well-being.

This study has shown that whilst there are limits to what community organisations can achieve in the face of the dominant neoliberal narrative, there is still the potential to make a significant difference within communities. There is no consensus regarding the role of community learning in our broader educational system or in society at large. Our current

legislation continues to serve the needs of the economy, not local communities. It will continue to remain a moral dilemma for providers such as AVCT to continue to accept funding for narrowly focused educational programmes. We now have a full appreciation of the benefits of participatory and relational community-based learning towards advancing enhanced well-being. The main theoretical framework underpinning this pursuit of social justice is the understanding and harnessing of positive relationships. The Reaching Communities project has demonstrated that there is a different way of working and that relational aspects of social justice and psychological well-being needs to be prioritised above narrow instrumental concerns. It follows Russell and McKnight's (2022) model of Asset-Based Community Development which advocates a bottom-up response to community transformation. The failure of external approaches to community issues can encourage people to connect with each other more readily and pool social capital to build a better life together. National Lottery funding helped to undo a lot of disconnection and isolation in local neighbourhoods, by nurturing community relationships enabling more people to work together to address concerns and priorities. It represents a foundation stone in building a preferred future. In the next, and final chapter I draw together my summative findings and reflect upon their significance and contribution to knowledge.

This chapter has presented an account of one organisation's experience of delivering community learning provision using differentiated principles and approaches. It confirmed to me that the dominant neoliberal world view is based on the principles of Newtonian Science which is mechanistic and reductionist; anathema to the creative possibilities of humanity and our interconnected world.

More favourable outcomes were achieved by the Reaching Communities project because a holistic approach was adopted which gave precedence to community-instigated change. This confirmed that AVCT's alternative approach to community well-being through relational working promotes greater opportunities for social justice than narrow, market-driven, economic orientated intervention. An example perhaps, of an organisation creating strategies that could become future practice

given that I have engaged in theoretical and practitioner-based understanding of the connection between relationship working, community well-being and social justice. I have come to recognise that the pursuit of community well-being and social justice is only possible if centred upon a participatory worldview. This has been a transformative experience for me, as I now understand that my intuitive way of being in the world is a participatory paradigm and that has enabled me to view the world through a different lens.

The third action research cycle has galvanised my belief that relational and connected practice with others advances well-being and self-efficacy, but this remains an under-researched aspect of improving peoples' lived experiences. This represents the cornerstone of my contribution to new knowledge; the importance of acknowledging the effect of connectedness and belonging to everyone and our need to be treated with unequivocal respect, care and compassion.

We are all inextricably linked and inter-connected, therefore, participatory practice will always be prioritised within my professional practice:

this is a participative universe, nothing lives alone. Everything comes into form because of relationship...Even reality is created through our participation on relationships. We choose what we notice; we relate to certain things and not others. Through these chosen relationships we co-create the world (Wheatley, 1999, cited in Ledwith and Springett, 2022, p.23).

Chapter 7. Findings and conclusions

In this final chapter I reflect upon the cumulative research process and summarise what I believe I have achieved in my thesis. I return to the original research objectives outlined in the introduction before synthesising the main themes and findings. I assess the significance and value of new learning relating to community well-being, from which I present my claims for contribution to knowledge. Conclusions are drawn and I conclude with an iteration of the need to shape a preferred future.

7.1 Introduction

The sole reason for embarking upon a PhD research degree was to deepen my learning and to better understand how to improve community well-being and promote greater social justice. The genesis of this study was to explore the process of community-led change and its potential to improve the lived experiences of people in a disadvantaged community. The key question being: how can I, in collaboration with others enhance well-being within a disadvantaged community? Two objectives were formulated as a means of responding to this research question:

1. To investigate how AVCT as a community-based charity could achieve greater impact when contributing to improved well-being and lived experiences.
2. Identify and understand the factors impeding AVCT's efforts to further enhance community well-being and lived experiences.

Having gained insight and greater understanding of these aspects, the study also represents an unfolding story of being called to consciousness. The world is now viewed through a different lens and this only transpired because of pursuing a research degree and the application of action research methodology. Initially I had assumed that if I could improve my professional practice, then AVCT could become more effective, and this would then lead to positive impact upon the local community. By the conclusion of the study, I found myself in possession of a very different mind-set from where I began, illustrating the

transformational nature of action research. Participatory practice became an essential characteristic to support improved outcomes.

7.2 The value of practice-based research

I engaged in several research styles to fulfil these objectives; this enabled me to find my own voice and articulate my vision of the contemporary world. At the start of this research journey, I did not fully appreciate the potency of exploring my own professional practice as a way of theorising and developing new knowledge. In the introductory chapter I describe myself as a naïve voyager, but I now appreciate that by trusting the process afforded by autoethnographic framing, critical incident analysis and action research methodology, I have gained key understanding supporting how best to secure conditions which contribute to community well-being. The combined approach to inquiry promoted dialogue, collaboration, and deeper thinking about preferred courses of action.

This practice-based study generated new meaning and awareness for me and AVCT as an organisation; I contend that it also holds national significance. The most important aspect of personal learning has been the strengthening of my critical consciousness. To illustrate this, I am indebted to Darder (2014, p. 7) who uses a metaphor from a Spanish poem to explain the process of conscientisation, ‘we make the road by walking’. Only by acknowledging the primacy of personal experience and that of research participants did I come to understand the structural factors impacting upon peoples’ everyday lives and the importance attributed to belonging and connectedness. The cumulative research process generated new learning at each stage of the inquiry, and this contributed to new knowledge linked to the enhancing of community well-being through participatory practice.

7.3 Action research: Trusting the process

Theoretical engagement with the principles of action research had not prepared me for the process of transformation that took place. It made sense to promote collaboration and the co-creation of knowledge to bring about action for positive change. However, the consequent outcomes exceeded my expectations as I learnt along the way from cycles of experience, reflection and theorising. This iterative process helped to refine practice through systematic inquiry and reflection (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1987). Each stage commenced with a different outlook on previous experience because of the learning I had

gained from reflection and theorising. In the first action research cycle I recognised that the application of models of organisational theories of leadership could not add value to local community outcomes. Colleagues held differentiated views of how AVCT enhanced lived experiences, but it was an impromptu interaction with a library member who influenced the decision to examine affective dimensions of well-being with community members. The second action research cycle harnessed a collaborative approach to ascertain what aspects of life were most in need of improvement; and I learnt that social connections and positive relationships were prioritised. The analysis of four critical incidents resulted in a personal awakening and a deeper understanding of social reality and the dominance of neoliberalism. This, in turn led me to acknowledging that two diametrically opposed world views existed. The third action research cycle cemented my growing awareness that participatory practice secures greater impact for people than neoliberal –orientated initiatives which are underpinned by the principles of Newtonian science. My learning and subsequent practice evolved through an engagement with literature and reflection. The value of action research was seen in its widest sense as I firmly believe that this methodology was the most appropriate form to answer my research question and discover new approaches to improve lived experiences.

7.4 Overview of key learning and contribution to knowledge

At the commencement of the study, I never envisaged the volume of learning that could be accrued by blending action research, critical incident analysis and autoethnographic framing methodologies. Thinking retrospectively, I have captured over four decades of an evolving narrative centred on a disadvantaged community in the Northeast of Liverpool. The city achieved a reputation for recalcitrance in its opposition to Thatcher's free market ideology and punitive legislation exacerbated the living conditions of the most vulnerable. The longitudinal aspect of this research represents an important lens through which to view an evolving story. Further equipped with deeper knowledge, I am now more confident to stress the political and social significance of my research and to record the potential implications for others who seek improved community well-being. So challenging and demanding is the nature of community development work in contemporary society, that most often one is so busy delivering and firefighting that minimal time is committed to reflection. The critical incidents that I describe, illustrate my superficial level of awareness of impact of external

conditions. Given the constant barriers requiring immediate attention and action, reflection time was a luxury. The extended period of reflection was a unique opportunity to analyse my professional practice, treating it as a case study. I was able to gain a deeper insight into the structure and systems of neoliberal society...this is an important contribution to knowledge.

The new awareness was intriguing, yet it also made me feel uncomfortable and embarrassed; I questioned how I could have progressed through my career without recognising the dominance of neoliberalism? Monbiot and Hutchinson (2024) assuaged these sentiments by describing how neoliberalism operates namelessly, so it was entirely understandable that I had not been aware of its existence. They contend that the pressures of neoliberalism serve as a means of de-humanising people. This thesis has shown that what actually matters to people is generally overlooked by current policies and systems, that rational and quantifiable objectives take priority over affective domains such as relationships.

Through a comprehensive reflection on my career, I experienced what Paulo Freire (1996) termed conscientisation-a profound awakening to the structural inequalities embedded within society. From early adulthood, I had been unsettled by the prevailing status quo, driven by a conviction that genuine equality and social justice demanded far-reaching reform. I believed that democratic processes, particularly the ballot box, held the potential to either alleviate or exacerbate the hardships faced by disadvantaged communities.

This reflective journey reshaped my consciousness, bringing into sharp focus the realities of systemic oppression, entrenched power hierarchies, and the rigidity of neoliberal ideologies. Freire's assertion that individuals internalise societal myths and that education must become a critical, transformative process resonated deeply with my evolving perspective. His work illuminated the gap between perceived and actual community needs, guiding me to interrogate the root causes of disadvantage rather than merely addressing surface symptoms.

By applying Freire's principles in practice, particularly his view that critical awareness is a precursor to liberation, I see my efforts not merely as inspired by his legacy, but as an active contribution to it. As Freire (2002) noted, understanding oppression alone does not liberate;

yet it is a vital step toward transforming the material conditions in which it persists. My journey, therefore, aligns with and extends Freire's vision, translating critical pedagogy into tangible action within a contemporary organisational context. My deeper knowledge supported a new way of thinking about how AVCT as an organisation could take 'the road less travelled' and improve conditions for the community we serve. Furthermore, whilst more critical understanding of oppression cannot liberate a person 'it's a step in the right direction' claims Freire (2002) in terms of transforming the concrete conditions in which oppression operates.

7.4.1 Whose knowledge is it?

The decision to apply action research as my substantive methodology had been informed by an interrogation of the nature of knowledge; (Brew, 2001; Buber, 2002; Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Johnson and Parry, 2015). These authors all emphasise the value of building knowledge from peoples' lived experiences not from distant, rational theories of the academy. Brew (2001) goes further by warning about the danger of what she terms commodified knowledge; therefore, action research was seen as an ideal fit for an exploration of how to improve AVCT's effectiveness in bringing about improvements within the local community:

The process of research must move us beyond the despair of post-modernism and the drudgery of commodified knowledge to discover anew how to inquire in ways which not only take forward our collective understanding of the world but provide exemplars of how others might live. (Brew, 2001, p. 186).

