

## **Spaces and relations in critical education research: lessons from community research-in-action**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper considers notions of spaces and relations in research design for critical education researchers, based on Freirean principles of empowerment education. Three reflective ‘narratives of praxis’ from community-based research are explored. The first narrative takes a community arts approach to research and is situated in an urban regeneration programme with community workers. The second narrative is situated in the intersection of education and research-in-action and is situated in outdoor learning ‘farmer field schools’ with teachers and pupils. The third narrative explores the idea of co-production and is situated in a dialogue between researchers, working together yet occupying different spaces, who are engaged in a commentary of the impacts of austerity policies. Using excerpts and reflections from research journals such interpretations are useful to identify and seek the interstices, the cracks, in which critical education researchers operate. This paper seeks to ask, ‘In seeking research spaces for change, what lessons can be drawn from community research-in-action for critical education researchers?’ In response, the paper explores the centrality of research relations, as priority focus in the idea of engaging in research to know and act in the world.*

**Keywords:** *Freire, empowerment education, critical education research*

## **Introduction**

This research paper offers a framework of questions exploring research relations for critical education researchers to consider, derived from reflections on research-in-action. The paper explores three reflective ‘narratives of praxis’ informed by Freirean empowerment education approaches to research practice (Freire, 1990). The first narrative takes a community arts approach to research and is situated in an urban regeneration programme with community workers. The second narrative is situated in the intersection of education and research in action and is situated in outdoor learning ‘farmer field schools’ with teachers and pupils. The third narrative takes a co-production approach and is situated as a dialogue between researchers, working together yet occupying different spaces, who are engaged in a commentary of the impacts of austerity policies. By reflecting on practice, in order to situate the present, and to look forward, the paper explores the question, ‘In seeking research spaces for change, what lessons can be drawn from community research for critical education researchers?’ Application of Freirean principles of empowerment education to reflexive ‘narratives of praxis’ illustrate spaces and relations in research design to inform critical education researchers. In response to the main research question the paper explores the centrality of research relations, as a priority focus in the idea of engaging in research to know and act in the world (Freire, 1990).

As the global crisis of capitalism deepens, social justice responses are sought from egalitarian researchers and educators seeking spaces to engage and act. It could be argued that community work approaches to education, and research, have been curtailed as a voice for social justice and equality, both in and outside academia (Hill, 2012; Lynch, 1999). This can partly be explained by the constrained spaces for critical education research created by neoliberalism, the impacts of globalisation on education, and market based approaches to

education that reduce learning to the transactional (Edwards and Usher, 2008; Harvey, 2002; Mayo, 1999). It could also be that critical community-based research practices have been subsumed under the hegemonic global guise of community participation, learner experience, skills acquisition and narrowly defined community inclusion outcomes (Edwards and Usher, 2008; Craig, 2007). Participation in research is not enough without a wider critical analysis of context, and inquiry is not enough without consideration of egalitarian learning and praxis in research practice (Ledwith, 2020; Baker et al., 2004).

In critical community research, creating alternative spaces for people to come together and critically reflect on issues that affect them is central. Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator working with marginalised group spoke about the importance of empowerment education in community work processes that enable people experiencing poverty to analyse the wider contexts of their lives, and to use that knowledge to bring about positive change (Ledwith and Springett, 2010; Heron and Reason, 2001). Working directly with communities Freire ‘taught’ and enabled analysis through creative approaches, such as theatre, arts and adult literacy, to promote a political literacy, drawn from people’s own lived experiences, that could create a pedagogy of hope (Bourn, 2014; Freire, 1994). Education is therefore not neutral nor value-free but an act of personal-political inquiry (Carpenter and Mojab, 2011; Heron and Reason, 2001; Freire, 1990). Empowerment education is relevant to critical educators engaged in research as it is a form of critical inquiry grounded in community and collective interests (Heron and Reason, 2001; Mayo, 1999; Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988; Freire, 1990; Freire, 1994). A reading of Freire’s methodological approaches can be to consider three interconnected elements within problem-posing empowering educational processes, which will be of relevance here in the discussion of ‘narratives of praxis’, namely listening, dialogue and action. The first of these is listening and making space to really

