Re-imagining Democratic Learning at Workers' Educational Association (WEA): An Interpretivist Analysis of Tutors' Perspectives, Practices, and Experiences.

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Abstract

This doctoral research critically examined the concept and practice of 'democratic learning' within the context of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), a UK-based adult education institution with branches across the country. The study aimed to understand how democratic learning is perceived, interpreted, and enacted by WEA tutors in their professional practice. This research was guided by four objectives: to explore tutors' interpretations of democratic learning; to examine its translation into pedagogical strategies; to investigate its manifestations within teacher-learner relationships; and to evaluate the influence of internal and external policies on the WEA's teaching and learning practices.

The methodology employed was a qualitative, interpretivist approach, within a case study research design based on in-depth interviews with six WEA practitioners. The recorded interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis, which entailed grounded coding, identifying, and examining meaningful units, patterns, and themes within the data. Six major themes were derived from the thematic analysis: *inclusive practice and pedagogy*; *democratic learning* (student voice, empowerment, and choice); *informality and fluidity*; *social purpose; equality diversity and inclusion; and policy-practice nexus.*

The findings illustrate how WEA practitioners implement an inclusive pedagogy, focusing on learner-centred and collaborative teaching practices. They foster democratic learning environments that encourage student autonomy and participation in decision-making, curriculum development, and goal setting, thus empowering learners of diverse backgrounds and abilities. In addition, the thesis highlights the theme of 'social purpose' in education, showing how the WEA extends its mission beyond traditional educational goals towards fostering broader societal benefits such as personal growth, empowerment, and fostering inclusivity. Tutors also expressed concerns about exam-centric education, instead favouring an approach that prioritises understanding and the intrinsic joy of learning.

The thesis investigated the theme of 'diversity and inclusion' and reveals a commitment to respecting and valuing the unique abilities, knowledge, and experiences of all learners, including individuals with developmental disabilities. The study underscores the strength-based perspective of the WEA, accommodating varying learner needs; validating alternative

means of expression; and emphasising proactive interventions to ensure inclusivity in learning for all learners. This research further delves into the instances of 'informality and fluidity' within the WEA. It shows how informality in structure and relationships enhances the learning experience and outcomes, fostering spontaneity, flexibility, and a shift from traditional teacher-student dynamics to more open and egalitarian relationships. Lastly, the thesis explores the intricate interplay between policy and practice in the UK education system, shedding light on the ways in which the WEA's educational practices are influenced by internal and external policies. The research reveals mixed perspectives by the tutors regarding policy influences, indicating that the nexus between policy and practice is contentious and contested.

The study concluded that democratic learning, as conceptualised and practiced at the WEA, aligns with several seminal educational theories, including those of Freire, Dewey, and Knowles. Democratic learning was found to promote an egalitarian, learner-centred, inclusive, and empowering learning environment. However, it also found limitations to this approach, including the persistence of traditional teacher-student hierarchies and the potential for overwhelming learners with excessive autonomy. The findings underscored the importance of balancing learner autonomy with teacher guidance. The study further illuminated the crucial role informality and fluidity play in shaping democratic learning environments, reinforcing the principles of collaborative and transformative education. It also emphasised the necessity of policies and practices that promote inclusivity and diversity, whilst acknowledging the complexities and challenges of these approaches.

The research suggested the importance of balancing humanistic and economic perspectives in adult education, underscoring the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses both personal empowerment and socio-economic betterment for adult learners. Finally, the study highlighted the significant influence of policy on adult education practices, revealing a complex and often contested policy-practice relationship.

Overall, this research contributes to the field of adult education by providing an in-depth examination of democratic learning in practice and identifying its nuanced limitations, offering insights that can inform educational policies and practices in adult education institutions. This research suggests that achieving a truly inclusive, empowering, and effective

adult education system requires a delicate balance of democratic-humanistic principles, learner needs, policy considerations, and prevailing socio-economic realities.

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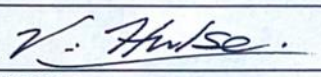
Signature of Proofreader:	
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Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter introduces the focus of the thesis, which is education, specifically adult learning, and explains the rationale for the research. It explores the specific context of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) settings, in which the research was located. The chapter also presents a brief introduction to the lifelong learning sector and its historical background, which has significant relevance to the aims of the research. To gain further insight into the context and rationale of this research project, a brief overview of both my personal and professional interest in the topic is also included.

1.1: Research Context and Rationale

The WEA is organised into 13 districts of England, as well as, a Scottish Association, with over 650 local branches and 28 local organisations, including 23 national trade unions affiliated at national level. The research took place in the North West region across six different settings, which included creative writing, ESOL entry levels 1, 2 and 3, photography, performing arts, teacher training and IT courses. The North West region provides a range of courses which are specific to the needs of the local community. The courses are funded by the Government's *Skills Funding Agency*.

When I first joined the WEA in 2011 as an Adult Learning Practitioner, I was inducted to its key values and objectives to be 'Fair, Just and Democratic' (WEA, 2014). I was curious to discover what the word 'democratic' meant in practice within teaching and learning from the tutors' perspectives, since it is uncommon for the concept of 'democracy' to be invoked as a dominant element in the mission of an educational institution. I also wanted to improve my own practice and embed the WEA principles into my teaching and professional practice. Hence, I chose to conduct this research to examine the concept of democratic learning and listen to the experiences and perspectives of tutors embedded within the teaching and learning environment of the WEA.

The values of the WEA in providing social justice in education were influenced by the changing political social and economic situation of the United Kingdom in the late 18th century and early 19th century. The following is a brief historical background of the organisation, which explains the thinking and purposes underlying the establishment of the WEA and sets out the context for this research.

1.2: Democratic Learning

In examining the definition of what 'democratic' means in theory, the views, and theories of renowned theorists such as Dewey, Freire, Knowles, Rogers, and others have been examined to explore what democratic learning means in practice. Dewey (1916) described the traditional approach to education as a closely monitored teaching style, where the learner was viewed as a passive recipient of knowledge conveyed by the teacher. He believed education to be a more active learning process, asserting that education is a social process, education is growth, and education is not a preparation for life but is life itself. (Dewey, 1916;2010).

Dewey proposed a more humanistic and democratic approach to education as an active learning experience rather than the passive remembering of facts. The concept of 'democratic' learning is rooted within the humanistic tradition of education and the learner-centred approach advocated by both Freire and Rogers. Here, the overall goal of 'democratic' education or learning is for the individual learner to achieve 'self-actualisation'; 'autonomy'; and personal empowerment. Both Freire (1967;1993) and Roger (1969) proposed that a strong learning environment depends on a student's freedom of communication, the school curriculum, and their wider social-experiences.

Freire's (1967) philosophy of education comes from modern Marxist and anti–colonialist schools of thought. He is best known for his exposition of what he called the 'banking' concept of education, in which the student was viewed as an empty vessel to be filled with information provided by the teacher. Freire observed that this model of learning transforms students into receiving objects of knowledge, in relation to the generally passive 'banking ethos' of learning. Although this clearly contradicts the value of democratic learning within the WEA, it reflects the viewpoint of some major religious beliefs surrounding the concept of a 'teacher' and their

relationship with the 'learner.' In these religious and cultural contexts, the 'teacher' is in the position of power and superiority as the undisputed custodian of knowledge, whereas the 'learner' is seen as occupying an inferior position of being a passive recipient of the knowledge imparted by the teacher.