The general perception of knowledge has become increasingly narrow with a common assumption that only the natural, rational sciences provide credible explanations about our world. The Dutch philosopher, Rick Peels claims that scientific interpretations fail to understand the variety of reality. 'Use the lens of natural science and you miss out on aesthetic qualities and things that really matter to us as human beings', (in Stewart, 2024). The belief that a body of coherent information can be applied universally must be challenged because a significant amount of knowledge can only be accrued experientially. For example, one former Conservative Government Minister claimed that politicians do not use local data sufficiently 'the knowledge that mattered was not in libraries but in the lived experience of local communities' (Stewart, 2024). The status of knowledge was a key

consideration because I believe that the quality of people's narratives is far more relevant than third party enquiries. I had witnessed on innumerable occasions examples of policies being disconnected from people. Ledwith and Springett (2022) argue that there is a dominance of top-down thinking in policy formation. Systems thinking is in the hands of so called expert committees who rarely invite participation of actors within the system; particularly the poor and marginalised.

I felt it was only right to ask, 'Whose knowledge is it?' and listen to the authentic voices of those experiencing community life. I applied Buber's (2002) model of turning inwards, outwards and toward the world as a way to establish mutual understanding and the co-construction of knowledge for change. He emphasises the importance of genuine, reciprocal relationships when trying to understand and know the world. Traditional knowledge paradigms are premised on the assumed superiority of rationalist knowledge. Toulmin (1990) reminds us that there is an underpinning belief that all of society can be fitted into rational categories. This research employed a variety of voices which helped me to continually look again and not draw artificial boundaries around a research topic. Brew encourages researchers not to prejudge relevance, but to act on the hypothesis that everything is relevant. She notes that Usher *et al.*, (1997) (cited in Brew, 2001, p. 59) point out:

any understanding of human actions based on this kind of closure is necessarily incomplete. Subsequent looking again from different viewpoints can often illuminate connections which were previously obscured.

Through meaningful engagement with the community, it became evident that fostering connectedness and relationships was a central priority. In response, AVCT reshaped its provision to align with the aspirations of the people we serve, embracing Ledwith's (1997, p. 13) principle of 'encouraging active participation of people in their own transformation'. This approach not only validated the community's voice but also affirmed my support for Ledwith's belief in the power of participatory practice as a vehicle for genuine change.

The process revealed how much of community life had previously gone unnoticed, an insight that echoed Jung's (no date) notion of making the unconscious conscious. The relentless pace and workload typical of education and charitable sectors leave little room for critical reflection. Moreover, the reliance on quantifiable outputs to measure success

offers only a superficial understanding of people's lived realities, focusing on external metrics while neglecting the emotional and relational dimensions that communities themselves actually prioritise.

Through cycles of action research, I came to understand these deeper, internal human needs that are often invisible to funders and policymakers and I acknowledged the disconnection between their objective measurements and the community's affective dimensions. This experience reinforced my conviction that participatory practice is not just a theoretical ideal, but a practical necessity. Ledwith and Springett (2010) have long articulated the transformative potential of participative practice, and my research allowed me to fully endorse their perspective. It was only through direct involvement that I grasped the profound impact of enabling communities to identify and address their own challenges:

Practices of knowing cannot be fully claimed as human practices, not simply because we use non-human elements in our practices but because knowing is a matter of part of the world making itself intelligible to another part...We do not obtain knowledge by standing outside the world: We know because we are *of* the world. (Barad, 2007, p. 185).

Barad's insight that knowledge emerges from being part of the world, not standing outside it resonates deeply with this journey. Participatory practice, as I now advocate, is a way of knowing that honours lived experience, collective wisdom, and the agency of communities. In supporting Ledwith and Springett's work, I commit to embedding these principles into AVCT's ethos, ensuring that our efforts remain grounded in the belief that people are not passive recipients of change, but active agents in shaping their own futures.

7.4.2 The fourth R: Primacy of relationships in supporting well-being

The findings from this study reinforce and extend existing scholarship that highlights the critical importance of working relationally with people to improve their lived experiences. My research contributes to a growing body of work, including that of Appadurai (2004), Cohen (2022,) Haidt (2024), Lynch (2012), Monbiot (2016b), Putnam (2000), White (2017) and the World Health Organisation (2023), and which identifies a global mental health crisis rooted in loneliness, disconnection, and a diminished sense of belonging. By foregrounding relationships as central to wellbeing, my study affirms that the erosion of social bonds has profound consequences for individuals and communities alike.

Across three cycles of action research, it became evident that micro-level relational dynamics characterised by kindness, dignity, respect, and affirmation are what people most value. This insight builds upon foundational psychological theories from Maslow (1943), Rogers (1961), and Seligman (2011), and offers empirical evidence that these relational qualities remain vital in contemporary community contexts. My work adds depth to these perspectives by demonstrating how relational practices can be intentionally cultivated within community-based organisations.

Furthermore, my findings address a notable gap in the literature regarding people's aspirations, as identified by Appadurai (2004). While neoliberal narratives often prioritise economic advancement, my research reveals that human connection is consistently regarded as a more immediate and meaningful priority by those living in disadvantaged contexts. This challenges dominant assumptions and supports a reorientation of policy and practice toward relational well-being.

In alignment with Dean's (2020) framework of thin and thick conceptions of need, my study provides evidence that connectedness and positive relationships are essential components of the human condition. By documenting how communities articulate and prioritise these needs, I contribute to a more nuanced understanding of what constitutes meaningful support and development to enhance community well-being.

In sum, my research strengthens the case for relational approaches by offering grounded, practice-based insights that complement and extend theoretical work in the field. It affirms that the path to community transformation lies not in abstract metrics or imposed solutions, but in the everyday relational practices that foster belonging, dignity, and mutual care.

Community well-being is an integral component of AVCT'S approach to improving the lived experiences of local people and the organisation now has a clearer understanding of well-being as a result of this study. From the outset the complexities surrounding a definition and epistemology of well-being was apparent. Well-being is a commonly used term and as discussed throughout this thesis, can be interpreted in many guises depending upon the individual's subjective assessment of their quality of life. There is a range of meanings and strategies for community development and well-being in different contexts. Categories could include physical, social and environmental, emotional and psychological (Ryff, 2018).

Although it is not easy to define, I found that there was a visceral response when individuals described their sense of well-being (instinctive and intuitive as opposed to a rational or cognitive description). When Community members presented an alternative narrative to mainstream understanding of well-being, it called into question the accepted status of knowledge. There needs to be deeper insight into the non-material aspects of well-being, centred on affective indicators. The term is in regular use and most claim to understand the concept but this 'still does not pay real attention to the complexity inherent in how people negotiate their everyday lives' (Ledwith and Springett) 2010, p. 69).

Research conducted by The British Academy and Nuffield Foundation (2025) aimed at addressing the lack of lived experience in existing evidence bases explored how communities function, and the potential to improve individual and community well-being. A key finding was the focus on connectedness and relationships in improving lives. Community-led models outperformed top-down interventions by leveraging local knowledge, lived experience and mutual support.

Thus, my research contributes to the growing body of knowledge affirming that connectedness and positive relationships are foundational to individual well-being and, by extension, to the pursuit of social justice. My findings demonstrate that working relationally with people through intentional, values-driven interactions can significantly enhance lived experiences. By promoting relationality as both a method and a principle, I offer evidence that supports and extends existing theories of human connection as a catalyst for change.

A key contribution of this study lies in its emphasis on the quality of relational engagement. It is not enough to simply work alongside others; we must be critically aware of how we interact. Drawing on Rogers' (1961) concept of congruent relationships, my research shows that authenticity, empathy, and respect are not abstract ideals but essential conditions for fostering dignity and genuine care. These relational qualities emerged consistently across the data, underscoring their importance in community-based practice.

By integrating theory with practice, this work advances understanding of relational approaches as a pathway to social justice. It challenges reductionist models of service delivery and offers a framework for practitioners and organisations to cultivate meaningful,

transformative relationships. In doing so, it adds depth to the discourse on well-being, belonging, and the relational foundations of community development

This research challenges the dominant assumption that well-being is primarily defined by economic and material advancement. Neoliberal narratives have positioned economic materialism as a central life goal, yet my findings reveal that this emphasis obscures the deeper, relational dimensions that truly underpin human flourishing. By uncovering the overlooked link between positive relationships and community well-being, this study contributes new knowledge to the discourse on social justice and well-being.

A key contribution of this thesis lies in identifying a societal deficit: the widespread failure to recognise the transformative value of human connection. Through the application of relational and participatory modes of action, my research demonstrates that meaningful improvements in well-being are most effectively achieved when people are engaged in processes that prioritise relationships, dignity, and mutual care. These outcomes were not incidental, they emerged consistently across the data, affirming the centrality of relational practice.

Building on this evidence, I propose an expanded understanding of social justice. While Fraser's (2008) framework of redistribution, recognition, and representation remains foundational, my work introduces relationality as a fourth, equally vital dimension. By positioning relational epistemology as the core conceptual framework of my thesis, I offer a new lens through which social justice can be understood and enacted, one that acknowledges the primacy of relationships in shaping lived experience and promoting well-being. In doing so, this research contributes to the field by bridging theoretical critique with practical insight. It advances the argument that humans flourish not solely through material gain, but through the cultivation of meaningful connections. This reframing invites the academy, practitioners, and policymakers to reconsider the processes and initiatives by which improved lived experiences and community well-being are pursued, placing relationality at the heart of transformative social change:

When you open your eyes, you can see all of the things that are around you. What you see is their physical form, but you realize that this form is really just the web of relationships that have taken on a familiar shape. Every individual thing you see around you is really just a huge knot- a point where thousands and millions of

relationships come together. The relationships come to you from the past, from the present and from your future. This is what surrounds us, and what forms us, our world, our cosmos and our reality. We could not be without being in relationship with everything that surrounds us and is within us (Wilson 2008, p. 76).

7.4.3 Circumnavigating the neoliberal landscape

The dominance of the neoliberal hegemony imposes significant constraints and inhibits the potential to work relationally with people and secure better outcomes and a more just society. The accompanying audit and compliance culture of funders also serves to restrict opportunities for well-being to be fostered through relationships. Audit is a manifestation of neoliberalism as it prioritises product over process. Similarly, external evaluation is not a superior form of impact assessment, so it is time to deploy a different lens because the Impact assessment industry with its over-reliance on quantitative criteria needs to be challenged because it does not assess what people believe matters to them. Inspired by philosophers such as Toulmin, (1990, p. 24) who call for:

a reintegration of humanity with nature, a restoration of respect for Eros and the emotions, for effective transnational institutions, a relaxation of the traditional antagonism of classes, races and gender, an acceptance of pluralism in the sciences, and a final renunciation of philosophical foundationalism and the Quest for Certainty.

At one AVCT Board meeting a trustee suggested that the reality of our situation is one of relentless delivery and continuous resilience, but they sensed that we were losing influence and impact in the community because of the extraneous factors impacting upon our work. Another agreed declaring:

Extract from AVCT board deliberations 7th September 2024

“It often feels like Groundhog Day as you constantly try to share a narrative regarding what and why we do things to so many different professionals and authorities. Not many of them understand the format and usually move on to other roles never to be seen again. The only constant in society seems to be

community groups such as ours delivering meaningful and influential activities that improve peoples' lives".