‘hear’ each other. This enables communities to surface and identify key issues that impact on them. Purposeful and open listening leads to a second element, that of dialogue and discussion. Using creative approaches such as drawings, poems, enactments, concerns identified are codified into representations or codes, of the matters under scrutiny. These provocations prompt and allow for deeper dialogues that problematise conditions and contexts surrounding these concerns to identify inequalities, mechanisms of exclusion and oppression, and what needs to change. The third element considers research-in-action as critique leading to possible actions for change and challenge to wider socio-economic, cultural and political structures that impact negatively on people’s lives. While change may be incremental or structural, the development of alternatives of what should be, is part of empowerment education (Ledwith, 2020; Carpenter and Mojab, 2011; Ledwith and Springett, 2010; Burns, 2007). The role of the critical education researcher here is to facilitate discussions around multiple factors and influences on community issues; a role that requires an understanding of multiple knowledges and a consciousness of power in research.

### **Power and knowledge(s)**

Political power in society influences three areas of action; the ability to make or influence decisions, the ability to set agendas or prevent decisions; and the ability to manipulate what others’ want or think (Haywood, 1994). Political power seeks to organise conformity to elicit stability, widespread acceptance, and public support. Positivist research, as a dominant knowledge paradigm, is used selectively by the powerful to legitimise the authority of political power by using research ‘truths’ to confirm the ideological ‘rightness’ of social and political elites (Oliver, 1992). A detached research approach pre-supposes research can operate within a value-free research context and disregards how

knowledge and power relations are intertwined and intersectional (Johnson, 2023; Clarke & McCall, 2014; Carpenter & Mojab, 2011; Harding, 1986).

Connell (1993) argues that power is generally socially organised and legitimised by society. Legitimising power as an authoritative force of the powerful *over* others, operates through silent justification of dominant classes and groups in society, including through the academy, political and policy domains. For those not in power, or dominated by the powerful, access to knowledge, the academy and research requires strategies for collective action and unity to challenge the power of elite groups. Even though power includes the choice to challenge and resist, for an individual or group to have power, this must also be sanctioned by society, as in Connell's view, all members of society are subject to power functions of control and rule (Connell, 1993).

Access to and use of knowledge has important implications for how society is organised and changed, therefore, to contribute knowledge(s) that challenge inequalities, it is crucial to explore mechanisms for emancipatory knowledge generation (hooks, 1994). Feminist research approaches to enhancing knowledge and views of the world includes recognition of the subject as both 'experiencer' and 'knower' (Smith, 1995). Harding (1986) asserts that knowledge is dynamically constructed and re-constructed within social contexts, and she argues, is situated in time and place (Harding, 1986). For post-modernists, knowledge is fragmented into multiple truths, defined by multiple perspectives, ontologies and epistemologies, and knowledge and research can be used to raise critical awareness of the multiple and overlapping contexts of inequalities in societies. Carpenter & Mojab (2011) taking a Marxist-feminist perspective, connect theory and epistemology into a theory of the social, examining the extent everyday experiences are connected, illuminated or obscured, rather than fragmented and isolated. Knowledge(s) become dynamic

narratives of reality in relational, intersectional and multiple social interactions, rather than an expression of a single, static truth (Clarke & McCall, 2014).

In globalised capitalist societies, dominant research paradigms and neoliberalism combine to influence sites of knowledge production, and to limit co-production of knowledge(s) thereby preventing a substantial shift in power relations that might enable a widespread, critical reflection on power, knowledge and society (Oliver, 1992). Habermas (1998) further criticises the relativism of post-modernism as a block to the potential for critique and challenge. While it is impossible to be completely free of bias and relative perspectives, it is possible to be critical, while openly acknowledging research biases. Habermas (1998) talks of the concept of participation as communicative action, where society requires both formal and alternative spaces, in the public sphere for people to debate concerns, ideas and politics. However, without critical perspectives on the nature of public debate, there can be no participation or action in society, and thus no change, leading to hegemonic sites and processes of knowledge generation (Fraser, 2008; Habermas, 1998).