As a practising Hindu, my belief is to respect the teacher and hold the teacher in a position of higher authority. This means that learners are expected to acknowledge and accept the teaching of the teacher and not to challenge or question their teachings. However, my current research has challenged this belief and has raised fundamental questions about my own practice. This is in terms of my understanding of what democratic learning is and whether I am embedding democracy in my own teaching. Can I truly claim to be embedding democracy into my own practice? There is clearly a contrast between my Hindu belief of the position of a teacher and my own research into democratic learning and what the democratic ethos of learning requires about the role and position of a teacher.

Conversely, in my role as a learner, I do see the teacher in a position of superiority. This represents a potential dilemma and stems from my own background and up-bringing as Hindu to believe that teachers are next to God and should be respected and not challenged. In contrast, as a teacher, I promote learning as a two-way process, where I, as a teacher, can learn from my learners and vice-versa.

Rogers observed that "the only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realised that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security" (Rogers, 1983:104). This sums up democratic learning, emphasising its empowering, evolving, expansive, transformative, person-centred, and inclusive character. Rogers' humanistic view of learning, particularly those regarding experiential dimensions of learning and learner-centred approaches to pedagogy, are already observable within the WEA's overarching teaching and learning ethos to help in creating more effective and impactful learning experiences. Nevertheless, the extent to which learning and teaching at the WEA measures up to these humanistic ideals, including the democratisation of learning, remains debatable and forms a core part of this research project.

Since the WEA is an educational setting designed for and dominated by adult learners, this research also draws upon the specific theoretical perspectives concerned with adult learning (Tennant, 1997; Knowles, 2005). The overarching assumption is that children and adults learn differently for a wide range of reasons. The work of Knowles (1997) is particularly significant in understanding how adults are taught and how they learn. This is a theoretical domain known as 'andragogy' (as opposed to 'pedagogy' which is concerned with children and younger people). Knowles' theory of andragogy implies that adult learning should emphasise the *process* of teaching rather than the *content* being taught, as well as a sharper focus on the use of practical demonstrations, problem-solving, fieldwork, and case studies. Andragogy and the associated principles of adult learning have important implications for learning/teaching in post-compulsory and life-long education (Tennant, 1997).

According to Knowles (1984; 2005), there are certain basic principles that strongly characterise adult learning. Knowles (1984) observed that adults are self-directed and expect to take responsibility for their own learning decisions; they need to know and understand why they need to learn something; they approach learning as problem-solving; they learn best when the topic is of immediate and proven value; and ultimately, adults need to learn through experience rather than purely through instructions (Knowles, 1984; Tennant, 1997). The emphasis on experiential learning is also found in Rogers' work within the humanistic tradition of learning, as well as in Freire's (1993) critical pedagogy. This kind of broad educational goal, that focuses on employability and economic self-determination, would be expected to draw significantly and coherently from students' own experiences.

Knowles' (1984) concept of andragogy and the associated principles of adult learning have specific relevance and significance to the debate on democratic pedagogy and learning, particularly those elements concerned with the practicality and instrumental relevance of learning to the adult's demonstrated needs. Knowles' theoretical work, therefore, embraces the WEA's fundamental characteristic of democratic learning, particularly where student-centred learning is encouraged and promoted (WEA Development Plan, 2012-13*)*.

Interestingly, Dewey (1916) further claims that education does not have to be acquired at the beginning of life or in childhood but can be acquired at any stage of life and then built upon. This is very much the case from my personal experience as a mature student, as well as for

many of my adult returners at the WEA. At the policy level, since the publication of the *Learning Age* Green Paper (DfES 1998), recent governments in the UK have mainstreamed and promoted the discourse of life-long learning as a core component of the Government's growth strategy, encouraging people at all ages to prioritise and take control of their own continuous learning and development (Wolf Review 2011; DFE 2021).

The WEA concept of democracy and democratic education embodies its transformative purpose or potential. This can have many aspects, but these include the possibility to change learners' perceptions and include them in an 'authentic' collaborative enterprise as an individual but with wider social impacts. This draws on aspects of radical education and mirrors some of the pioneering work of Freire (Freire, 1993; Mithra, 2014). Quinn (2003) identifies democratic education using the Freirean concept of 'authenticity', and this is considered similar to that applied within the WEA's claim that "authentic education must be socially and politically transformative as a liberating process that embodies a theory of knowledge put into practice (praxis) aimed at contributing to the emergence, development, and maintenance of a just society." (Quinn, 2003:84)

As a political concept, democracy, when used within education, tends to disrupt established power relations and some dominant views regarding not only the learning process but also the relationship between learners and teachers in some cultural, national, and religious arenas. This contested arena at the intersection of education and democracy represents an interesting area to explore further.

From an educational context, and more specifically relating to my research, I believe democracy is about the way in which people relate to each other in the teacher and learner relationship. It is also about decision-making and how these decisions are made, looking at who participates in the decision-making process. The decision-making process in the teaching and learning context would be related to the notion of collaborative planning and giving the learner the opportunity to take part in the planning and the delivery of the learning programmes. I believe principles such as accountability, inclusion, participation, and giving the learners a voice is essential if true democracy is to be embedded in the teaching and learning experience.

Many educationists support the view, arguing that all learning relates, in some way, to change, but that not all change can be ascribed to learning (Rogers, 1983; Kolb, 1984). For example, physical growth can change our capacity for certain activities. Kolb's work emphasises the nature of learning as a continuing process and a characteristic of human ability to understand and shape the environment. He states that "Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world; learning is the major process of human adaptation" (Kolb, 1984: 31-2). The views captured by these educationists bear some correspondence to the WEA's stated agenda of providing an educational experience that is supposed to equip adults with the knowledge and skills for taking control of their own livelihoods, driving change, and achieving increased empowerment.

1.3: Dynamics of Political Discourse and Policy

Having worked in education for over thirty-five years, I have experienced how political discourse, and different ideological perspectives can influence education policy and practice. For instance, the ideal of a liberal-meritocratic perspective**,** which was informed by what is often considered to be the post-second world war social democratic consensus, is seen to support increasing and widening educational participation as a force for promoting social inclusion, social mobility, and broadening the base of higher education (Ball, 1998; Olssen et al., 2004). This perspective believes that entry to university should be based on the aptitude and diligence required, which is demonstrated or evidenced through the acquisition of qualifications in the traditional sense. Initiatives such as encouraging disadvantaged adults to participate in education through new entry routes, credit transfer systems and schemes to foster the aspirations of young people are part of this perspective (Billet, 2010).

The radical strand in post-compulsory education took a critical view of dominant modes of formal education and regarded informal adult education as a tool for raising consciousness, empowering communities, and changing unequal socio-economic structures (Lee et al., 2008). This view is quite closely associated with the WEA's humanistic mission and somewhat instrumentalist conceptions of lifelong learning (WEA, 2012), whereby learning opportunities, both formal and informal, are provided for the purpose of widening educational participation for disadvantaged and non-traditional learners as an instrument for empowerment and upward social mobility for communities and individuals (Olssen et al., 2004).

The key focus of the WEA organisation is to work towards creating more of a 'partnership' approach to learning, seeking to build a stronger relationship between the learner and the tutor in a way that draws on critical pedagogy as proposed by Freire (WEA, 2022). Critical pedagogy can be understood as a form of teaching and learning that aims to challenge and disrupt established forms and relations associated with inequalities and exclusion that prevent individuals from realising their fuller potential in any given context. As a result, critical pedagogy seeks, in some way, to emancipate and empower individuals to surmount such structures and relations to be able to freely determine their own choices and achieve their own goals more fully (Freire, 1993). This current research project is located within this critical theoretical landscape and was informed by the theoretical traditions of Dewey (1938), Freire and Rogers and is underpinned by the broader concept of the humanistic theory.