This extract reflects how our organisation appreciates the value of working relationally with people, yet other sectors do not. It is a similar case with teaching. Freire (1998, p. 48) urged practitioners not to focus upon the mechanical and technical components of pedagogy, but to seek, 'comprehension of the value of sentiments, emotions, and desires...and sensibility, affectivity and intuition'. In a similar argument other scholars prioritise working relationally within communities:

The term we use is 'communal being-ness', the action of being in common. It is this which shows us the centrality of inter-relationality for understanding the actions and processes of community. (Studdert and Walkerdine, 2016b, p. xii).

Neoliberalism has fostered a reductionist culture, privileging technical service delivery and managerialism over relational and human-centred approaches. While these systems claim to enhance quality and equity, my research challenges their adequacy, revealing that they often overlook the deeper values and lived experiences that communities hold dear. Across the country, people are demonstrating their capacity to navigate around these dominant structures, revealing the limitations of imposed frameworks and the potential of grassroots agency.

Studdert and Walkerdine (2016b) offer a compelling alternative by reimagining community not as a static object tied to geography or shared interests, but as a dynamic, relational process, an ongoing creation of the communal through everyday practices. Their concept of communal being-ness, the act of being in common, foregrounds inter-relationality as central to understanding community life I support and extend this view by showing, through both research and practice, how community-based organisations like AVCT embody this paradigm in real-world settings. My contribution lies in operationalising their theoretical framework. While they call for a shift in public policy toward relationality and sociality, my work demonstrates how such principles can be enacted within existing structures, even in the absence of legislative reform. By facilitating self-directed, participatory processes, AVCT empowers individuals and communities to define their own problems and co-create solutions-an approach that aligns with Marmot's (2010) emphasis on locally driven change.

In doing so, I add to Studdert and Walkerdine's work by evidencing how communal beingness can be cultivated through intentional practice, not just theorised. My findings show that relational paradigms are not only viable but necessary for meaningful transformation. This supports De Certeau's (1984) notion that while national strategies may be imposed, communities retain the power to develop their own tactics, reclaiming autonomy and resisting the consumptive obsession of neoliberalism.

Ultimately, my work contributes to a growing body of knowledge that challenges reductionist models and affirms the transformative potential of relational, participatory community development. It bridges theory and practice, offering a lived example of how Studdert and Walkerdine's vision can be realised on the ground.

My influence upon AVCT's practice exemplifies and actively contributes to Studdert and Walkerdine's (2016b) theory of sociality by placing relational work and values-driven engagement at the heart of its approach. Working relationally is not only a central part of a professional repertoire, it is also deeply rooted in a commitment to love, compassion, and respect for fellow human beings. This ethos drives AVCT's everyday interactions and underpins its impact on the communities we serve. 'The starting point is relationality, so relationality is the driving force, not a person, a place, or a thing' (Studdert and Walkerdine, 2016a, p. 163)

An extract describing an anti-poverty intervention team operating from a repurposed retail space resonated powerfully with my own experience. Studdert and Walkerdine's observed that informal, unscripted conversations among volunteers often do more to foster community cohesion than formal, agenda-driven programmes. This captured the essence of what I witnessed and helped facilitate through AVCT. Our work, grounded in relational practices rather than bureaucratic targets, has consistently demonstrated that meaningful change emerges from authentic human connection.

By prioritising sociality, understood as the everyday relational processes that build trust, belonging, and mutual support AVCT embodies the kind of community development that Studdert and Walkerdine advocate. We do not treat community as a static object or a site for intervention, but as a living, evolving network of relationships. In this way, I have contributed to the theoretical development of sociality by showing how it can be

operationalised in practice, offering a counter-narrative to dominant models of service delivery. Our values-led approach affirms that relational encounters, those moments of kindness, listening, and shared presence are not peripheral but central to community well-being. Through this lens, AVCT's work stands as a lived example of Studdert and Walkerdine's (2016b) claim that sociality itself is a powerful force for transformation, often more effective than formal programmes designed to nurture improved lived experiences.

7.5 Participative reality

Usher (1996, p. 13) suggests that most researchers possess a tacit understanding of adopting a research methodology that is aligned to their world view; 'methods are embedded in commitments to a particular version of the world (an ontology) and ways of knowing that world (an epistemology)'. I had come to appreciate that probably the only change which could effectively transform communities, is one in which self-directed, active participation takes place and where we can all be 'movers and shapers' in our participatory universe (Wheeler 1994; Heron 1996).

Following on from the first action research cycle, I ensured that participatory practice became a key focus by working relationally with community members to acquire new knowledge and alternative approaches to current practice. It has been demonstrated that participation per se, is a transformative process in the pursuit of community development. Thus, the key purpose of community development is, 'collective action for facilitating social change principled on social justice and a sustainable world' (Ledwith and Springett, 2010, p. 14). The process of deciding upon the most appropriate research approach, led me to a greater insight and understanding of my ontological and epistemological foundations. I found myself questioning the traditional Newtonian views that have dominated most peoples' perception of the world at a deeper level. A participatory ontology and the theory of quantum physics have come to challenge the traditional Newtonian perspective of the separateness of social phenomena and argue that we inhabit a participatory universe in which everything is connected and exists in a context (Wheeler, 1994; Rovelli, 2021). Much evidence supporting the concept of a participatory world view emanates from the theoretical physicist, John Wheeler (1994, p. 126)

Useful as it is under everyday circumstances to say that the world exists “out there” independent of us, that view can no longer be upheld. There is a strange sense in which this is a “participatory universe”.

Objects and substances in the natural world exist only in relation to other objects. This growing awareness that everything in the universe is quantum, leads one to thinking that and there is nothing special about scientific laboratories containing measuring apparatus. ‘There are not quantum phenomena only in laboratories, and non- quantum phenomena elsewhere: all phenomena are quantum phenomena’ (Rovelli, 2021, p. 119).

Heron (1996, p. 11) deepened my ontological thinking when he maintained that:

reality is always subjective-objective: our own constructs clothe a felt participation in what is present. So reality is constantly being co-created by one’s internal mind and the surrounding external cosmos.

He maintains that there is a distinct fifth inquiry paradigm, which he terms participative reality. ‘This holds that there is a given cosmos in which the mind creatively participates, and which it can only know in terms of its constructs, whether affective, imaginal, conceptual or practical’ (Heron, 1996, p. 10). Increasingly it can be seen that there is ‘a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging in this historical moment’ (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p. 4).

It is clear that the nature of research has undergone a transformation since the second half of the twentieth century and it is evident that there is no single truth as positivists have maintained; researchers cannot remain outside of inquiries proclaiming independence and objectivity. ‘We have to cross out that old word “observer” and replace it by the new word “participator”’. Over time, I came to see how participatory ontology underpinned this thesis by building upon the foundations and principles advanced by Heron, 1996; Ledwith, 2016; 2020; 2022; Reason and Bradbury, 2001. This relatively new paradigm aligns with my belief that in a sense there is a wider concept of reality that should be explored. More emphatically, it can be suggested that:

The conclusion is revolutionary. It leaps beyond the idea that the world is made up of a substance that has attributes and forces us to think about everything in terms of relations’ (Rovelli, 2021, p.120).

7.6 Action and axiology

Arendt's (1958) theory of action epitomises another salient finding namely, the capacity we all have to start something new and take collective action in the public sphere on an issue that is important to us. Refreshingly, she offers no advice regarding how a group of people should or could act on an issue of common concern, fearing that this would disempower their actions. At its core she bases her concept of action on two conditions of humanity namely, natality and plurality. Natality is seen as an individual's capacity for original thought and their potential to bring something new into the world. The second premise plurality asserts that all humans are distinct and equal, Studdert and Walkerdine (2016 b) draw upon her conceptual framework which emphasises linkages and the belief that action endows the world with meaning. Describing Arendt's work as 'a project dedicated to the notion of the primacy of inter-relationality' (Studdert and Walkerdine, 2016 b, p. 32). She identifies the value of spaces and processes when collaborating on areas of common concern. During this research inquiry I have come to recognise that AVCT's community hubs are in Arendt's (1958) terms 'spaces of appearances' where being-ness in common is routinely created and sustained. The following log records a visit to one of the charity's community libraries.

10th May 2024. Extract from a recorded conversation with a librarian.

AVCT hosted two researchers from Cambridge University investigating the impact of Government cuts on Local Authorities and third sector organisations. They invited the librarians on duty at the Breck Road base to outline their roles and main areas of work. One replied:

"Librarians, that is secondary I would say because most of the time we are computer technicians because we help so many people to use them in one way and another. The main role we have is sign posters for lots of different things. It could be for the local M.P or Merseyside domestic violence, you don't know what's coming through the door next. We are social workers, personal shoppers, especially for vulnerable people. We have an elderly gentleman who comes in who has definitely fell through the system, he can't even push a

shop door open but he manages to get here and we do a bit of shopping for him and then do an on-line delivery for him as well so it gets delivered each week.

We've also had Eddie and Margie in this morning as well, Alma has met them before, both very vulnerable, elderly people who have completely fell through the system. What would you say Tom, they were institutionalised for many years then somebody said it would be a great idea to put them out in the community so they both ended up homeless for years then found and supported each other. They ended up in separate hostels but they seem to find each other every morning, no phone, or nothing but just sit over there for hours keeping warm and we always make sure that we have a gab to them and make sure they have a drink and a bite to eat...they are lovely".

This response from a member of staff clearly demonstrates how working relationally forms a large part of her professional repertoire; however, it also reflects how the value of love and compassion for fellow human beings drives practice. The extract also resonates with an account of an anti-poverty intervention team situated in former retail premises on a street front that features in a research project. Studdert and Walkerdine (2016b, p. 62) discuss the work of volunteers and the numerous unscripted chats and declare:

...as an aside, we would claim that this sociality, on its own, does more to create and sustain community cohesion, than many of the agenda-driven programmes, ostensibly, the official task of the centre.

The power of this quotation for me at the time of reading was immense, it resonated with my belief that AVCT was having a more prominent impact on people's lives than many formal initiatives because of the propensity to work relationally with people and support improvement from values-driven motivation. At an AVCT board meeting on 23rd October 2021 the company's image and reputation were raised as an issue, as some trustees felt that we needed to promote ourselves more effectively. Numerous suggestions were proposed such as: organising an exhibition or an open day to highlight our work, form a social media committee to harness these vehicles more effectively, improve branding, devise and publish concise impact report with infographics, sound bites and short films to enhance the web site. One member disagreed with the suggested form of action, saying

that we would end up being another impersonal corporate body. This same trustee has helped the Board make informed decisions on several occasions by urging us to “stay on the right side of history” and not compromise principles. It was their belief that some quarters have a negative perception of the organisation probably because we are viewed as being ‘left leaning’ and challenging. This trustee persuaded the meeting not to commit additional resources to marketing, urging us to remain and to continue as a values-based organisation prioritising improving the community’s lived experiences. Whilst the primacy of relationships underpins these research findings there is also an axiological consideration to note, this relates to love and genuine care for mankind. Authentic, congruent relationships can only be fostered if one has unequivocal love and commitment to all individuals and the belief in equality and social justice:

Learning that action is an ‘inside-out job’ too. We need to pay constant attention to what we are doing and the impact it is making in the world, to ask if our time and efforts are worthwhile, how our theories of change are being challenged, and whether we think we stand a chance of creating the change we say we want to see. These evaluative questions and judgments, questions about axiology – of what is worthwhile – cannot be outsourced (Sharp, 2023, p. 24).