Baker (2003) asserts the case for equality is the case for social justice. Since inequality of condition is- structural, he argues that the re-structuring of social relations can only be achieved by re-structuring social institutions, including the basis for relations between social groups, civil society, places of learning and the state (Baker, 2003; Chambers, 1994). Initiatives addressing social inclusion and regeneration through engaging communities in social analysis, is further problematised by John (2008) who notes that social inclusion policies are in effect about 'inclusion' in a still grossly unequal society and have nothing to do with egalitarianism. Without challenge to entrenched structural inequalities, such as unequal outcomes in education, health and welfare, and unwillingness of those with advantage to re-distribute resources it is inevitable that disadvantage, exclusion and inequalities remain. So, while some institutional

and policy frameworks for participation may appear to be about equality of access and participation, they fall short of enabling equality of success and condition (Baker, 2003).

Education, across formal, non-formal and informal spaces for learning, has multiple roles here in working for equality by enabling people to articulate knowledge(s) and to recognise power-over and inequalities through individual and collective learning. (Baker et al., 2004). This occurs through social justice informed curricula, emancipatory adult learning approaches, community research and collaborative research, and gatherings of equalities focussed alliances and networks (hooks, 2003). Encompassing transformative education processes within egalitarian research agendas and through participatory research methodologies can be mechanisms for communicative action for participation in knowledge generation, public sphere debate and working for equality (Lynch, 1999; Daly, 1999). Community education and community-based research, as purposeful and transformative process are part of critical education research, both as a means to equality and as a way of expressing equality (Baker et al., 2004; Daly, 1999; Baker, 1998).

### **Narratives of praxis: empowerment education as critical community research in action**

In this research paper, Paulo Freire's theory of empowerment education, and the selected three elements of listening, dialogue and action outlined above, are applied to interrogate research processes in three 'narratives of praxis' as case studies of critical community research-in-action (Freire, 1990).

#### Aims and research questions.

The aim of this research paper is to explore the main question, 'In seeking research spaces for change, what lessons can be drawn from community research for critical education researchers?'

Research questions are:

- a) How do practices of critical community research enable Freirean empowerment education processes of listening, dialogue and action?
- b) In what ways are processes and research relations articulated as part of ways of working?
- c) How might these elements inform the design of problem posing critical education research?

### Positionality

Three case studies underpinning the ‘narratives of praxis’ are from my own journey and practice as creative-educator-researcher. While ‘I’ am present in all three cases studies as one of the researchers, the I/we as researcher boundaries are porous, reflecting the practices of creative, community and participatory research, when people research *with and together* (Daly, Anderson and O’Driscoll, 2012 & 2011). As noted later in the discussion section, the key question, ‘whose knowledge?’ is central in ethical critical research practice. The ‘I’ as researcher in this paper, is as author, taking a reflective and reflexive standpoint to examine, through an empowerment education lens, experiences of critical community research, that continue to inform my teaching and research practice, and that I hope will be valuable to other critical education researchers. The three examples of community-based research-in-action were underpinned by research ethics approvals and principles including codes of practice and research writing guidelines of the British Education Research Association Research Ethics Guidelines (British Education Research Association Research, 2000; 2018). My academic positionality is shaped by life and influenced by my own context as a community worker, community artist, engaged with others in critical education research outside of academic contexts for many years, and that these experiences and practices continues to influence my current teaching and research in university. ‘Texts’ presented in this paper are from my own



research journaling, notes and reflections in situ and over time and are my own reflexive interpretations. It is important to note, in critical education research, these thoughts are not generated in isolation, learning to listen is a key characteristic of critical education and research practice. I acknowledge the wisdoms and insights gained over time from/with/alongside other people including community workers, teachers, young people and co-researchers who also seek social justice through research-in-action in our own contexts.

Reflexive thematic analysis was applied to research journals and reflections with reference to the research questions noted above and through specific periods of re-reading and generating narratives based on texts, memory and field notes (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Okely, 2012). Three specific points of writing/reflection, and discussion of emerging ideas contributed to the formulation of the narratives presented in this paper. Firstly, a writing retreat focussed on academic non-fiction writing, led by Professor Cathy Cole, opened up the importance of story in academic writing (Cole, 2022). Secondly, a public talk about what influences my work as an academic led to an articulation of a golden thread of influence of Freirean approaches on my teaching, research and teaching of research (Daly, 2023). Thirdly, the environment of critical inquiry created by the participants at the International Conference of Critical Education reinforced the re-connect of my narratives within contemporary critical education research practice (University of Malta, 2023).