As an adult education practitioner who embraces the values and perspectives of critical pedagogy and the democratic ethos in learning, I have questioned whether educational processes or interventions can be genuinely neutral. There is a well-established strand of thought which suggests educational programmes and systems are largely driven by dominant political discourses, values, and emergent policies (Olssen et al., 2004; Ball, 2003). For instance, at the WEA where I work as a tutor, the funding for courses is linked to learners' academic achievement and the institution is required to meet mandatory performance targets which are shaped by prevailing neo-liberal and neo-conservative political ideological inclinations and the resultant policy discourses, such as performativity, managerialism, and marketisation (Olssen et al., 2004).

The linking of government funding to these policy ideals and the expectations of senior managers on how teachers should deliver their courses creates potential areas of conflict with the predominantly humanistic values of the WEA, which emphasises values such as the learner-centred approach, democracy, and empowerment through widening participation (WEA, 2022). Whilst as a tutor, who is aspiring to embed democratic learning into my classroom through student-centred learning, I find myself in a dilemma of working under time constraints to ensure all learners achieve higher outcomes that would enable the WEA to claim government funding and meet its financial and business targets.

However, this government funding stream is essential to the ongoing survival of the institution and its provisions. These pressures and expectations leave very little flexibility for practitioners to involve learners in appropriately transformative and collaborative learning due to heavier workloads and tougher financial constraints, which are both driven by government policy and dominant discourses such as performativity and managerialism. It also creates tensions between my own belief and my style of teaching, as I believe teaching is a two-way process: teacher and learner motivation, and that to teach and learn collectively is crucial. I also believe it is essential to give equal status to my learners, since they too have life experiences and bring a wealth of knowledge with them that can benefit other co-learners in the class (Rogers, 1983). As reflected in the most influential works of Freire and Rogers, and as I also passionately believe as an educator, democracy in learning is concerned with valuing each and everyone's personal journey and experiences, drawing upon that mutual experience, and sharing and applying these multiple experiences to enrich the learning context. This strand of educational philosophy, drawing heavily on Freire and Rogers, strongly resonates with my own view of a more democratised ethos to learning and teaching.

1.4: The Research Problem

Drawing on the complexity and varied meanings of the concept of 'democratic learning' and considering the delicate constraints of government policy regarding funding and learning targets, this study set out to examine how 'democratic learning' is constructed and practiced by teaching practitioners at the WEA. The overarching research question for this study can therefore be stated as follows:

How is 'democratic learning' constructed and embedded within the practice of teaching and learning at the Workers' Education Association?

1.5: Research Aims and Objectives

My experience as an adult education practitioner across different settings has meant that I often encounter the term 'inclusion'. However, linked to this term, within the WEA mission statement, is the term 'democratic' (WEA, 2022). The overall aim of this study is to explore

what this term means for those engaged in learning and teaching, and how it is constructed, negotiated, implemented, and contested through the voices and experiences of teaching practitioners working within the WEA setting. The study, therefore, pursues the following four objectives:

1. to explore and evaluate the tutors' understandings and perspectives around democratic learning within the context of their practice at the WEA;
2. to critically examine how practitioners negotiate and translate the concept of 'democratic learning' into their pedagogical practice in the classroom;
3. to examine how the concept of 'democratic learning' manifests itself within teacher-learner relationships and its implications for learning;
4. to critically evaluate the internal and external drivers of WEA's policies on teaching and learning within the wider context of government policy and how 'democratic learning' narrative is embedded and negotiated.

1.6: My Positionality: Fluidity of Being an 'Insider'

In terms of my positionality, working for the WEA as a tutor is very inspirational. I feel a sense of responsibility, both on a personal and professional level, to be a reflective practitioner to ensure my learners have access to a high-quality learning experience that is likely to be more inclusive and meet their individual needs. Being a reflective educator is associated with a consistent focus on interrogating one's own practice, in terms of how well it meets the diverse learners' needs and expectations, with a view to identifying areas of one's own practice that might be in need of improvement to achieve better outcomes.

The imperative to be a reflective practitioner is compounded by the fact that I am also a fellow of the *Institute for Learning*, where reflecting and improving my practice is seen as an integral and essential part of my professional role, as stipulated in the WEA's Code of Practice. Hence, my research explores the WEA's learning experiences from tutors' perspectives as practitioners, through conducting in-depth exploratory research focusing on tutors at the WEA. The selection of a research paradigm should be closely aligned with the research objectives and questions, underscoring the importance of a given methodology's 'fitness for purpose' (Guba, 1990). Building on this perspective, my research adopted an interpretivist

epistemological framework and employed semi-structured interviews, a method well-grounded in the qualitative research tradition (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The interpretivist paradigm offers a unique lens to view human behaviour, asserting that understanding the social world requires interpretation of the subjective experiences and perspectives of individuals (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). By applying this paradigm, my research acknowledges the inherent subjectivity and reflexivity within the research process, particularly when exploring the complexities of human experiences and perceptions. Semi-structured interviews, as utilised in this study, enable the capturing of rich, in-depth data, thereby providing an avenue to grasp the complex nature of individual's experiences and viewpoints (Brinkmann, 2013). This method aligns seamlessly with the interpretivist paradigm, providing a platform to delve into diverse and evolving human experiences, making it exceptionally suitable for this type of investigation.

With respect to this research project, I consider myself to be in the position of an 'insider researcher', since I am an educational practitioner employed at the WEA, which is the case study in this research project. Regarding 'insider researchers', Costley et al. (2011) observe that the insider researchers are in a better position to draw upon the shared understandings and trust of their colleagues to access meanings and nuances that are unique to the immediate context and the participants. This helps with building trust and rapport when conducting the research and offers the potential for gathering different, perhaps more illuminating data, which can tell a more informed story than might have been possible to an 'outsider' researcher (Costley et al., 2011).

On the other hand, knowing my participants also worked as a disadvantage, as there was a possible risk of being too close, whereby my participants might not have felt comfortable telling me anything that was negative or undesirable, thus shaping the data collection process. Hammersley and Atkins (2007) claim that there is more risk of 'over-rapport', which can limit data gathering opportunities. Hence, it was crucial for me to set clear boundaries and ground rules to avoid any potential misunderstanding and to protect my participants

(colleagues) as well as my precarious position as an insider-researcher. (Hammersley and Atkins, 2007: 86-87).

I was also aware of the fact that there could be potential issues as well as advantages when conducting research as an insider. Costley et al. (2011) state that if a researcher does not communicate all aspects of their research to the participants, then this might create risks to the outcome of the research. This includes communicating the purpose of the research; the strategy that will be implemented; what the aims and objectives are; and what their role is within the research. Drawing on Costley et al. (2011), I ensured that I disclosed complete and accurate information to my participants regarding the nature and purposes of the research project (as detailed later in this thesis under the section on research ethics). I had induction meetings with each research participant and provided each person with an information leaflet about the research project to enable them to gain a clearer and fuller understanding of the project. I also made myself available by telephone, email, and in person to answer any queries or concerns from the participants.

Being supported by my employers also enabled me to have several privileges, such as having easy access to resources and participants. However, I was also aware that this may have actually made my position as an insider researcher less comfortable. For instance, my employer could have placed certain expectations on the process and progress of my research. They could have also wished to influence my research to suit and meet the organisation's objective and targets. I was, however, very clear about my aim and the objectives of my research and ensured that this was communicated clearly with my employers to avoid any confusion and misunderstanding.