7.7 Shaping a preferred future

With hindsight, I now appreciate the ineffectuality of attempting to develop a transferable model which could be applied to improve the lived experiences of people in disadvantaged circumstances. This objective was considered before the commencement of my first action research cycle but was dismissed when I recognised that formulaic frameworks cannot be applied across disparate community contexts. Although no distinct model has been articulated, that does not mean that change is not being advocated. I am suggesting the adoption of a particular approach to improving outcomes. There are clear implications for those contributing to enhancing the lived experiences of others. Before embarking on any initiative, they must be able to recognise what is important to people. My findings highlight affective dimensions above material and tangible realities. The overriding assertion is that community-led change is possible, whilst the process may appear to be glacial in pace, it can still be impactful. I recall facilitating several leadership programmes and encouraging participants to focus upon small aspects of practice that could be ‘tweaked to transform’. This inquiry demonstrates the effectiveness of discovering a ‘sweet spot’ in the form of

affective relationships which, when accentuated, can lead to big change. ‘Infinitesimally small changes at the start lead to bigger changes later’ (Sarder and Abrams, 2009, p.26). The value of relationship working is under-researched, so we need to re-imagine community development practices amidst the neoliberal orthodoxy. Warren and Mapp (2011, p. 139) suggest that ‘The whole idea of community organizing is really about relationship building’. In a similar guise Wheatley (2009) urges communities to cease discussing what is wrong in society and instead explore with others what you can do to change conditions.

7.7.1 Implications for community development

This research builds upon and contributes to the work of Monbiot and Hutchinson (2024), who challenge the notion that competition is humanity’s default state. Their assertion that most people are driven by social values such as altruism, empathy, family, and community resonates strongly with the ethos and practice of AVCT. They suggest that we can still recover the best attributes relating to humanity; ‘Where there is atomization we can build a thriving civic life with a rich participatory culture’ (2024, p. 142).

My findings affirm that connectedness and belonging are not peripheral ideals but central to human motivation and well-being. AVCT’s commitment to fostering positive relationships across all aspects of its provision demonstrates how these values can be embedded in practice, offering a lived example of what Monbiot and Hutchinson term ‘the politics of belonging.’

By creating spaces where relationality is prioritised, AVCT actively contributes to the recovery of humanity’s best attributes. This research shows that when communities are empowered to engage in rich participatory cultures, they begin to reclaim agency and resist the atomisation imposed by neoliberal structures. Monbiot’s emphasis on local-level transformation is reflected in AVCT’s grassroots approach, which emerged as a direct response to frustration with top-down, hegemonic systems.

My contribution lies in evidencing how the shift toward relational, values-driven practice can be operationalised within community organisations. AVCT’s work exemplifies how the politics of belonging can move beyond theory and become a tangible force for community development. In doing so, this research not only supports Monbiot and Hutchinson’s

analysis but extends it by demonstrating how localised, relational action can challenge dominant paradigms and restore collective power to communities.

7.7.2 A call for further research into relationship epistemology

Previously, I have outlined how an IPPR report (2010) had credited AVCT for securing improved community outcomes. At that juncture, colleagues within the setting anticipated government interest being generated because of the status of this research body. Pickard, (2024) once described the IPPR as ‘one of the most powerful policy factories in Westminster’ because so many former executive directors go on to join Downing Street Policy units. Political study visits have taken place, and trustees have given presentations to government departments, but no policy changes have materialised; therefore, it falls on similar organisations to work collaboratively and demonstrate what can be achieved.

On 7th September 2024, following a period of reflection to consider future plans and direction setting, the trustees resolved to develop partnerships with similar community-based organisations as a means of devising a local strategy for joined up provision. Up until this juncture AVCT had focused upon seeking partnerships with the Local Authority and Government-funded organisations, but the overwhelming barriers being encountered left us little choice but to seek bottom-up initiatives. There was an overwhelming feeling of confidence and competence in this approach which accentuated connectedness and positive relationships. I noted that similar action and plans are taking place in various groups across the country, so a momentum is building. This can only be explained by the belief that relationship working is in the ascendancy. Neoliberal orthodoxy implies that any reliance upon others is a sign of weakness. This study suggests the exact opposite. In the month of October 2024, I accessed several radio pieces that featured examples of grass root organisations working relationally with community members to address their needs. The theme of relationship working and communities supporting society was captured by Sir Philip Rutnam (Chair of the National Churches Trust) who claimed that they save the NHS an estimated £8.4 billion per year by helping people to develop their own groups to provide food banks, youth provision, drug and alcohol support and mental health counselling. It was suggested that the country’s problems could not be turned around by relying upon the classic solutions of hospitals and GP surgeries but instead we should be looking at engaging civil society (Crawley, 2024).

A similar plea was made for recognition of the work of charities that work in the community to prevent women from re-offending and receiving custodial sentences. By addressing the underlying causes of crime, these organisations secure more positive outcomes than the current criminal justice system. Shabana Mahmood (Secretary of State for Justice, 2024) acknowledges that things need to change to prevent so many women receiving a prison sentence as a form of punishment. Alas she has yet to publish an alternative strategy. The head of the Women in Prisons charity (Lily Blundell) declared, “we know that women are better off working with us than in an inappropriate placement in prison, but funding is the key issue”. The efficacy of community-based initiatives was also supported by Dame Ann Hours (Chief Inspector of Prisons until 2010 and Chair of the independent monitoring Board until 2023). She presented the example of a 65% reduction in youth offending brought about as a result of diverting youth justice resources away from prisons and into the community. Instead of over 2,000 young people in prison there is now 440, “so we know that focusing resources on prevention and working with the issues in the community these kinds of initiatives can work” (Barnett, 2024).

Such examples mirror AVCT’s work with its emphasis on positive regard for all people and prioritising connectedness, relationality and self-directed change. Our organisation is not working in a vacuum because similar processes are being played out across the land. In this way we could be collaboratively, ‘weaving a tapestry that won’t unravel’ (Warren and Mapp, 2011, p. 134). We have the power to make a difference because:

Human existence is, in fact, a radical and profound tension between good and evil, between dignity and indignity, between decency and indecency, between beauty and ugliness of the world (Freire, 1998, p.53).

Appadurai (2004) has highlighted the contradiction of the world being increasingly connected yet disconnected as evidenced by the growing problem of loneliness. This is a consequence of neoliberalism which marginalises connectedness and relationships by accentuating competition in pursuit of increased economic opportunities. More qualitative research needs to be conducted to fill the gaps in knowledge regarding the impact of neoliberalism on relationship working.

7.8 A counter narrative: Changing the story

This thesis has captured evidence pertaining to positive and negative perceptions of contemporary society. AVCT as an organisation has never considered capitulating to the pressures of neoliberal conditions, because we maintain that community-led change is possible. There is still a firm belief that we can be shapers of society and secure positive outcomes by applying humanistic, relational, being-ness. As Slaughter (2004, p. 2) reminds us:

What is possible is not independent of what we believe to be possible. The possibility of such developments in the practical world depends upon them being grasped imaginatively by the people who make the practical world work.

It is my belief that AVCT has responded creatively to secure positive outcomes within the community; by upholding social justice as a core value, we have worked in a relational and participative manner. Such an approach secures more meaningful outcomes for community members. My next course of action will be to develop a plan to disseminate these research findings as a means of supporting the desired change. This represents third person research and wider-scale engagement with similar organisations seeking ways to bring about social change.

As my research draws to a close, its findings now serve as a foundation for future action-action that places relationships and human connectedness at the centre of community development. In education, the familiar adage 'what gets measured gets done' reminds us of the performative pressures that dominate contemporary society. Yet, in advocating for relational and participatory approaches, I argue that what truly matters must also be made visible and valued. As Milosz, (cited in Heaney 2004), poignantly states 'What is pronounced strengthens itself. What is not pronounced tends to nonexistence.' This insight compels community-based organisations to assert the significance of working relationally, lest such transformative practices be marginalised or lost.

A counter-narrative to neoliberalism exists, one rooted in connection, dignity, and collective agency and it must be shared widely. While challenges persist, particularly under neoliberal constraints, this research affirms that when people come together to shape their own futures, progress is not only possible but deeply meaningful. 'It's a testing ground in every

essence. We have learned that change is possible. It can be small scale and slow, and yet also meaningful and significant '(Sharp, 2023, p. 26).

Freire (1998) reminds us that radical hope is essential, a belief in what can be collectively imagined and achieved. In a similar vein my doctoral journey echoes Darder's (2014, p. 26) belief that faith in oneself and others needs to be actioned 'through our consistent love, commitment and labor'. By embracing relationality as both a philosophy and a practice, I offer this work as a contribution to a more just and compassionate future, one where human connection is not a peripheral concern, but a central force for transformation.

'If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all' (Shakespeare, 1609).

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Appendix 1: Ethics approval



Alma Mason
School of Education

29 March 2017

Dear Alma,

I am pleased to inform you that your project "Enhancing well-being in disadvantaged communities" has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee for Education, Humanities, Religion and Philosophy and Language and Linguistics.

The approval code is 170329_Mason_159108880_ED.

You may now proceed with the project.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "C. Hall".

Prof Christopher J Hall, Chair

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Figure 11 Letter from York St John confirming that ethical approval was granted for the thesis.

Appendix 2: Community solutions project evaluation.

(Report submitted to National Lottery funders in 2023, the content was developed by AVCT's community team. The researcher has redacted the photographs and replaced individual names with pseudonyms.)

Summary

This is an evaluation report for the 'Community Solutions' Reaching Communities project. It was approved in 2017 and is due to be completed by April 2023. The evaluation reviews the delivery and the impact of the project and records the changes to the project and local need as a result of the Covid pandemic and the Cost of Living Crisis.

The Community Solutions project was devised following extensive consultation with local communities. They identified key outcomes to be addressed and the following aspects and activities were proposed to address individual and community well-being:

Outcome 1. Community Leadership (20 to 40 community groups are better able to meet residents' needs as a result of improved skills, capacity and sustainability through AVCT's training and support)

- 2 x 10 week leadership courses per year led by Community Champions to train community leaders/activists/volunteers.
- Networking: a programme of six weekly community engagement meetings in our three community hubs across the area targeting local community organisations and key stakeholders.
- Mentoring service: advice and guidance, and practical support for community and residents groups. This includes, community surgeries, bespoke training, administrative support, signposting, fundraising.
- Supporting four thematic forums (Health, Environment, Education and Poverty), facilitating meetings, co-ordinating community responses and strategy to each theme.
- Annual community conference to develop strategy and planning across our target areas, led by AVCT, with community organisations and stakeholders

Outcome 2. Social Isolation (250 to 500 residents are less socially isolated as a result of engaging in peer support, community networks and social events.

- Training and peer group support for carers, particularly in mental health. This included mental health awareness, mental health first aid.
- Developing peer to peer support groups for bereavement and mental health.
- Development of weekly luncheon clubs, elderly support, visiting groups, shopping support. Delivered in a combination of AVCT and supported groups, and targeting sheltered housing schemes and those identified by the community champions.