These spaces and approaches to analysis generated three thematic ‘narratives of praxis’ as recalled and interpreted reflexive accounts and are presented below as ‘community artist-community researcher’, ‘lessons *with-in* fields’ and ‘writing a commentary of the cuts.’ Praxis applied in this context means Freirean education empowerment theory realised in community research practice, with a view to critical analysis for change (Ledwith & Springett, 2010).

The following section presents three texts as reflexive ‘narratives of praxis’.

### Narrative of praxis 1: Community artist - community researcher

The first ‘narrative of praxis’ draws on critical community research and my early experiences of community-based arts practice *as* research-in-action for social justice. Situated in an urban regeneration programme I reflect as a community artist - community researcher on Freirean notions of listening and representation (codifications) in community work concerned with tackling poverty and socio-economic exclusion.

Precarious employment was commonplace. After graduating from arts school in 1984, and being an unwaged artist, I was offered a place on a ‘job creation programme’, in a role of community artist that, innovatively, was promoted by a local network of community organisations. Influenced by Paulo Freire’s ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’ (Freire, 1990) options for creativity, research and social change seemed to align with the role. The community employment programme was based in an outer city housing estate in the grip of what was known as ‘first wave’ widespread addiction alongside intergenerational poverty and long-term exclusion. Conditions were difficult for families as reported in a local newspaper on an impromptu visit by the then Secretary for the Environment:

‘[The Secretary for Environment] had seen ‘frightening’ housing problems in a part of [city] where there are more youngsters out of work than virtually anywhere in Western Europe. The area has no police station, no swimming baths, no playing fields, no libraries - and yesterday the Government decided to close the only Secondary School.’ (Echo, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1981).

The workers of the community project were not under any illusions about the contested spaces in which we worked, and the community and voluntary sector’s problematic relationship with the state. In neoliberal social policy the structural determinants of exclusion are often falsely presented as ‘accidental’ and ‘unintentional’ rather than directly and purposefully resulting from

economic ideology (Meade, 2005). Politically, I learned a great deal about social justice and community action. I was encouraged to explore creative methods to work alongside people on capturing everyday experiences of life, both positives and negatives, in and around the area. This cultivated a sense of creative community work *as* research practice, drawing on Freirean principles of learning to listen. The first element of empowerment education is listening, and to do that requires leaning in, hearing, and reflecting various viewpoints and co-creating respectful representations (Freire, 1990). Taking time and learning to listen is an open process and leads to dialogue, the second element of empowerment education, as an excerpt from my research journal at the time illustrates below.

‘My first assignment was to photograph ‘housing poverty’, a council block of maisonettes, stepping over used needles [for injections] to meet a tight knit family of five. Mum showed me the kitchen first, and as she opened the cupboard water was pouring down the back wall. We cleaned the cups and brewed up [tea]. We talked about dignity in representation and power of images, and we chose that ‘cupboard photo’ for the front of the report into the request for re-housing being put together by the projects’ community workers.’ (Daly, 1989).

While achieving small gains in housing policy and some justice for a few families, community workers continued to operate in conflicted spaces. The constant double-bind of the tendency for micro analysis versus macro analysis of poverty meant working in a context where there appeared to be state relinquishment of responsibility for resolving socio-economic exclusion (Allan 2003). Furthermore, the community and voluntary sector tended to be funded as rehabilitator of communities, potentially compromising political critique (Meade, 2005).

In trying to make sense of these tensions, I made connection between creativity, research, education, listening and voice. By learning to listen the mechanisms in which neoliberalism operated in our lives and the challenges in bringing about

change individually, in local actions, or through wider collective actions became clearer. Analysis in empowerment education is to engage in critical dialogues to enable social actions to be defined. I began to see the role of artist-researcher in working alongside people to firstly listen, discuss and generate codifications and representations from lived experiences as a contribution to problem-posing dialogues. Photographs were guided, created, and informed by the people I spoke with, who were well aware of inequalities and housing poverty. Indeed, it was my own critical consciousness of wider inequalities that was raised by them. The extent to which the process of research directly led to action, is limited, but codifications as co-created photographic artefacts of inadequate living conditions, were part of making visible social injustices, as an act in itself, and used in formal representations to local authority housing services. As I noted in the excerpt below from my journals at the time, the focus on purposeful listening and the dimensions of dialogue as analysis would become central to a way of working.