1.7: Reflections on Potential Professional Benefits

Reflecting on the potential impact of my research, I recognise its immense benefits for my personal and professional development and for the broader impact on the WEA organisation. I envisage that this research will enable me to become a more reflective and reflexive

practitioner, allowing me to critically assess my own practices. This journey towards enhanced confidence and competence will empower me to play a more active role in influencing the WEA's equality and diversity policies. I value the power of evidence-based change and acknowledge how my research can provide the necessary evidence to inform policy decisions, resulting in positive contributions to my individual practice and the workplace environment. Being an 'insider-cum-practitioner' researcher, I have the unique advantage of a strong rapport with my colleagues across the WEA, which can facilitate positive changes driven by my research.

I wholeheartedly believe that my research will fortify the WEA's commitment to social justice, inclusion, and a quality learning experience that continually evolves to meet our learners' needs. I anticipate that my findings will augment the WEA's good practices and highlight areas ripe for further development. Given the geographical span of my research across the North West region of the UK, I hope it will foster the sharing of best practices throughout all WEA regions, specifically in the context of the teacher-learner relationship. This could potentially open avenues for the WEA to provide personal and professional development opportunities across the U.K regions. Reflecting on Cochran-Smith & Lytle's assertion that "much of practitioner research's ultimate goal is challenging inequalities, raising questions about the status quo and enhancing the learning and life chances of students" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009:102), I see a profound alignment with my research objectives. This reflective exercise only strengthens my belief in the transformative potential of this research.

1.8: Structure and Organisation of the Thesis

This introductory chapter presents the framework and underpinning of a study on the practical application of 'democratic learning' within the Workers' Education Association (WEA), a key player in the lifelong learning sector of the UK. Situating the research within this specific organisational context, it explores the historical background and the broad contours of the adult education landscape. Simultaneously, the chapter draws attention to the personal and professional interest of the researcher, underlining the experiential dimensions of the inquiry. The chapter articulates the principal research question and delineates the aims and objectives of the research, providing a comprehensive, albeit brief, roadmap to the study's investigative trajectory.

Chapter Two presents a comprehensive literature review on democratic learning, examining its theoretical facets. It draws from Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory, emphasising critical reflection, and Dewey's (1916) concept of democratic education. It also references Knowles' (2005) andragogy theory, endorsing self-guided, experiential learning. The chapter locates the WEA within the UK's adult education and lifelong learning history, using academic and policy texts. It explores various definitions and views of democracy and democratic learning, offering a theoretical framework for the study.

Chapter Three details the study's design and implementation, starting with a discussion on foundational ontological and epistemological concepts within research paradigms. The research uses a case study design, with semi-structured interviews as the main data collection method, focusing on practitioners' perspectives of democratic education. It scrutinises the research conduct, including the role of the 'insider researcher', reflexivity, and ethical considerations. This chapter leads into the subsequent chapter, where data analysis is explored.

Chapter Four analyses findings from the semi-structured interviews with six WEA teaching practitioners, using thematic analysis as defined by Braun & Clarke (2006) and Bryman (2016). The interview data, once transcribed, is broken down into codes and assembled into larger categories to form themes and sub-themes. Six major themes were identified: Inclusive practice and pedagogy; Democratic learning (including student voice, empowerment, and choice); Informality and fluidity; Social purpose; Equality diversity and inclusion; and the Intersection of policy and practice. These themes shed light on democratic learning within the WEA.

Chapter Five discusses and synthesises the study's findings within the wider context of existing literature on democratic learning and inclusive pedagogy. Utilising Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, it explores the six main themes from the WEA practitioner interviews. The findings strongly reflect democratic learning ethos and practices, promoting inclusivity, equality, and informality. The observed shift towards a learner-centric model aligns with Freire's (2000) democratic education theories, emphasising dialogical, participatory learning for empowerment and civic emancipation.

Finally, Chapter Six is dedicated to examining the conclusions, the contributions and the key recommendations drawn from the findings of this study. The chapter draws key conclusions and highlights major recommendations before exploring the limitations of the study and suggesting areas for further empirical research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1: Introduction

The literature review examined a range of theoretical, empirical and policy documents aimed at identifying a gap for the research. The process is set out below and led to the conclusion that there was a gap in current understanding of democratic learning according to the first-hand experiences of the six adult learning practitioners, their perceptions of democratic learning, within the WEA teaching and learning environment. The review found a lack of evidence specific to the UK and the unique context to learning provided by the WEA. This context of learning is essential to understanding the WEA mission that sets out just, equal and democratic learning as delivered by adult learning practitioners.

2.2: Systematic Literature Review

Before a literature review can be undertaken, the reviewer must first conduct a systematic search and locate the most relevant published sources of sufficient quantity and quality (Cooper et al., 2021). In conducting a systematic literature review on adult learning, I adopted a rigorous approach to identify and evaluate relevant academic sources within the chosen field of democratic learning and education. A systematic review is a comprehensive and structured method used to synthesise existing research on a specific topic, allowing the researcher to identify patterns, trends, and gaps in the literature (Cooper et al., 2021). By employing predefined search criteria, I aimed to manage the volume of sources and maintain focus during the review process (Cooper et al., 2021).

The literature search process goes through several steps: defining a need for information; formulating a specific review question; identifying appropriate sources to be used; developing a search strategy; conducting the search; and ends with screening and organising the references generated. Whereas this model depicts the steps as being linear, it is important to recognise that, in practice, the literature search process is iterative, overlapping, and cyclical (Bryman, 2016; Cooper et al., 2021). To undertake the literature search, I utilised various electronic databases available in the University of Central Lancashire's (UCLan) library system.

This approach ensured access to a wide range of academic sources, including books, reports, and peer-reviewed journals. Electronic databases offer an efficient way of locating and retrieving scholarly material, enabling the researcher to access up-to-date and relevant research evidence (Cooper et al., 2021).

Regarding journal articles, I set specific parameters to select the most appropriate sources to include in the systematic review. The criteria included:

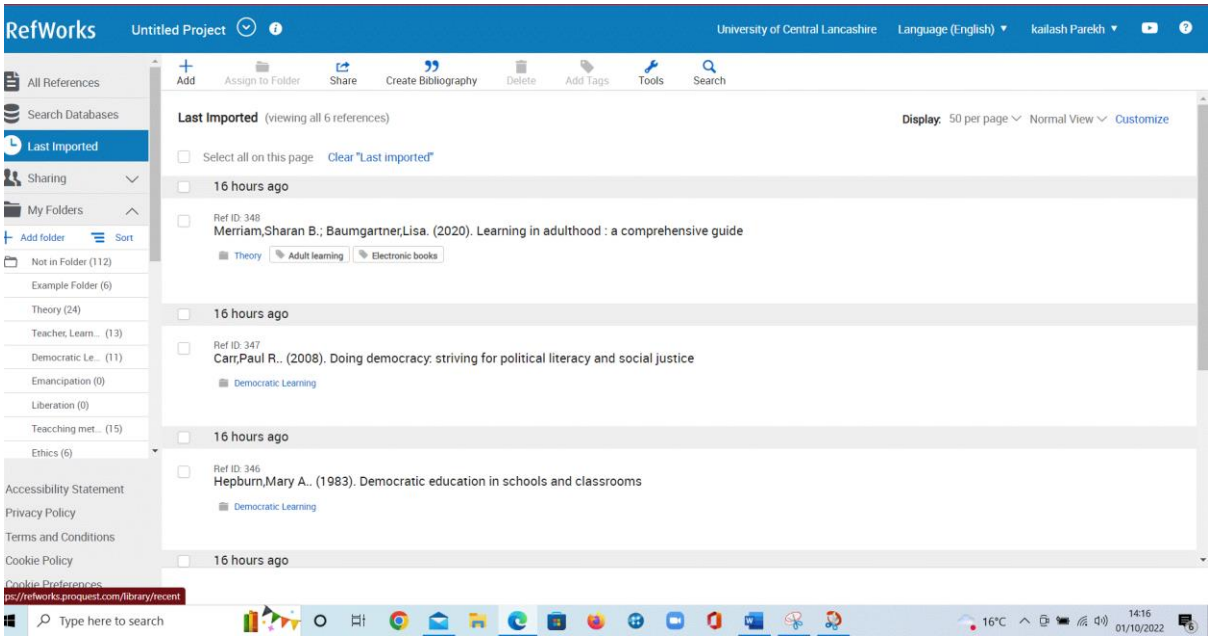
1. Peer-reviewed journals: Academic papers published in peer-reviewed journals which undergo rigorous evaluation by experts in the field, ensuring the quality and reliability of the research.
2. Recency: By considering sources published between 1995 and 2022, the researcher ensured the inclusion of contemporary research, whilst excluding outdated studies.
3. UK-based studies: Focusing on UK-based studies allowed the researcher to explore adult learning practices and policies specific to the UK context (although the search was subsequently opened to include studies from international sources.
4. Primary research-based: Prioritising primary research sources, such as empirical studies and original investigations, provided first-hand data and insights into the subject matter.
5. Language: I selected sources published in English to facilitate understanding.
6. Availability as a PDF: By seeking PDF versions of the sources, the aim was to ensure easy access to the full text of the selected materials.

I utilised a comprehensive list of relevant keywords and word combinations in the literature search. These included: *'democratic learning'; 'adult learning'; 'social justice'; 'lifelong learning'; 'lifelong education'; 'informal educational'; 'Workers' Education Association'; 'student-centred learning'; 'theories of learning'*; and *'theories of pedagogy'*. By employing these carefully selected keywords and applying the predetermined criteria, I ensured a systematic and focused review of the literature on adult learning, democratic learning, and related concepts, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the field.

The first search I undertook was by using the UCLan library search engine of the term '*Democratic Learning*' and this yielded over 51,506 sources of reference from journal articles and books. There were references in studies undertaken in other parts of other countries and in schools and other educational settings. I did not filter out all the school studies, as they were relevant to my studies. However, as my research was specifically within an adult learning sector, I narrowed my search to adult education, and democratic learning within the UK. The search yielded approximately 25,184 results. Following the use of the primary set of keywords, I applied additional secondary terms to refine the search and cut down the number of selected sources. The following terms were combined and applied in different iterations to refine the search: *'community learning'; 'informal learning 'student-centred'; 'transformative education'; 'empowerment'; 'emancipation'; 'education policies'; 'civic emancipation'*; and *'personal development'*.

Following the iterative searches and further refinement of sources, I organised the final collection of sources into different folders under appropriate themes in 'RefWorks' as depicted in Figure 1.0 below:

Figure 1.0: A screenshot of my RefWorks management system.



2.3: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The phenomenon of democratic learning appears to be located within a complex and intersecting theoretical and conceptual terrain, where a varied range of theories and concepts are involved in understanding its representation and enactment. One possible conceptual framework for democratic learning could be founded on the ideas of transformative learning theory, particularly as developed by Jack Mezirow. This theory is specifically relevant to adult education and argues that critical reflection on one's own assumptions and beliefs plays a significant role in adult learning.

Mezirow's theory (1997) is centred on the idea that adult learners undergo a transformative process, shifting from non-critical acceptance of social norms and values to a more critically reflective perspective. Mezirow's work focuses on the process by which adults critically assess their deeply held beliefs and assumptions, to facilitate transformation and growth. This theory is particularly relevant in the context of democratic learning, as it emphasises the importance of critical thinking and open dialogue, which are key elements in democratic societies. In the context of this research, this would imply that democratic learning in adult education is not simply about imparting knowledge about democratic institutions and practices but involves helping learners critically engage with these ideas and reflect on their own roles within democracy.

Dewey's influential theory of democratic education, articulated in 1916, envisions education as inherently social and integrally linked to the fabric of democracy and social justice. He proposed that education should go beyond the mere transmission of knowledge, fostering critical thinking, collaborative learning, and social responsibility to prepare citizens for active participation in the democratic life of their societies. Dewey's theory emphasises the importance of participatory, experiential learning in democratic societies, and suggests that education is a fundamental tool in the development and preservation of democratic ideals (Dewey, 1916). There is evident alignment of Dewey's educational philosophy with that of Freire, who in his "Pedagogy of the Oppressed", also champions an education aimed at emancipation and social justice (Freire, 1993;2000). While both theorists emphasise transformation and empowerment, their theories may be seen as idealistic or impractical in the face of pressing economic challenges that require immediate and tangible skill sets.

Despite its immense influence on modern educational thought, Dewey's idealistic perspective on education has not gone unchallenged from a range of critics who question his over-emphasis on process and student-centredness as the expense of other considerations such a rigour and economic applications of knowledge (Mason, 2017, Kliebard, 1987, Ravitch, 2010, Billet, 2018).

Amy Gutmann (1987), extending Dewey's democratic education theory, presents an elaborate theoretical framework that might also be considered in an investigation into democratic learning in adult education. Gutmann argues that the primary aim of democratic education is to cultivate the virtues, knowledge, and skills necessary for political participation. She delineates the responsibility between the state, parents, and the learners themselves in shaping democratic citizens. The application of Gutmann's theory to adult learning institutions could provide a novel perspective on how democratic learning is understood and practiced in these contexts. Although Gutmann's theory may prove useful, Knowles' (1980) work is, however, essential when discussing adult learning, as he developed the theory of andragogy, which focuses on the specific needs and characteristics of adult learners.

Knowles' theory of andragogy posits that adult learning is self-directed, experience-based, relevant to real-life situations, and problem-centred rather than content-oriented (Knowles, 1980). The principle of self-directed learning emphasises the idea that adults take control of their learning process, mirroring the autonomy and participatory nature inherent in a democratic society. Furthermore, experience-based learning resonates with Dewey's experiential learning and its importance in democratic education, as it enables learners to draw upon their life experiences in the learning process, fostering critical reflection.

In line with Mezirow's transformative learning theory, Knowles' andragogy emphasises the importance of critical reflection on one's own experiences, particularly pertaining to adult learners. This resonates with Mezirow's theory where critical reflection is key to transformation and the development of democratic values such as openness, empathy, and the willingness to change one's perspective. Moreover, by focusing on problem-centred, real-life situations, Knowles' approach aligns with Gutmann's framework that asserts the primary aim of democratic education is to cultivate the skills necessary for political participation.

The pragmatism in Knowles' approach complements the practical application of democratic virtues and knowledge as advocated by Gutmann (1987). Thus, by integrating Knowles' theory of andragogy into the framework of Dewey's democratic education theory, Gutmann's democratic education perspective, and Mezirow's transformative learning theory, a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of democratic learning in adult education institutions can be developed. This integrative approach underscores the learner's agency, the importance of experiential learning, the need for practical, problem-centred learning, and the role of critical reflection in personal transformation and the cultivation of democratic values and social justice.