Outcome 3. Community Education (200 to 400 residents participate in community- based learning and 100 progress into further education, training and employment)

- Regular weekly programme of community adult learning to engage local residents in learning, and include: book club,, knit and natter, DIY, reading with children, fluid art, yukalaylee classes, helping with homework, podcasting.
- ‘Steps to Excellence’. A 10-15 week course that targets people who have personal barriers that they need to overcome .This includes building self-esteem and confidence and is based on positive psychology and Neuro Linguistic Programming.
- Establish an employment hub in each library to support residents looking for employment opportunities., Liaise with locally- based employers, DWP and city Council Liverpool In Work team to provide bespoke professional development and training.

Outcome 4. Community mental health and well-being activities (Up to 1000 residents report improved health and wellbeing from their participation in physical, social and community activities).

- Planned programme of community walks developing the parks and open spaces in the area, designed and led by residents and supported by the community champions.
- Well-being Wednesdays to engage people in healthy activities. AVCT used their three community hubs with sessions available every week that include; holisitc therapies, Tai Chi, Yoga, healthy eating
- Community drama club recruiting residents of all ages to write, produce and showcase performances on the main themes that affect the local area.
- An annual programme of community events in each of our target areas that include: dine and debate nights, summer fairs, community makers markets.

AVCT developed its role as the anchor organisation in the Alt Valley area of Northeast Liverpool, working with and supporting local organisations through training, external relationships and co-ordination. This project developed a planned, coordinated and effective programme of community solutions to community problems between AVCT, community groups and stakeholder activity, improving community relationships, addressing social isolation, open ambition and aspirations to create thriving sustainable communities. AVCT helped to enhance the skills and capacity of residents to prepare them for education, training and employment and to make an effective contribution to the life of their community, and the people in it.

The project addressed the uneven spread of services and facilities, filling gaps in provision by working with local groups i.e. extending elderly activities from ‘old’ Croxteth into Norris Green new estate and Knotty Ash, targeting sheltered schemes that no longer have wardens organising social activities. AVCT provided learning and community activities in Sparrow Hall, particularly for the elderly and young adults, because Action for Achievement closed. AVCT co-ordinated a volunteer engagement programme including training and supervision, to support families experiencing difficulties. Youth work was already provided and AVCT

offered additional training, administrative support and volunteer recruitment to support those organisations' sustainability. Additional capacity was secured to jointly organise large community events (summer fairs, bonfire and Christmas events). AVCT provided administrative and marketing support to community consortia approach to youth and community activities.

Project Rationale

ISSUES: Community Support: Many local community organisations have closed (e.g. Action for Achievement in Sparrow Hall) or face closure (Ellergreen after School) due to loss of income/grant/capacity. There is a need to improve our neighbourhoods through building the skills, capacity and sustainability of local groups.

Isolation: Day centres closed, pensioner's luncheon clubs/social activities and home care support reduced, increasing the isolation of many people, impacting on health/independent living.

Many children with SEND and their families experience isolation, with inadequate activities for children to mix socially, creating family tension/breakdown and behavioural problems in school. Parents need information/training, and more support for local groups (Autism in Motion).

Adult learning: 30+% adults have no qualifications, poor self-confidence and are not work ready. Job centres have closed, with the loss of employability course/IT access. Residents expressed their desire to participate in return to learn courses within their own community to progress into education/employment.

Health and well-being: mental and physical health is amongst the worst in the city, particularly the high incidence of cardiac disease, cancer, COPD. Participation in sport is amongst the lowest in Liverpool. There is a need to develop well-being activities using AVCT's community locations and community links to improve emotional and physical health.

Delivery

Year 1 and 2

The first two years delivered to the profile of the project application:

- Community events that break the isolation of local residents.
- Delivering activities that help improve the physical and mental health of local residents, particularly housebound elderly and families with children who have SEND related conditions.
- Supporting local organisations with training and networking
- Providing community based learning to help individuals progress to training or employment.

In this period the project delivered more outcomes than were targeted in the application as follows:

Outcome 1	20-40 community groups have greater skills and capability to meet local needs and be sustainable through our training and support.	60 organisations supported through training and networking.
Outcome 2	250-500 residents' evidence that they feel less isolated as a result of engaging in peer support, community networks and social events.	4560 engaged in local events and evidenced less isolation.
Outcome 3	200-400 residents participate in community learning activities and 100 progress into further education, training and employment.	999 residents completed courses to develop their key and basic skills, through 25 different programmes Of the people supported: • 70% had not engaged in learning previously • 22.01% had no qualifications • 18+% were 50+ • 40% were out of work or in receipt of in-work benefits or under threat of unemployment The outcomes of the delivery were: 95% or 949 of learners completed the learning 82% or 819 progressed into further learning, Volunteering or employment.
Outcome 4	Up to 1000 people evidence an improved sense of well-being from participation in community activities and access to peer support.	276 families evidence improvement through participation in active sports and leisure events plus a further 57 participating in programmes such as alternative therapies (holistic and massage). Participants reported an increase in their physical and mental wellbeing which is recorded in their personal files. Verbal feedback at events confirmed that events enhanced well-being through improved social interaction.

Years 3 and 4

The impact of the pandemic, the lock downs, the issues following lockdown and the cost-of-living crisis have all changed the focus and intent of your work. AVCT had to move away from in person support and community meetings and activities and AVCT used our staff to reassess the needs of the local community and prepare a response. The change to the project has broken down into the following 3 areas of activity:

1. **THE PANDEMIC RESPONSE**

The pandemic and the lock downs began in year 3 of the project and has had an influence on it into year 4. As a result, AVCT could not deliver the face-to-face work that it had planned and had done in years 1 and 2. For example the training support and progression dried up, as did most of the community events, particularly those focused on relieving residents of self-isolation and improving physical and mental health based on the use of the community hubs and sports centres. This has changed again due to the pressures on households from the increase in inflation mainly through energy costs, shopping and real terms reduction in wages and income.

Over this period, it became clear that there were other needs in the community that required attention, to help people through the impact of the pandemic that broke down into 3 areas:

- Increased demand for free/reduced priced food and shopping support
- This has led to an increased need for affordable healthy food
- Increasing numbers of young people and adults that are suffering poor mental health, as a result of a long period of enforced isolation, followed by increasing household debt and the pressures created for the sustainability of community organisations.

As a result, our activity moved away from those planned to deliver:

- AVCT became the coordinating organisation for emergency food and other responses for the local community. It was identified by Liverpool Council of Voluntary Services as a 'Locally Trusted Organisation' to receive city allocated funding to maintain community support. This included the Food Pantries, community organisations offering food support, local foodbanks and advice agencies.
- Established a Food Hub with a base in the local De La Salle school gym, where Fair Share and other donated food, and purchased food was stored and bagged up into family packages.
- Recruiting volunteers to deliver food parcels and to prepare the food packages in the food hub.
- Other volunteers and workers from Cobalt Housing Association maintained weekly contact with elderly people over the phone, to provide social contact and to address issues that they had.

- AVCT collected the names and needs of residents that were supported by the Food Hub organisations and made referrals to advice agencies for any additional support they might need.
- AVCT worked with its partner agency, Neighbourhood Services Company, to deliver fresh vegetables and meat that were produced on the Larkins Farm and Home Farm that NSC runs. This was an online home delivery service.
- AVCT used local businesses to provide other fruit, vegetables, meat, prepared food and other items, to sustain their business during the pandemic.

Over the lockdown period of the pandemic, AVCT co-ordinated the support for more than **2855 adults and children** from more than **800** households.

2. EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Coming out of the pandemic, AVCT also switched our resources to support young people 16 to 25 years old into employment. This is a group that was disproportionately affected by unemployment. The Resolution Foundation report 'Uneven Steps', which established that Covid has hit young people 16-24 in particular harder than any other age group. 57% of those losing employment as a result of Covid is in this age group. The intensive support and advocacy they require is not available in the area. AVCT established a pilot Youth Hub that has worked with 101 participants, providing intensive 1-1 support to address the range of social, employability and health that they are experiencing so that they can ready for further training or for work

The package of support includes:

- Basic skills and Personal Needs assessment including using the Kudos Diagnostic with a review of previous qualifications and work experience, and an assessment of all barriers to further learning and employment including additional needs, confidence, mental health, financial issues
- The results of the assessment are written into a Personal Development Plan that includes a package of support through the Employment Hub that will address their barriers and opens them up to employment and training opportunities. AVCT will do this through:
 - Each learner will be allocated a mentor, who will provide 1-2-1 support including:
 - Weekly meetings (virtual and face-to-face)
 - Interview and CV preparation
 - Job search and preparation for specific opportunities

3. COST OF LIVING CRISIS

Since the middle of 2021, the cost of living crisis has added financial hardship to local residents, particularly older people with increasing demand for free and affordable food, and community events where they can go to relieve the pressures of heating their own homes.

From the refocusing on hardship and cost of living, AVCT has trained community members to be peer researchers. In conjunction with Toynbee Hall, London AVCT has researched community views on 'Access to cash' for example, where the aim has been to develop solutions for the LINK scheme that runs the UK's ATM network, to protect free access to cash for low-income and vulnerable communities.

This extensive research and face to face interview experience has upskilled community focused personnel to capture insightful feedback from community members. This will be further developed in the future to inform our strategic response to the 4 thematic forums as face to face interviews provide greater depth and meaningful insight so they complement our survey data.

Partnerships

Through this period, as local community organisations have struggled with their own income and sustainability, AVCT has stepped in to:

1. Coordinate community responses to food need and mental health issues
2. Provided volunteers to support their own community activities
3. Provided financial and administrative support
4. Opening our centres for partners to run their activities.

The VNC

During this period AVCT were approached by the Vauxhall Neighbourhood Council that was facing closure as a result of the dramatic reduction in income to the centre and the increase in utility costs. Since 2019, AVCT has taken over the financial management of the organisation, the reorganisation of activities and used our funds to support two core members of staff. The buildings were run down and in need of refurbishment.

Through this support the VNC has stabilised financially, AVCT has secured £800,000 to develop the facilities for a Food Pantry and youth provision, and to bring the building into a condition that it could provide support for local people.

The Vauxhall Neighbourhood Council is one of the longest established community anchor organisations in the city. It was originally an umbrella organisation for 40 community organisations to provide a range of education, community development and other support for one of the poorest areas in Liverpool. The centre has always been a focal point in the local community, and the main hub for community functions, training residents in the community to go onto further learning or employment. It has provided youth activities in the evenings and in the school holidays. The Centre has been the base for housing, welfare benefits and debt advice for local residents, social centre and it has produced the community newspaper, the Scottie Press.

Although it was a central part of the community, there is no much activity there at the moment apart from a Food Pantry and an elderly people's project pilot. Natural Breaks and Vauxhall Law Centre are still based in the centre.

It is located in Kirkdale ward in north Liverpool in what was a thriving large community centre that includes 2,814m² in 4 large buildings and an open space that was used as a bowling green.