‘Here the artist-researcher connects with community development processes to co-generate knowledge and strategies for action through:

- Contextualising individual/area problems and struggles in structural/political problems.
- Enabling and acknowledging a community commentary of itself – to challenge within and without.
- Recognising the contribution of inquiry-based learning and action through facilitation of multi-textual stories and inclusion of voices usually not valued; building on peoples’ skills to work together to identify, capture and analyse data, and representations, and agreed codifications, of lived experiences.
- Working collectively and in solidarity to provide artist -research as a way of acting and improving conditions of individuals and neighbourhoods.’ (Daly, 1989).

The prevalence of neo-conservative and neo-liberal views of adult and community education and a narrowing of community education and community

development projects to individualism and (work-related) skills courses, resulted in contested spaces for those engaged in more radical and political community work (Craig, 2007). This tension was evident in my own experience of being directed onto a ‘community employment programme’. Despite challenges and potential co-option of community work, empowerment education approaches to research-in-action remains an important space for problem-posing dialogues and social justice research to take place (Ledwith, 2020).

### Narrative of praxis 2: Lessons *with-in* fields

The second ‘narrative of praxis’ draws on participatory learning and action as the basis for teaching and learning in schools and communities in Bangladesh (Daly, 1997). Situated as part of educational ‘farmer field schools’, the narrative explores research-in-action by teachers and pupils and reflects on Freirean notions of dialogue, that led to critique of pesticide use and consideration of possibilities for action and change. As educator-researcher, my role involved working with agriculturalists and aqua-culturalists to engage teachers and pupils in an extension of the critical adult education based ‘farmer field school’ model. The projects specifically promoted the use of indigenous knowledge, community monitoring of pests and predators, and farmer-led trials with the aim of reducing the use of harmful pesticides (McCrary, 1995). At the same time, in Bangladesh, Action Aid was conducting its research for the project ‘REFLECT Regenerating Freirean Learning for Empowering Community Techniques’ (Archer & Cottingham, 1996). This aligned with participatory learning-in-action approaches that are central to the ‘farmer field school’ methodology. Active learning approaches of ‘farmer field schools’ informed school-based teachers’ and pupils’ participation in outdoor learning (Daly, 1997; McCrary, 1995). The school curriculum included ‘environment’ and ‘farming techniques’ as topics, and many rural teachers and pupils are involved in household food production.

The project team collaboration brought participatory rural aqua-agricultural extension work together with active learning and children's participation in education and field work research. Central to the project was learning *from*, *with*, and *in*, the natural environment, in this case the rice paddy fields.

The rice paddy is used as 'farmer field school', and an 'outdoor classroom'. Lessons *with-in* fields offered a way of experiencing the environment through educational inquiry methods such as focused observations of nature over time and in place, data collection of pests and predator insects, role plays and sharing and discussing findings among teachers, pupils and project workers (Daly, 1997; McCrory, 1995). One of the activities in the school-based 'farmer field school' was to observe and draw the rice paddy in its entirety as an eco-system, a visual codification of theory in practice, as described below.

A rice paddy is drawn by a 10-year-old boy. He has drawn beneficial insects, wasps, lacewings and songbirds that are predators for the pests that destroy crops. The rice paddy is a household-sustaining ecosystem. Here among the rice are fish for protein, on the banks are seasonal vegetables for vitamins. In between are tall, slower growing fruit trees that are planted for each child, and when the time is right produce is sold and cash used for school funds and education. This is an Integrated Pest Management system that helps farmers resist using dangerous chemicals through their own knowledge of the ecosystem. (Daly, A. 1996, Research journal reflections on teacher and children's participation in 'farmer field school' curriculum approaches).

The educational activity of producing drawings represents codification of Integrated Pest Management, that in turn was generative of a Freirean element of critical community dialogue on the ways in which indigenous and community-based knowledge of nature and farming practice interact within ecological systems. While listening to different approaches, social and economic critique arose on the contested use of harmful commercial pesticides versus nature friendly pest management. Taking a 'farmer field school'

approach teachers and pupils further examined the impacts of pesticides on health as my research journal account below records.