Additionally, the idea of deliberative democracy, as conceived by Jurgen Habermas (1984), could provide a relevant theoretical framework. Habermas emphasises the importance of rational discourse and debate in the public sphere as integral to the functioning of a true democracy. In an adult learning context, this could be interpreted as suggesting the importance of creating spaces for debate and discussion, fostering critical thinking skills, and encouraging learners to engage with differing viewpoints, all of which are fundamental to both transformative learning and democratic processes.

By integrating these theoretical frameworks, Mezirow's transformative learning theory, Habermas' deliberative democracy, Knowle’s andragogy theory, and Dewey's democratic education, one can build a robust, interdisciplinary approach to understand how democratic learning is understood and practiced in an adult learning institution in the UK. These theories provide a coherent foundation in order to examine the extent to which adult education institutions foster critical reflection, promote open debate, and cultivate an active, participatory learning environment. Exploring how these theories are, or are not, enacted in an adult learning institution in the UK could provide significant insights into the understanding and practice of democratic learning in adult education. The literature review that follows will examine these and other theories and concepts in more detail, to build a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of democratic learning within the terrain of adult lifelong learning.

Since the WEA was the chosen context for the research, this chapter gives some background and history of the WEA and its values. It begins by studying the historical background from

the Victorian era and the context in which the WEA was established, in particular, the social, economic, and political situation in which it was founded. It then moves on to examining the values and aims of the founders of the WEA and identifies any changes which the WEA may have undergone in the 120 years of its existence. The chapter then reviews the more up-to-date situation by examining publications which describe and analyse the thinking relating to the concept of democratic education**.**

The chapter attempts to define what 'learning' means within an educational setting, along with the term 'democratic learning'. It also discusses the theories of learning, specifically the work of Dewey, Freire, Knowles, and Rogers discussed above, since they have relevance to the area of my research. Locating the WEA as a leading stakeholder in the UK's lifelong learning landscape, this chapter aims to conceptualise lifelong learning and capture the development of lifelong learning policy and practice in the UK from a historical perspective. It refers to some of the key relevant government policies relating to adult learning and its impact upon the funding and delivery of the service.

2.4: Setting the Scene: WEA in Historical Perspective

The Workers' Educational Association (WEA), founded by Albert Mansbridge in the early 20th century, emerged as a pioneering force in adult education, initially named the Association to Promote the Higher Education of Working Men. This initiative aimed to democratise access to education beyond the privileged classes, reflecting a broader societal shift toward inclusivity. The WEA built its ethos on philosophical and political ideas such as democracy and self-help. The foundation of its ideas was to effect social change through new types of educational provision, based on ideas such as democracy, equality, and human dignity (Fieldhouse, 1996).

Despite its progressive agenda, the organisation's early focus on men's education, at the expense of women's, highlighted the period's pervasive gender biases in education (Fieldhouse, 1996; Caldwell & Templeton, 2015). It was not until 1905 that the name changed to the Workers' Educational Association, indicating a broader, more inclusive mission.

However, the transition towards gender inclusivity was gradual and fraught with challenges, reflecting deeper societal gender norms that persisted well into the 20th century (Fieldhouse, 1996).

The WEA's evolution occurred against a backdrop of rising socialism and an expanding trade union movement in the UK. While it sought to address class inequalities through educational programmes, the association grappled with maintaining its political neutrality, balancing between educational provision and its emerging political affiliations with leading trade unions (Fieldhouse, 1996). This balancing act sometimes led to criticisms of the WEA becoming overly politicised, which potentially alienated broader segments of the workforce who might have benefitted from its educational programmes yet felt wary of its political undertones (Fieldhouse,1996; Caldwell & Templeton, 2015).

Furthermore, while the WEA established significant collaborations with university departments, this relationship was not without its tensions. Universities were often criticised for imposing academic interests that did not always align with the practical, worker-centred educational needs that the WEA advocated (Caldwell & Templeton, 2015). Such discrepancies occasionally led to curriculum conflicts and debates over the direction and control of adult education programmes, reflecting broader tensions between academic pursuits and vocational needs (Fieldhouse, 1996).

In its partnership with the Trade Union Movement, forming the Workers' Educational Trade Union Committee in 1919, the WEA aimed to solidify and coordinate educational efforts across various sectors. However, this initiative also faced challenges related to aligning diverse union agendas with educational goals, sometimes complicating the delivery of programmes that were universally acceptable and beneficial (Caldwell & Templeton, 2015). The interplay between education and labour activism was a constant navigational challenge for the WEA, as it strove to fulfil its dual mission of education and social transformation in the UK.

The Co-operative Society and several influential church figures were among other institutions and prominent people that played a vital role in nurturing the growth of the WEA. It was also a key player in advocating for improved state education, contributing significantly to the

discourse leading up to the *Education Act of 1944*, or the Butler Act (Fieldhouse, 1996). This Act marked a significant milestone in British educational reform, with one of its stipulations ensuring a provision for adult education.

R.H. Tawney, a seminal figure in the WEA's early years, joined as a tutor in 1905. His pedagogical approach and dedication to the WEA's educational programmes were instrumental in establishing the association as a successful educational organisation (Caldwell & Templeton, 2015). Tawney's teachings transcended traditional student-teacher dynamics, instead fostering an atmosphere of camaraderie and mutual learning. He famously said, "The friendly smiting's' of weavers, potters, miners, and engineers have taught me much about the problems of political and economic science which cannot easily be learned from books" (Davies, 1996:176). Overall, the historical development of the WEA, while marked by notable achievements in democratising education and widening participation, also encountered significant hurdles related to gender inclusivity, political neutrality, academic collaboration, and union partnership. These challenges underscore the complex interplay between education, politics, and societal norms in the pursuit of social justice and equality.

Fast forward to 2023, the WEA, remaining faithful to its roots, continues to be the UK's largest democratic and voluntary sector provider of adult education (Shah, 2020). It has significantly broadened its horizons since its inception in 1903, not only focussing on imparting liberal arts education but also enhancing employability skills and promoting social justice (Caldwell & Templeton, 2015).

Unrestrained by government controls, the WEA offers a wide range of programmes with remarkable flexibility. Its unique model allows for greater inclusion and social justice. In the words of a statement on their website, "we deliver our mission by developing partnerships to meet individual and collective needs, using active learning and a student-centred approach in which teachers and students work as equals" (WEA website, 2022). Now that I have briefly traced the journey of the WEA and its commitment to democratic learning, it is appropriate to delve deeper into the concept of democratic learning itself and its manifestations within the context of the WEA's teaching practices, which is the subject of the forthcoming exploration of democratic learning at the WEA.

2.5: Locating the WEA within Lifelong Learning Discourse

The WEA's organisational terrain and provision can be located within the broader policy domain of adult education or lifelong learning in the UK (Duckworth & Ade-Ojo, 2016; Kersh & Laczik, 2021). Adult education, or more recently, lifelong learning, has had a long and largely contested historical trajectory within both supranational and national policy arenas (OECD, 1998; Delors,1998; Russell, 1973), as well as within academic discourse among sociologists and learning theorists (Duckworth & Ade-Ojo, 2016; Billet, 2018).

The meanings, mechanisms, representations, and purposes of adult education continue to be at the epicentre of significant conceptual and empirical contestation and debate. A considerable body of the academic literature and policy pronouncements have tended to merge the term 'adult education' and 'lifelong learning' as if they are synonymous. This merger of terminologies has been heavily criticised by scholars of lifelong learning and adult education (Billet, 2010), as well as by educational sociologists who are concerned by the unequal and contested power relations that can arise from the conflation of the two terminologies, especially where 'adult education' appears to be privileged over 'adult learning' (Ehlers, 2006; Billet, 2010).