In the past year AVCT has worked with the VNC to set up:

- Food pantry with 250 members
- Plan youth provision in an area where youth centres have closed
- Pilot work with older people to get them out of the house

The project was planned to move from grant support from the Big Lottery to sustainability through income generated by the use of our centres in the neighbourhood by local residents. This did not materialise due to the impact of Covid and the Cost Of Living Crisis on AVCT.

Increased demand from residents for:

- Crisis and affordable food and provisions
- A space for young people to meet safely
- Community activities for older people to break their isolation and to provide warm hubs

Finance

As a result of the Coronavirus lockdown, AVCT has lost **£429,506** in income, due to a fall in direct debit payments and entrance fees to the sports centres, lack of education recruitment/provision and a loss of grant income. These losses have been mitigated up until the end of July through savings from building closures, the use of the JTS, small business grants and other small grants. AVCT has also had to use its free reserves to cover costs.

The Lottery bid was structured to taper grant revenue support over 5 years from £100,895 and £66,000, as our financial plans forecast that additional income from the use of our centres will replace grant, as AVCT becomes sustainable.

Grant amount requested from Big Lottery Fund						
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Total
Revenue	£100,895	£97,000	£85,000	£76,000	£66,000	£424,895
Capital	£2,000	£2,000	£2,000	£2,000	£2,000	£10,000
Overheads	£10,000	£10,000	£10,000	£9,000	£8,000	£47,000
Total	£112,895	£109,000	£97,000	£87,000	£76,000	£481,895

Lessons Learned.

1. Needs of residents in our community can change rapidly and AVCT needs to be prepared to respond to these needs, as AVCT has done in response to the impact of the Covid and Cost of Living crises.
2. AVCT needs to be able to support local community organisations that are real risk of closure, using its expertise, resources and facilities.

3. Engagement and feedback from residents has been essential to understand and respond to their needs and AVCT has developed a community research team that is responsible for monitoring and reviewing community needs, and assessing them against our delivery.
4. There is a need for AVCT to conduct further consultation with local residents to develop areas of work to respond to the evolving needs of the community for food, shopping support, provision for young people and the growing problem of independent living and isolation of older people. This breaks down into the following 3 areas of work:
 - a. Food Pantry provision
 - b. Young people's provision
 - c. Older people's provision

The Community Solutions funding has enabled AVCT to fund the staffing and resources necessary to respond flexibly to address new challenges and conditions created by the pandemic and the cost of living crisis.

Examples of Activities

Example 1

Course	Croxteth		Knotty Ash		Yew Tree	
STLS			15		8	
FA Coaching		12	36	9	14	9
Therapies	14		32		11	
IT			14		1	
Beauty	9		8		3	
Crafts		13	9		6	
Driving Theory	18	18	33	6	15	5
Art Therapy			8			
Baking	2	8	2	1	5	
Make Up (Instagram)			26		23	
Massage	12				2	
Basic Maths + English			4		6	
Facepainting	10					
Floristry			7		2	
Health and Motivation	9		17		3	
Lifeskills	4		4		4	
JFY	17	14	15	5	7	4
Playleader			7			
CSCS	2		6		5	
ESOL			6		1	
Business Start Up	12		6		5	
Hairdressing	7		1		4	
BSL	9		22		29	
Sports Active			36		8	
Term Total	125	65	314	21	162	18

Example 2

Creative Baking	9		
Driving Theory	30	29	
Just for You (Wellbeing)	14		
Multicultural Arts and Crafts	13		10
Football Coaching/Workshop	30	57	
CSCS		9	
All Women Can (Wellbeing)			10
Classic Bakes and Novel Cakes			9
Community Theatre			10

Creative Cake Decorating			6
Employability Skills			25
Holiday Spanish		5	5
In This Together (Wellbeing)		66	47
Introduction to Community Teaching			11
Total Learners	96	166	133

Example 3

PROJECT	OVERVIEW	MOVING FORWARD	BENEFICIARIES	OUTCOME
EVENTS	SUPPORTING COMMUNITITES	EVALUATE AND CREATE ACTIVITIES	COMMUNITIES / ORGANSATIONS	
D.KNIBB WOODLAND HOSPICE EVENT	FAMILY FUN DAY / EVENING EVENT TO RAISE MONEY FOR WOODLANDS HOSPICE BRING THE COMMUNITIES TOGETHER TO RAISE MONEY	CAN WE DO THINGS LIKE THIS FOR OTHER LOCAL CHARITIES AND RAISE MONEY TO HELP MAKE THEM MORE FINANCIALLY STABLE?	500	
FAMILY FUN DAY FOR SCOTT	RAISING AWARENESS OF MENIGITUS TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY IN A FAMILY FUN DAY	MORE LOCAL EVENTS SURROUNDING LOCAL ISSUES IMPACTING ON THE COMMUNITY	1000	
MENS HEALTH EVENT	TESTICULAR CANCER AWARENESS	MORE HEALTH AWARENESS EVENTS OVER THE COURSE OF THE YEAR	50	
OLSS EVENT	SUPORTING LOCAL SCHOOL TO HOST EVENT AND DOCUMENTING IN WITHIN ALT VALLEY VOICE	SUPPORT LOCAL SCHOOLS	362	
SPONSORED SPIN CROXTETH SPORTS CENTRE	SUPPORT BOXING CLUB	HELP TO RAISE AWARENESS OF LOCAL BOXING CLUB AND GET OTHER GOVERNING BODIES TO HELP WITH FUNDING	35	

ALT PARK FUN DAY	FAMILY FUN DAY FOR ALL THE COMMUNITY BRINGING THEM TOGETHER	MAKING SURE THIS ANNUAL EVENT CONTIUNES	300	
CROXTETH PRIMARY SCHOOL	PREVENT BECOMING ACADEMY STATUS	SUPPORT THE CROXTETH PRIMARY PARENTS GROUP	SUPPPORTING A PTA GROUP	
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MEETINGS	PARTNERSHIP LINKING UP		GROUPS AND ORGANISATIONS 60	
JUST 4U		HAVING THE SESSION BECOME SUSTANIABLE	100 INDIVIDUALS	
HINDU FESTIVAL	WORKING WITH BENGALI ORGANISATION	LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND THE HINDU COMMUUNITY ACROSS THE COUNTRY AND FURTHER A FIELD	2000+	
ADULT EDUCATION	PROVIDING EDUCATIONAL COURSES AND ENCOURAGE PEOPLE BACK INTO EDUCATION.	CREATE MORE COURSES TO UP SKILL THE COMMUNTY		

Snapshots illustrating impact of activities and intervention.

Donna was struggling with her weight and had low confidence and self-esteem. She was recommended by her friend to join Walton Lifestyles where she joined the walking club and gradually progressed onto more intense forms of exercise such as the Couch to 5K programme and classes at our centres such as Boxing Circuit, Spinning and Metafit.

With this regular exercise alongside adopting a healthier diet and lifestyle more generally Debbie lost an incredible six and a half stone and now feels healthy, fit and much happier and more confident. Earlier in the year she completed the Liverpool Rock 'n' Roll Half Marathon within 2 hours and 53 minutes and she still regularly attends the sports centre.

John attended a cancer awareness event and approached a Community Champion for support. He was concerned that he might have bowel cancer as he was showing symptoms and had lost 3 stone. He thought his doctor was not taking his concerns seriously. He said that he was distressed and

didn't have any friends or any family living local to support him. The Community Champion accompanied John to see a Bowel Cancer specialist nurse at the event who confirmed John's symptoms were that of bowel cancer and advised he visit his GP immediately. John was reluctant to visit the doctor on his own and asked for support.

John was supported to visit his GP and was encouraged to ask for an assessment. Within a two week period he had been taken into hospital and found to not have Bowel Cancer had received a correct diagnosis and treatment.

The impact on John's life has been massive and gives great credit to the support of our Community Champion. He stated that he can finally begin to enjoy life again as he has the correct diagnosis and treatment.

Martin is a young person who had recently left school and was unsure about his future. The Community Champions had set up free weekly football sessions in Scargreen Park for young people in an attempt to try and tackle anti-social behaviour in the area. He attended the sessions but appeared to be struggling and in need of guidance and support, he stated that after leaving school he felt there was nothing for him to do.

One of the football coaches signposted Martin to a sports apprenticeship where he gained a level 3 qualification and gained hands on experience working in Croxteth Lifestyles. With this experience he was able to get a job at Tesco supermarket and has since become a manager in the local Tesco though still comes back to help out in the sports centre when needed. Martin states: 'I loved working in the sports centre. It helped me with my confidence and most importantly gave me working experience that has helped me to get full time employment.'

Sue moved to Croxteth with her two children and didn't know anyone at all in the area and didn't have a network of family or friends. She was not working through ill health and for about two months she did nothing every day except for get her shopping. Her son's Connexions worker referred her to the Communiversity and one of the Community Champions who encouraged her to get involved.

Sue was encouraged to see a play at Croxteth Library by a Community Champion, where she was introduced to two other people who she began socialising with. She started attending the weekly book club at the library and an aromatherapy course at the Skills Centre.

She stated: 'I joined the book club and within a couple of weeks of going I had a group of friends around me, we started going to the theatre so we were having nights out, friends became really close where we help each other out. I started the aromatherapy course and I made more friends there. The course was brilliant, lots of good tips to do with my own health condition'.

In addition, through meeting new friends she began going to the gym at Croxteth Sports Centre one day per week and joined a walking club and now feels much healthier and happier. Furthermore, Sue enrolled on AVCT's business start-up workshops.

Abbie is a single mother who before starting to go to the Communiversity was quite low in confidence and didn't have an active social life. After developing a relationship with a Community Champion she was encouraged to take part in adult learning courses. She has since taken part in

classes including, journalism, creative writing, sculpture and drama. She joined AVCT's adult drama group Love Acting, which write original scripts, and performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

She stated of the experience: 'I had the opportunity to perform at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival which was an experience that I will never ever forget and would never have been possible if it wasn't for AVCT and the confidence and the way it has allowed me to grow my own skills.'

With Abbie's confidence notably improved she completing her PTTLs course gaining a level 3 qualification and becoming a community tutor delivering courses herself. She now has an active social life and feels she is a better role model for her daughter.

'I've met lots of brilliant people which I would never have met. My social life is a lot better. I feel if I'm invited out somewhere I'm more likely to accept and go out and have fun. It's also had an effect on the type of mother I am, whilst before I was quite pessimistic now I'm quite optimistic, and it's rubbing off on my daughter. It's great for her to see me succeed and reach my personal goals as I am and hopefully it's going to inspire her as she gets older and as she's going through school to go for what she wants and what she believes in.'

Autism in Motion is a Community Interest Company with three founding co-directors. The company has been established with one clear objective: To support and enhance the lives of families and children on the Autism Spectrum. The founders are all parents with autistic children and they were all too aware of the challenges that exist in accessing support and information in addition to the provision of activities to stimulate development and social interaction.

They are passionate about ensuring that other parents in a similar position and also carers can enhance their children's lives through accessing the right educational support through working with parents who fully understand through their own personal experiences.

They decided it was important to set up an organisation in Liverpool to facilitate support, networking, activities and events to raise awareness of autism however they were unsure how to go about it. Following a conversation with their local councillor in Norris Green they met with a Business Advisor from Alt Valley Community Trust.