Spraying pesticides goes all over the place, not only on the crops. Children conducted a survey by mapping and collecting data through walking tours in the village before, during and after pesticide spraying. Data on incidences of tummy ache, headaches and skin rashes in households that used pesticides were collected. This was presented visually as a set of three maps with infographics on pest management approaches linked to health. In the rice paddy, used as a classroom for maths, biology and agricultural science, counts were made of the numbers of beneficial insects and pest insects at certain times of the season and what environmental factors supported beneficial insects thrive. Role plays on the costs to family budgets of calling out doctors due to illness from pesticides were enacted. This research was presented to their community as part of agricultural extension week and children argued persuasively for protecting biodiversity and health.

(Daly, A. 1996, Reflections for report for NOPEST Children's Participation Initiative).

Empowerment education processes are at work here are by making visible existing and new knowledges and understandings about natural pest management processes. The teachers and pupils followed a collaborative learning loop model of five points of inquiry: 1) What do we know? 2) Design and plan inquiry and raise more questions. 3) Observe, collect, find out, what do we now think? 4) Corroborate, summarise and suggest. 5) Present and share, debate, to generate new inquiries.

This led to problem-posing dialogues raised by teachers and pupils alike about findings of their school-based research. Critique of harmful pesticides use and evidence of impacts on health was listened to and debated by family, community members and agriculture and aqua-culture extension officers. With raised consciousness of the wider contexts and implications for pesticide prevalence, family and community local action in planning sustainable livelihoods by sustaining rice paddy natural ecosystems became possible.

There is much to learn from the grass roots research of teachers and children of Bangladesh about protecting biodiversity. The controversial issue of pesticide use persists, and Integrated Pest Management as an educational and critical research-in action-approach is as relevant today not only in Bangladesh but around the world.

### Narrative of praxis 3: A commentary of the cuts

The third ‘narrative of praxis’ draws on dialogues between researchers, occupying different spaces, engaged in a writing a commentary on the impact of austerity policies. Situated in the context of homelessness and resettlement services, ‘co-researchers’, some with lived experiences of homelessness, reflect on the meanings, relations, and ways of working in ‘doing research together’ and co-producing knowledge.

The group had prior experience of research, and one was researching towards a PhD. All had knowledge of those with lived experience of homelessness. However, issues of power, position, whose knowledge counts, the role of co-researching and co-writing was a regular feature of co-negotiating research relations. Here, empowerment education elements of listening, and critical dialogue helped us establish and constantly check in with ways of working.

The notion of Freirean codifications made visible our ways of working, negotiated and written up as co-created artefacts. We considered the values of the community and voluntary sector organisation involved in the research and gained university research ethic approval referencing the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2000) Codes of Practice. Regarding researching and writing together, we were cognisant of the research ethics of authorship, and representations of people experiencing homelessness. We drew on BERA guidelines noted below.



The research ethic of respect for persons requires researchers, in reporting data on persons, to do so in ways that respects those persons as fellow human beings with entitlements to dignity and privacy.

(BERA Good Practice in Educational Research Writing 2000)

As a group, we presented artefacts as further codifications for provocation on the impact of austerity and reflected on the roles and practices of being co-researchers at a research knowledge exchange conference for critical community researchers (Daly, Anderson & O’Driscoll. 2011). We reflected on research in practice and produced an initial artefact ‘ethics in practice’, that established our ethical practice, meanings of respectful participation, and research relations throughout, as re-presented from our archive below.

### **Ethics in practice**

#### **Voice**

Each contribution is valid.

Everyone has a point of view.

Ensuring each is given an opportunity to speak and that no individual dominates (good chairing skills).

Everyone has a voice (if they want).

We acknowledge the right to be heard.

#### **Dignity**

Support to participants in research will be available from the organisation’s workers if required (if any issues raised that may cause service users unintended anxiety).

People will be respected.

We ensure the dignity of human beings and their life journeys.

We value people’s experiences.

#### **Research relations**

Participation in the focus group and/or interviews should have a feel-good factor and be comfortable for participants at all times.

Confidentiality will be maintained.

Research consent to participate will be explained and sought and captured in an empathetic way.

(Daly, Anderson & O'Driscoll, 2011).

The second artefact concerned the roles of co-researchers, what they do and ways of working in an ongoing way throughout the project, as our conference notes re-presented below illustrate.