Lifelong learning is generally applied in the academic and policy literature to refer to the broad range of educational and learning activities taking place in diverse settings and circumstances, often encompassing a variety of formal, non-formal, and informal settings and mechanisms (European Communities, 1996; World Bank, 2003; Poquet & de Laat, 2021). A common feature, that defines all these adult learning or educational activities, is that they are intentional and purposeful. Not all of them, however, are necessarily structured, systematic, or accredited (Poquet & de Laat, 2021). Scholars insist that a critical distinction exists between 'lifelong education' and 'lifelong learning'. 'Lifelong learning' is understood as a process that is individual, spontaneous, ubiquitous, unstructured, and takes place in individuals across multiple contexts and mechanisms throughout everyone's lifespan, including the forms of learning that might take place through organised educational

interventions (Billet, 2010 & 2018). To emphasise the 'socio-personal' nature of 'lifelong learning', Billet (2018) observes:

"Learning is something that humans do continuously and across our lifespan ... learning is very much a personal process driven by our own capacities, interests, situations, and support, and engaging the human mind and consciousness" (p. 402).

In contrast, 'lifelong education' is conceptualised as an organised institutional activity, arising from, and enacted by the social world (educational institutions of various kinds), in the form of the provision of particular types of structured educational experiences and interventions, which can either be accredited or non-accredited (Billet, 2018:2). Hence, unlike 'lifelong learning', which is largely unstructured and occurs spontaneously, 'lifelong education' denotes the provision of particular forms and levels of structured and systematic learning experiences, interventions, and practices, which are institutionally embedded and have predetermined purposes or outcomes (Billet, 2010; Billet, 2018, Poquet & de Laat, 2021). Overall, it is clearly emerging that 'lifelong learning', and 'lifelong education' are distinct forms of provision, denoted largely by structure and purpose.

It is important to recognise that lifelong educational interventions merely suggest the intended or desired outcomes in terms of the realisation of certain changes in the behaviour or thinking of individuals (which is what is known as 'learning'). However, the identification of the goals or intents of 'lifelong education' does not offer any guarantees or assurances that learning will take place (Billet, 2010). Considering these arguments, it clearly suggests that 'lifelong learning' is a much broader and more permeating phenomenon compared to 'lifelong education'. In fact, 'lifelong learning' encompasses 'lifelong education' as a small subset of the domains of learning. Indeed, Billet (2018) points out that throughout the history of humanity a considerable proportion of learning has taken place without formal schooling or teaching, largely because these primordial forms of human learning experiences occurred long before the emergence of mass educational provision.

Supranational and national public policy literature represent 'lifelong learning' and its purposes from two different and contested perspectives. One school of thought represents the purpose of 'lifelong learning' from a predominantly sociological and humanistic perspective (Vargas, 2017). This view is widely associated with UNESCO's *Delors Report*

(1998), which considered ‘lifelong learning’ as an instrument for empowering disadvantaged adults towards achieving greater equity and social justice. However, a contrasting view of ‘lifelong learning’ is predominantly economic and has strong links to human capital theory (Milana, 2012; Poquet & de Laat, 2021).

The classical idea of human capital theory suggests that financial investments in social provisions such as healthcare and education are equivalent to investments towards physical infrastructure like roads and industrial installations, and therefore, they accrue both direct and indirect economic returns to the individual and the wider national economy (Milana, 2012; Klees, 2016). Drawing on this overall theoretical perspective, some influential supranational organisations have viewed ‘lifelong learning’ or ‘lifelong education’ as a means for developing a strong and adequate human capital base to drive long-term economic growth and contribute to the global knowledge economy (OECD, 1998; World Bank, 2003; Milana, 2012).

The OECD’s perspective on ‘lifelong learning’ and ‘lifelong education’ could be considered more instrumentalist. Nonetheless, it has exerted significant influence across different arenas, leading to policy discourse on ‘lifelong learning’, “converging into a homogeneous rationale in which the economic dimensions of education predominate over other (sociological and humanistic) dimensions of learning” (Vargas, 2017:1). This predominantly economic view of ‘lifelong learning’ is associated with the growing economic imperative, which demands continuing adult employability and occupational competence throughout people’s productive lifespan, in the context of changing occupational dynamics, workplace requirements, and technological transformations (Billet, 2018; Poquet & de Laat, 2021). Alongside this emphasis on employment-related outcomes and the devaluation of social justice and equity goals, has been the tendency towards blending ‘lifelong learning’ into ‘lifelong education’ and giving increasing predominance to ‘lifelong education’ at the expense of ‘lifelong learning’ (Billet, 2010).

Kersh & Laczik (2021) sought to understand the policy transfer and policy learning in adult education in the context of the United Kingdom. Their study considered the complex interplay between policy and practice in relation to adult education and social inclusion in the context of the UK, specifically considering the role and influence of international discourses on the

landscape of adult education. According to this study, the consideration of policy learning around the social inclusion of vulnerable young adults suggests both some common patterns and some diverse practices embedded in the structure and delivery of specific adult education programmes in the UK.

2.6: Lifelong Learning Policy and Practice in the UK

Adult education has a long history in Britain stretching back to the 16th century with the emergence of a miner's library, Toynbee Hall (a pioneer community centre in East London, named after the great historian Arnold Toynbee) in the 19th century, and the establishment of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) at the turn of the 20th century (Shah, 2020). However, its discursive framing as 'lifelong learning' is a relatively recent phenomenon that emerged in the 1970s, following the publication of UNESCO's *Faure Report* (1972), which emphasised the significance of learning and education to the development of human capabilities and the realisation of potential (UNESCO, 1972).

The Russell Report of 1973 called for increased collaboration between Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and non-governmental organisations to deliver structured adult education aimed at supporting disadvantaged groups within communities (Russell, 1973). This initiative marked an early commitment to the principles of 'lifelong learning,' which was envisioned as a powerful tool for promoting social justice and democratisation. Lifelong learning was particularly focused on empowering economically and socially marginalised individuals, facilitating their active participation in society and enhancing their ability to influence democratic processes (UNESCO, 1972; OECD, 1998; Duckworth & Ade-Ojo, 2016). The framework established by these early efforts underscored the potential of education to serve as a transformative force for individual and collective empowerment, a trajectory that mirrors the idea of democratic education in Dewey's and Freire's works (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1993).

By 1996, the discourse around lifelong learning had evolved to emphasise its role in cultivating informed, active participants in democratic life, both locally and nationally (Fieldhouse, 1996). Aspin & Chapman (2001) later articulated what they termed the 'triadic purpose' of lifelong learning, which included promoting economic growth, personal development, and social inclusiveness. This framework suggested that lifelong learning should not only contribute to

economic development but also support personal empowerment and foster a deeper democratic understanding and engagement among citizens.

Despite these broad goals, from the 1980s onwards, UK policy increasingly favoured the economic aspects of lifelong learning, aligning more with global trends that prioritise economic efficiency and market responsiveness in educational initiatives (Shah, 2020; Skills Commission, 2020; DfE, 2021). This shift reflects a wider international movement towards valuing education primarily for its economic benefits, as evidenced by policies advocated by global organisations such as the World Bank and the OECD (World Bank, 2003; OECD, 1998; Billet, 2018). This emergent focus on economic outcomes of education has often overshadowed the original social and democratic intentions of lifelong learning, raising questions about the balance of priorities in educational policy (Billet, 2018; UNESCO, 2019).