Following the initial meeting, the three partners were enrolled onto the programme attending workshops in addition to the one to one support from their Business Advisor. Given the community and social values, it was agreed that the business would be established as a Community Interest Company which offers a flexible approach to managing a social enterprise. Alt Valley assisted through the application process and 'Autism in Motion Liverpool CIC' was incorporated.

They are delighted with the support they have received from Alt Valley Community Trust which has helped them access grant funding through the National Lottery's 'Unlimited' fund in addition to other sources. The company took free office space at the Communiversity for three months until they found a more suitable space and continue to grow through enhanced activities for children, presentations and events for parents and carers.

They are now regular attendees at community engagement events and attend the Education Forum organised by AVCT and attending by local service providers and community groups. They have also received training for themselves and their volunteers from AVCT such as First Aid and are working with AVCT to develop further training.

On World Autism Day - the directors organised an event in Norris Green Park which was a huge success with 500 people in attendance. The aim was to raise awareness of autism through providing information and partnering with other organisations to enhance health and wellbeing. There was also entertainment, craft and gift stalls and it was very well attended exceeding all expectations. The group were supported by Community Champions through advice and support volunteering on the day. 'AVCT are good mentors, they send you in the right direction. They give you amazing advice on what to do next. It's a community hub, everyone congregates there. The Communiversity, as far as I'm concerned is the centre of it. You go in and it doesn't seem to matter what time of day it is, there's always someone in that café that you know. There's always someone around if you need help.'

Jenny says 'I can't believe how far we've come already, when we first met our AVCT Business adviser we were just a couple of mums with a vague idea of what we wanted to do but no clue about how to do it. With the guidance and support we have received from him and the rest of the team we are now a viable business. We have new families coming to us weekly and we love seeing the impact the support and activities have on them, it's just wonderful.'

Mentmore Green is a green space, owned by Cobalt Housing located near the perimeter of Norris Green and was originally a Crown Green Bowling ground and a children's play area with swings. The Community Champions were approached by a small group of tenants/residents from the surrounding area who wanted to start play activities.

The Champion met with the group and explained how they could set up a TRA and that they would need to be a constituted group to apply for funding, it was agreed that this was the way forward, but would need support from the Champions as the group had no experience of running a group. The Champions delivered a basic Committee Skills workshop and arranged for 3 members of the group to attend a 2 day course in Trafford Hall (funded by Cobalt Housing). The group met again after the training, a Chair, Treasurer and Secretary were selected and the group agreed on the name BRATs (Bowley Resident and Tenants)

The first action that the group took was to organise a community meeting on the Bowley, one of the main issues raised was that the green space was used as a dog walking place and that the children couldn't play there due to the dog fouling. It was agreed that the greenspace needed a clear identity of its own.

A meeting was then arranged with Ward Councillors, Cobalt Housing and Council Officers to discuss having a sign erected, dog bins and regular activities. A competition was planned for local children to design the sign and the winner was duly erected at the main entrance to the 'Bowley' (see picture 2

The group worked together and organised the following:

- Coach Trip to Crocky Trails
- Fundraising table sale on the Bowley
- Fund raising bag pack Iceland Store
- Fun day on the Bowley
- Halloween party in the Broadway Club

- Christmas lantern parade to Croxteth Country Park Grotto

Due to key members moving house, the group are no longer active, although new tenants/residents have come forward to restart activities for over the summer period.

Ryan was diagnosed with ADHD at school and put in special learning classes which led him to not enjoy school and becoming disruptive. He had left school at 16 and had no background or experience of Child Care. He was enrolled on a Children & Young Peoples Workforce Study Programme at AVCT which involves a vocational qualification in Childcare and whilst also improved his Maths, English and Employability skills whilst being placed in AVCT's nursery 'Diddy Day Care' to gain practical experience.

Ryan states: 'After I got my GCSEs I tried to move to one college but they didn't want me, so I tried to go to another, they didn't want me either. I spoke with a woman from Connexions who referred me to AVCT where I had an interview. I got into the college and ever since then my life's been great.'

Groups have an average of 6 to 8 learners so he was able to get frequent individual support and monitoring as well as an individual learning plan. He was able to develop practical skills and knowledge to work in a child care setting within a simulated environment before gradually moving him into a child care setting for gradually increasing periods of time. Ryan progressed through the Study programme and then went on to complete his Level 2 Children & Young Peoples Workforce Apprenticeship.

'They've helped me with so many things: my confidence, my learning and I've learned so many different things. My course is going great – I'm loving working! I love the kids and in the future I hope to be fully qualified and own my own nursey.'

Mandy is a twenty one year old from Norris Green. She left school at eighteen and completed a Level 2 Children & Young Peoples Workforce Apprenticeship with Alt Valley Community Trust. She began working at NSC's Diddy Day Care nursery and other nurseries across the city. Molly stopped enjoying her work and left her job. After this, she did not work for months and was 'stuck in a rut' as she described it.

Mandy's mother was concerned and a friend advised her to speak to a Community Champion who they knew due to their visibility working in the community. The Community Champion referred Mandy to the ILM (Intermediate Labour Market) programme whose workers were based in the Communiversity. There she met a project worker and told them about the jobs that she was interested in. The ILM project worker referred her to a role at AVCT which fit her requirements. AVCT had recently taken over running Ellergreen Community Centre and needed a receptionist and Mandy was enthusiastic about the opportunity to change career paths. She started working full-time in a fully paid 6 month placement and really enjoyed the job and made an excellent impression. After her placement she was kept on full-time and continues to be a key member of the team at Ellergreen. Mandy states: 'I am very thankful for the support and opportunities AVCT have given me. They helped straight after school and then when I was in a difficult place they gave me an amazing opportunity which helped me get to where I am now. I love working in Ellergreen and engaging with the community every day.'

A Kurdish Syrian living with his family and working in Liverpool approached Alt Valley Community Trust about setting up a social business to improve the wellbeing of his Syrian Community. He was

introduced to the Business Advisors at Alt Valley Community Trust in Croxteth and signed onto the Enterprise Hub business start-up support programme. He comments:

‘There are around 150-200 Kurdish Syrian families in the Liverpool City Region. We are setting out to enhance the physical and mental health of those from Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East granted refugee status and their dependents so as to advance their abilities to adapt and thrive in their new communities.’

After attending an initial start-up workshop, he then proceeded to develop his business plan as well as understand the different types of business structure and the obligations of holding a directorship. Alongside two other directors he formed a Kurdish Community CIC to deliver a range of activities to raise awareness of Kurdish Syrian society and culture and thereby promote cultural understanding and cohesion in local communities. He adds:

‘Without the support of the Alt Valley Enterprise Hub team we would not have been able to get as far as we have. The level of detailed information and mentoring that they have provided is amazing – from Kayleigh on the administration side to Alan who has helped us set the CIC up correctly from the beginning’

One of AVCT’s librarians asked the community champions to support one of their members with a housing concern. The elderly lady was living in one bedroom of a 3 bedroom property which was unmanageable for her. She couldn't afford to heat and light the property hence the reason she lived in one room. The lady had tried for some months to speak to the housing officer about relocating to a property that more suited her needs. Unfortunately nobody was getting back to her and the lady was becoming more anxious about her housing situation. With her permission we managed to contact the relevant person on her behalf and a meeting was arranged between her and the housing officer. Within a few weeks she had been moved into a property that was a lot more manageable for her. The lady was extremely thankful for our support and stated she believed she would have still been in her old property if it was not for the intervention of our staff.

Learner A is in his mid-fifties and has poor mental and physical health and wellbeing. He wanted to learn basic IT but worried about committing to signing on to an IT course, he was referred to a local men’s community group to help reduce his isolation and was signposted to drop in IT sessions at the Communiversity. He attended regularly at the sessions and was interested in enrolling on a Basic Counselling course. He enrolled on the course and apart from one session when he was in hospital, he completed the course. He aims to progress to a L2 certificate in Counselling, his tutor confirmed that he has the ability and understanding for this but he needs support with his functional skills, this is ongoing through the drop in sessions. He is still attending the men’s group, but is worrying about the increasing cost of living and fuel costs so he has been referred to Benefit Maximisation to ensure he is receiving correct benefits, and has been signposted to a local Food Pantry to help with shopping costs, and informed debt advice and of fuel support if he needs it. This learner has the ability to improve his employment opportunities, and is being supported in taking small steps towards this by a cohesive blend of partnership working.

Alan, one of our learners from a couple of years ago contacted us to let us know that he is running in the Liverpool Spring 10k race in Sefton Park on Sunday. He completed a cake decorating course via Zoom in March 2021 while he was on Furlough from his work. He joined the course to help keep his

mental wellbeing in check and to improve his baking and cooking skills. In the 12 months since completing the course Alan has moved into his own flat and has been utilising the healthy eating tips he received from the course, and took up running to improve his physical and mental wellbeing. He is running this first race for himself, but plans on continuing to run and raise money for local charities.

Alan was also one of our regular volunteers during our food delivery service which ran until May 21. Due to his experience in running busy bars he would come in at least 3 days per week to monitor stock levels, help with ordering and pack up our weekly food parcels. Even after returning to work he negotiated his shifts in order to still be able to help out with the food hub.

Julie is a middle aged single Mother who presented herself at a 'drop in' IT session at the Communiversity. Staff perceived from the outset that she was extremely nervous and required significant social and emotional support to retain her engagement. The IT classes proved challenging given her poor technical skills but more influential was her low self-esteem and lack of confidence. A Community Champion developed a relationship with Jennifer and persuaded her to join the Friday Reading group in the Library.

Julie thrived in the Reading group as the facilitating Librarian designed bespoke sessions to develop self confidence amongst all members. Literature and plays were studied and themes discussed which provided common understanding of the human condition. The group bonded and shared personal issues for discussion and Julie disclosed that she had been suffering from depression for several years and that the group sessions were providing positive reinforcement for her target focused new 'can do' mind-set.

In time she began to join the AVCT Community theatre visit activities and this again reduced her feeling of social isolation as she began to describe fellow group members as 'friends'.

Recently Julie was persuaded to join a weekly Walking group and she participates with her 12 year old daughter ostensibly to support her weight management goals and states that this has also increased her confidence as she is now interacting with a wider group of community members. The two year journey has led to positive outcomes for Julie as she regularly accesses our range of services and now has a goal of securing paid employment. To develop 'work ready' skills she now volunteers in Croxteth Library and is building up her CV for future use.

A member of AVCT Board of Directors interviewed Julie to assess the contribution that the organisation makes to individual and community Well Being. The striking result was that whilst she voiced appreciation of the development of technical skills such as reading, fitness, CV writing and IT, it was the increased understanding of soft skills that she focused upon. She identified warmth, respect, time and understanding as the main factors that had encouraged her continued engagement. She articulated her sense of being understood by the staff and secure in the knowledge that nobody would judge her. The overriding benefit was her increased confidence and this had created a firm foundation for future social interaction and paid employment.