### **Our ways of working**

The role of co-researchers is to:

- Engage in continuous consideration of ethics: clarity of purpose of research, safe storage of data, respectful dissemination of people's stories.
- Facilitate the research in a meaningful way for participants.
- Have good chairing skills for focus group discussions.
- Provide subtle leadership.
- Bring people into the process and encourage people.
- Provide a faithful representation of people's lives and feelings.
- Support people if issues arise.

(Daly, Anderson & O'Driscoll, 2011).

The third artefact shaped the research project's participatory research approach from planning to using research as advocacy, as conference notes re-presented illustrate below.

In practice working as a co-researcher means:

- To co-plan and co-facilitate focus group sessions/interviews.
- To gather individual stories using accessible methods (visual/diagrams/timelines).
- To signpost to follow up support for anyone involved in the research.
- To collectively analyse data with reference to sustainable livelihoods and dignity of people's experiences.
- Co-researchers will reflect on all aspects of research and reports, providing critical reflection, editing, and ideas for dissemination alongside colleagues in the organisation 'hosting' the research.
- Purposeful sharing of findings and advocacy to bring about positive change in people's lives.

(Daly, Anderson & O'Driscoll, 2011).

These artefacts, as codifications and representations of ways of working, reflected continuous dialogue and enabling voice by engaging with those who wished to share their stories with us through what we called ‘caring research’ approaches.

As the project evolved into a commentary of the cuts due to austerity policies, actions for change were also part of critical dialogue. These spaces, containing political critique, were also negotiated and approaches agreed upon, with academic publications, briefings for politicians, advocacy conferences and advocacy actions challenging cuts to services by researchers and wider groups surrounding the project (Daly, 2018; Daly, Anderson & O’Driscoll, 2012 & 2011). Freire’s third element of empowerment education dialogue for social change is always relative, and sometimes hard to draw a direct line to research impact (Ledwith and Springett, 2010). However, small-scale studies on the impacts of austerity provided a collective body of evidence hard to ignore by those in power. In the case of housing benefit policy, the proposed ‘bedroom tax’, a policy impacting single homeless men, and those with disabilities was disbanded.

### **Spaces and relations in critical education research**

This section brings together the research questions and discusses ways of working to offer a model of spaces and relations in critical education research as a framework of questions to inform research design and practice.

The extent to which practices of critical community research enable Freirean empowerment education processes of listening, dialogue and action (research question a) are considered in the ‘narratives of praxis’ above. Elements of Freire’s empowerment education, listening, dialogue and action are identified as community-based, and participatory research approaches combined with empowerment education processes to create spaces for critical education research. Dialogue and knowledge exchange in critical education research takes

account of context analysis, allocation of resources and recognition of alternative 'texts' for knowledge generation, creative codifications of experiences and faithful representations.

The ways in which processes and research relations are articulated as part of ways of working (research question b) is explored through each of the 'narratives of praxis'. Boundary crossing occurs between researchers in academy and community, yet structures typically construed as inside/outside relations (college/community) inhibit equitable relationships (hooks, 2003). Learning to listen, and listening to learn, means it is important to act in awareness of the nuances and realities of power, hierarchies and relations in critical education research.

This research suggests that a consideration of research relations (research question c) brings together elements of Freirean empowerment education with understandings of power in research to inform critical education research practice. The 'narratives of praxis' presented illustrate elements of ethical spaces and research relations and are now re-offered as a framework of reflexive questions to inform design of problem posing critical education research (Figure 1 below).