Project Spend

The Community Solutions project spent expenditure to planned profile as follows:

Revenue costs	Planned Total Spend	Big Lottery Funding	Funding from other sources	Actual Spend
Salaries, NI and Pensions	£428,025	£340,825	£87,200	£428,025
Recruitment	£1,500	£1,500		£1,500
General running expenses	£15,612	£12,612	£3,000	£15,612
Training	£10,000	£6,000	£4,000	£10,000
Travel	£2,500	£500	£2,000	£2,500
Sessional Workers	£31,855	£25,484	£6,371	£31,855
Consultancy and advice (including evaluation)	£17,000	£13,000	£4,000	£17,000
Activity costs	£25,000	£23,000	£2,000	£25,000
Marketing and publicity	£5,000	£4,000	£1,000	£5,000
Total	£536,492	£426,921	£109,571	£536,492
Overheads				
Staff	£36,428	£31,428	£5,000	£36,428
Accommodation	£10,408	£8,408	£2,000	£10,408
Utilities	£7,806	£6,806	£1,000	£7,806
Total overheads	£54,642	£46,642	£8,000	£54,642
Capital costs				
Play and activity equipment	£20,000	£10,000	£10,000	£20,000
Total capital costs	£20,000	£10,000	£10,000	£20,000
Total project costs	£611,134	£483,563	£127,571	£611,134

Conclusions and Recommendations

AVCT has delivered the forecast outcomes for the Community Solutions funding and has had a wider impact on supporting organisations that were at risk of closure, for example the VNC. AVCT delivered health and social activities that have had the impact on improving the health and well-being of local residents. The support to develop employability skills of young people has been successful in supporting progression into mainstream learning and into employment. AVCT worked with a number of partners to deliver large community events, including the Santa sleigh, community fireworks display and summer carnivals that has increased the sense of community and supported local housebound residents to get out of the house and mix socially.

Although AVCT has met its planned outcomes, even though the change of focus, the change in circumstances has meant that AVCT has not been able to reach the income sustainable position it anticipated when the project application was submitted.

The project was moving towards sustainability through the increase in members of the sports centres and other income related to our community activities. However the pandemic reduced this, and AVCT subsequently reorganised its services and facilities to ensure the sustainability of the organisation, and to respond to the new needs of the local community, as a result of Covid and the cost of living crisis.

The Community Solutions project provided the funding for staffing and resources that were necessary to respond to the needs of the community as a result of the pandemic and then the cost of living crisis. The pandemic and cost of living crisis has seen the closure and reduction in youth services and provision in the community, and an increase in isolation and health issues as a result of the cost of living crisis, and the evidenced increase in fuel and food poverty in the community. This has led AVCT to change the focus of its work to provide youth provision, food pantries and to work with older people. AVCT has been successful in securing £3.2m in capital funding from the Youth Investment Fund to develop the facilities in our centres in north Liverpool. As a new development for AVCT there is a need to secure a minimum of two years financial support to embed the services and allow the time to build the sustainability of the project in the community.

It is unusual for organisations to secure additional funding from the Big Lottery Fund, given previous successful BLF projects. However, the pandemic has been a unique event that cut across the sustainability plans that AVCT anticipated when the Community Solutions application was submitted, and to meet the emerging needs in the community. As a result our recommendation is to explore 2 years additional funding from the BLF to develop the new services and allow time to build in sustainability.

Appendix 3: Timeline illustrating the development of AVCT

Alt Valley Community Trust (AVCT)

1982-83: A school occupation.

Local people campaign to retain Croxteth Comprehensive School which had been earmarked for closure in 1981. An action committee 'occupied' the school and provided education for students until the City Council reversed their original decision and the school re-opened in 1985. This symbolises the genesis of AVCT.

1983-86: Community development.

The leaders of the school occupation continued to develop strategies to improve conditions within the Croxteth community. They set up G Force (funded by the Government's Manpower Services Commission) to employ local residents who provided home visits and other services for vulnerable, elderly and housebound members of the community.

AVCT Development stages.

Phase 1	1987-2000	Establishment and early days as a charity
Phase 2	2000-2010	Development of community and youth initiatives
Phase 3	2010-2016	Rapid expansion of services
Phase 4	2016-2024	Maturation and new direction setting.

Phase 1: Establishment and early days as a charity

1987 Croxteth Community Trust founded.

Members of the Croxteth School Action committee established Croxteth Community Trust as a charity to address employment, education, health and social issues in the community.

1999 The Communiversity.

Croxteth Community Trust acquires and develops our first community building using a cocktail of funding; £350,000 European Regional Development Fund and £200,000 Adventure Capital Fund which included a £100,000 loan. This was the country's first social capital investment loan to be awarded.

1999- 2003 AVCT Environmental Task Force New Deal Contract.

Liverpool City Council and The Department for Work and Pensions funded six-month paid work placements with accredited training to support unemployed people into employment. Croxteth Community Trust worked in partnership with Calthorpe's Builders and

Neighbourhood Services Company. This project saw over 450 people supported (18-24 age group) with 78% progression rate into education, employment or training.

Phase 2: Development of community and youth initiatives

2000 Launch of Community Engagement Strategy.

Croxteth Community Trust develops a team of Community Champions in response to increasing crime and anti-social behaviour. Regular community engagement meetings held in which important local issues are discussed by community members and statutory agencies. Practicable solutions developed in a collaborative culture.

2001 Name change.

Company name changed from Croxteth Community Trust to Alt Valley Community Trust to reflect our broader geographical scope.

2001 Establishment of the Neighbourhood Services Company (NSC).

A trading company is created to support unemployed residents by training them to provide environmental services. Today, NSC's remit includes two children's nurseries, catering provision, two farms, building maintenance services, district shopping parades and an adult care hub. In addition, there are Kickstart, Youth Hub and access to work delivery contracts.

2002 Vocational Skills Centre opens.

Based on the former site of the decommissioned St Swithin's Church, the Vocational Skills Centre opened. This provided a range of community-based educational provision. This landmark building was saved from demolition and provided community-based educational provision for young people. AVCT purchased and refurbished the centre through a £2.5 million loan. The centre began by providing vocational training opportunities to 14–16-year-olds and the country's first Level 3 Teaching Assistant course funded by the European Social Fund (ESF)

2004 AVCT creates a Community Health Ambassadors Team (CHATS)

Community-based health initiatives were developed by our CHATS team with funding from the Primary Care Trust (PCT). This pilot initiative was then rolled out across the country

2006-2009 Preparation for Work and Training project

ESF funded Vocational training programme working with local secondary schools. Key Stage 4 students were offered a bespoke package offering study of a vocational qualification with AVCT for two days per week and mainstream school provision for the remainder. Full time Level 3 vocational programmes offered to 16-19 cohort.

540+ x 14-19 year olds progressed with an achievement rate of 75%.

Phase 3: Rapid expansion of services

2009-2012. Liverpool Neighbourhood Regeneration (LNRPG) project with Liverpool City Council (funded by ESF)

Vocational training placements for over 300 14–19-year-olds across a range of subject areas. 72% achievement rate.

2010 Adult Learning Service contract (ongoing)

Liverpool City Council contract to provide short, non-accredited community learning courses in Croxteth, Dovecot and Vauxhall districts of Liverpool.

2010 The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR)

AVCT is identified as a key factor influencing improvement in the Northeast of Liverpool.

This Social Enterprise (AVCT) was credited by many as a key reason for improvement in Croxteth. This is partly for its education, training and employment programmes, but also for the Leadership it provides within the community, challenging other service providers to use their resources for maximum local benefit (IPPR, Rebalancing Local Economies, IPPR North, 2010, p.64).

2010-2016 Austerity measures and asset transfer

The financial crisis of 2008 led to a prolonged period of austerity during which time AVCT became responsible for managing the following former Local Authority services.

- Community Centres at Ellergreen and Dovecot Multi Activity Centre (2010)
- Libraries in Croxteth (2012), Dovecot (2015) and Everton (2016),
- Sports Centres in Croxteth (2010) and Walton (2013)

2012-2016 Making Business Work

AVCT and NSC were the lead accountable body for this £4.3 million ERDF project. It provided business support to existing businesses working in partnership with delivery partners across the Liverpool City Region including Inclusive Access, Blue Orchid, Liverpool Chamber of Commerce and Wirral Biz.

The consortium supported 681 businesses.

2012-2018 Creation and management of the Alt Valley Business Network

AVCT supported local businesses to network, identify new business leads and develop best practice. This network had 200 members.

2014-2017 Resilient Communities

National Lottery's Community Fund supports activities to improve community well-being.

2014-2017 Erasmus + Project: 'Education for Equity'

AVCT partners with Uppsala University and Bildungswerk in Kreuzberg (BWK) in Berlin to develop innovative practice to reduce rising numbers of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) in Europe. AVCT hosted an International Conference to disseminate interim findings in November 2016.

2015-2016 Enterprise Hub New Business Start-Up project.

ERDF funded AVCT as a delivery partner for new businesses with 107 enterprises assisted.

Phase 4 Maturation and new direction setting.

2016-2018 BIM 4 Education

The Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) fund an innovative programme to encourage more young people to pursue professional careers in the Built Environment sector. AVCT and NSC manage the project in conjunction with the company Class of Your Own.

2016 Power to Change national conference

AVCT is invited to present our case study to demonstrate positive impact at 'Power to Change' community business conference.

2017-2023 Reaching Communities project

In depth consultation informs 'Developing Community solutions to Community problems' project which ensured that local people drive initiatives to improve lived experiences. Funded by The National Lottery.

2017 Ashoka organisation recognises AVCT as a 'change maker'

AVCT invited to participate in the Ashoka systems change accelerator programme.

2018 AVCT becomes the management agent for Vauxhall Neighbourhood Council (VNC).

Governance and strategic planning support provided to ensure that the Vauxhall community do not lose an essential resource.

2020-2021 Public Health crisis (Covid pandemic)

During lock down periods AVCT retained community-based provision to support the most vulnerable members of our community. Elderly warm hubs were created alongside food pantries and intervention for socially isolated residents.

2021. Communiversity is re-developed into an education and community hub.

AVCT awarded £470,000 by the Liverpool City Region to address skills shortages.

Apprenticeships: since 2004 over 300 apprentices have been supported by AVCT and NSC. In addition, the traineeship and accredited adult learner loan programmes have contributed to progression into employment and further training.

2021 Youth Hub created at Ellergreen community base

18–24-year-olds supported into training and employment. Funded by Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)

2022 Combined Authority Community Renewal Fund

Innovation in Communities project in partnership with Local Community Voluntary Services (LCVS) delivering an innovative digital podcast course to local unemployed people.

2022-2023 QS World Merit literacy project

AVCT's youth hub leads on an initiative with a youth council in Niger to develop films and training activities which improve basic literacy skills in rural communities.

2022-23 Access to Cash research

Toynbee Hall (London) invites AVCT to participate in community-based research to inform policy makers about the impact of cashless transactions and limited access to ATMs within disadvantaged communities.

2023 Youth Initiative fund.

AVCT becomes the first successful recipient of a £3.2 million grant to provide engagement activities for young people. Activities include music, drama, podcasting, recording studios, dance, performance and sport. Bespoke provision developed at The Communiversity, Adult Care base, Dovecot, Ellergreen and VNC community hubs.

2024 Million hours fund.

National Lottery grant (£96,000) to develop creative activities with young people