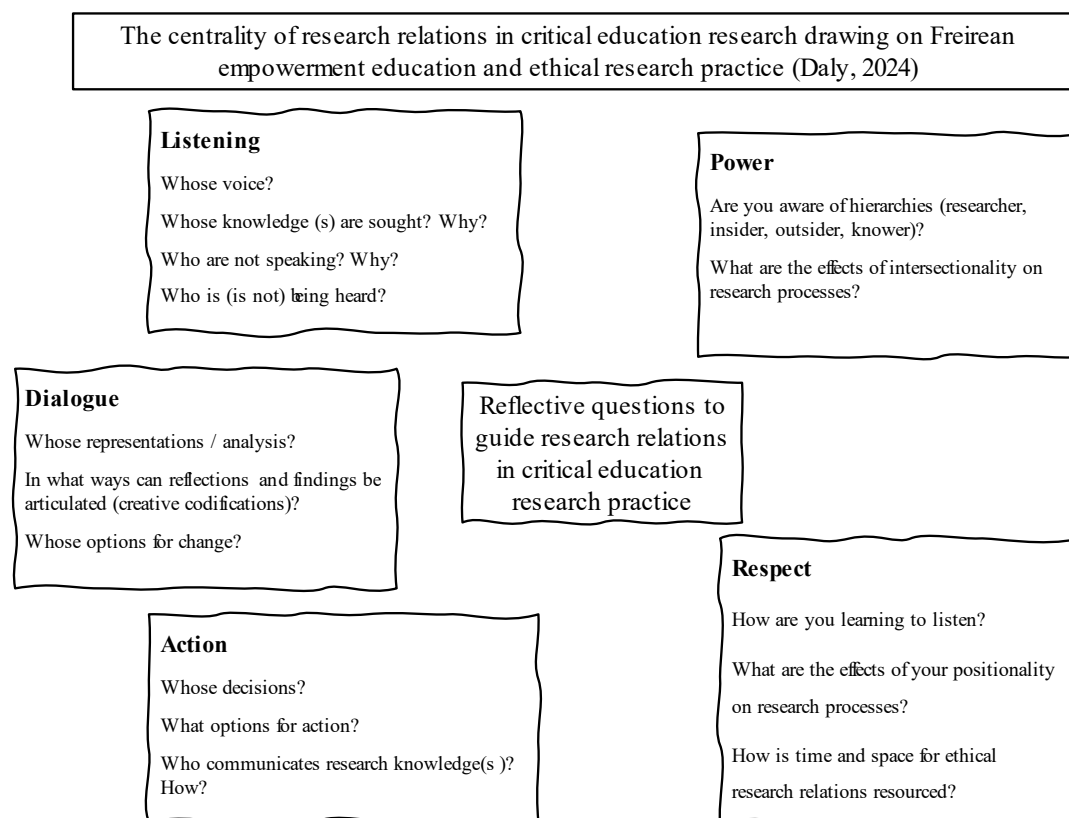


Figure 1: Spaces and Relations in Critical Education Research Design: A framework of reflexive questions (Daly, A. 2024)

The importance of equality in spaces for change and in the relations of collective action is central (Baker et al., 2004; Baker 1998). While new and alternative research alliances and spaces can be transformative, challenges are many in the detail of research practice and research relations. Questions of privileging of knowledge and access to knowledge arise such as, whose knowledge(s) are important, who is informed and who is denied knowledge? How does power operate and what are the power relations at work within and around alternative spaces for critical analysis? Whose voices are heard and whose are silenced in critical analysis and knowledge(s) generation? What are the dynamics of participation, who is included and who is excluded and who is representing whose issues?

The challenge for critical education researchers is how to make real opportunities that enable an analysis of power and to create ethical spaces for critical voices and opportunities for action for social justice and equalities to emerge.

## **Conclusion**

This research set out to explore questions relating to the synergies between ideas and practices in education and research, specifically Freirean empowerment education processes and critical community research. In each ‘narrative of praxis’ the extent and limits of the ways in which aspects of empowering elements of listening, dialogue and action authentically present in research relations are identified along with challenges and dilemmas for researchers and communities engaged in participatory inquiry. Conditions for equality are necessary in participative structures of research relations and within critical education research as part of action for social justice that identifies and problematises inequalities through listening, dialogue and action based on research-in-action (Daly, Anderson, & O’Driscoll, 2011; Baker et al., 2004). Notwithstanding the constrained and contested spaces of neoliberalism in current education and research contexts, it is important to seek the interstices, the spaces for change, for critical education and research practice to contribute critique and possibilities for change (hooks, 2003; Fraser, 2008, Habermas, 1998).

The framework of reflexive questions to position ethical research relations as central in research design offered in this paper, suggests ways of working and research relations as a particular space for critical education researchers. In the ideological context of a move to the right, the possibility for critical education research to have a role in radical social change may appear difficult. However, it is important not to underestimate the power of small-scale critical education research studies to bring about change, at local policy, family and community,

or national policy level, as illustrated in the ‘narratives of praxis’ in this research paper. Through critically applying Freirean principles of empowerment education in problem-posing critical research practice and research design, critical education researchers, as egalitarian actors can take up spaces for change as a collective endeavour.

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