Despite its long history with adult education, the UK continues to struggle with low levels of numeracy and literacy skills among adults. Recent reports indicate that approximately 1 in 6 people in Britain have low literacy skills, while 1 in 4 have poor numeracy skills (OECD, 2019). Other reports and studies have criticised the UK's adult education provision and policy as being heavily centralised, fragmented, poorly funded, and largely misaligned with the needs and priorities of local communities and businesses (Skills Commission, 2020). Yet the adult or further education sector has been the focal point of intense activity and volatility over the decades since the 1970s. In a turn of graphic detail, Augur (2019) points out that since 1980 there have been 28 pieces of legislation touching on further education and 48 Secretaries of State responsible for the sector, yet the sector is still largely marginalised and facing major challenges (Augur Report 2019: cited in Shah, 2020: 22).

Duckworth & Ade-Ojo (2016) have examined the evolution and periodisation of adult literacy (or adult education) policy and practice in the UK across three decades, highlighting convergences between policy phases and the promotion of democratic learning spaces. The paper identifies three phases of adult literacy development: the seventies to the mid-eighties, the mid-eighties to the mid-nineties and the mid-nineties to the work of the Sir Claus Moser Committee (Moser,1999). The features of adult education during each of these partly distinct phases were highlighted to map out convergences and divergences to the ethos of democratic learning spaces. The *National Literacy Strategy* (NLS) view of literacy and Bourdieu's theory

of social capital were used as the framework of analysis to interrogate the shifting ways in which adult learning was constructed and appropriated in diverse contexts and for different purposes. It was concluded that the dominant perception of literacy and the prioritised human capital perspective in the context of lifelong learning policy appear to limit the broader social justice agenda and the flourishing of democratic learning spaces (Duckworth & Ade-Ojo, 2016).

Although not specifically directed at adult learning, the *Education Reform Act of 1988* fundamentally reshaped the landscape of British education, steering it away from themes of welfarism and social justice, which had been historically rooted in education policy. This shift instead promoted neoliberal principles, focusing on individual entrepreneurship, competitiveness, and consumer choice. While the Act primarily targeted the broader educational framework, its ideological underpinnings significantly influenced adult education policies (Olssen et al., 2004). The neoliberal agenda was further entrenched with the implementation of *the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992*, which directly impacted adult education by fostering a distinct move towards vocationalisation, standardisation, credentialisation, and marketisation. This legislation marked a departure from more inclusive educational philosophies towards a model that mirrors corporate and market-driven efficiencies, reflecting broader economic policy trends (Ball, 2003; Olssen et al., 2004; Duckworth & Ade-Ojo, 2016).

In the context of lifelong learning, the *Skills for Life Strategy*, introduced in 2001 by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES, 2001), stands as a cornerstone policy over the past three decades. This strategy was developed in response to the critical issues highlighted by the Sir Claus Moser Committee in their 1999 *Moser Report*, which unveiled the alarming levels of adult illiteracy and its correlation with high unemployment rates. The Moser Report's influence was profound, catalysing a strategic overhaul that focused on the dual objectives of combating poor basic skills and reducing unemployment through targeted educational initiatives (Moser Report, 1999).

The *Skills for Life Strategy* emphasised the necessity of engaging potential learners through diverse channels to enhance both access to and retention in adult education programmes. This approach not only aimed to improve literacy and employment outcomes but also sought

to equip individuals with the skills necessary for personal and professional development in a changing economic landscape (DfES, 2001). These policy shifts reflect a broader trend towards aligning educational objectives with economic imperatives, emphasising the role of education in fostering a competitive workforce equipped to meet the demands of a globalised market. This orientation highlights a significant transformation in the philosophy underpinning UK education policy from a broader social justice perspective to one predominantly driven by economic utility and labour market needs (Ball, 2003; Olssen et al., 2004).

The second policy pathway was the creation of what the Moser committee described as high-quality literacy and numeracy skills learning infrastructure, characterised by coherent pedagogical practices, standardised curriculum and assessment regimes, and the recognition of achievement through recognised national credentials (Moser, 1999). These recommendations form the backbone of the *Skills for Life Strategy* (2001), which elaborated a distinct set of elements and an elaborate framework for what is described as the national strategy for strengthening adult basic skills in literacy, numeracy, and language (DfES, 2001). The strategy set an ambitious target of educating 750,000 adults to improve their numeracy, literacy, and language by 2004, a target which was achieved and exceeded, as progress reports indicate that more 850,000 adults were educated by that milestone year (DfES, 2004).

The UK's latest white paper on lifelong learning (DfE, 2021) provides the clearest representation of the predominance of the economic perspective to 'lifelong learning', portraying 'lifelong education' as a core element in the UK's long-term skills development strategy to "increase productivity, support growth industries, and give individuals opportunities to progress in their careers" (DfE, 2021: 6). Through its new *Lifetime Skills Guarantee* initiative, the UK Government aims to ensure that everyone across the country has adequate access to quality education and training opportunities throughout their lifespan to develop the skills required for continuing employability and economic productivity (DfE, 2021).

In the decade since 2000, the overall trajectory of UK government policy suggests increasing mainstreaming and the strengthening of 'lifelong learning' as well as an emphasis on the economic perspective characterised by discourses of employability, productivity, and economic growth. A recent report by the *Skills Commission* calls for the Government to

establish what they describe as a more coherent and sustainable 'skills ecosystem', in which lifelong learning providers work collaboratively with local employers, businesses, and communities to deepen understanding of the local labour market needs and priorities to inform the development of a workforce that meets prevailing demands and expectations (Skills Commission, 2020).

2.7: Theories of Learning and Adult Learning

Learning is complex, and multiple conceptualisations exist regarding its nature, including how and why it takes place. For this reason, educationists and psychologists have proposed a wide range of different theories and models that seek to explain what learning is and how it might take place. These theories of learning and their varied conceptualisations of the learning process are critical in trying to examine and reflect upon the teaching and learning ethos and practice at the WEA.

The most prominent categories of these theoretical perspectives include theories such as cognitive, humanistic, and situated learning theory (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Learning is based around a cognitive view of psychology, which relates to how people think and remember. It is about how human beings perceive their surroundings through the five senses, and then process these simple experiences to construct increasingly more complex mental concepts, schema, or structures which constitute learning or cognition.

Humanistic theories adopt a more holistic view of the human being in relation to the learning process and proposes that learning is more complex, situated, holistic, and not necessarily or only concerned with directly observable behaviour, as suggested earlier in the behaviourist school of thought (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020).

The aim of education according to the humanistic tradition is to develop and self-actualise the whole person's fullest potential across all facets of life including the social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. The learner is located at the centre of the entire learning process and is supposed to be in control of their own learning experience, considering the learner's own abilities, experiences, interests, weaknesses, hopes, background, and potentials.

2.8: Exploring Key Educational Theorists

The period in which the WEA was first established was the period in which educational theories, such as Dewey's thinking on education was prominent. Dewey proposed that education should go beyond the mere transmission of knowledge, but aimed at fostering critical thinking, collaborative learning, and social responsibility to prepare citizens for active participation in democratic life. There is evident alignment of Dewey's educational philosophy with that of Freire, who in his "Pedagogy of the Oppressed", also champions an education aimed at emancipation and social justice (Freire, 1993;2000). Dewey (1916) further asserted that education does not have to be acquired at the beginning of life or in childhood but can be acquired at any stage in life and then built upon.

From personal reflections, this is very much the case from my personal experience as a mature student, as well as for many of my adult returners at the WEA. Due to cultural and social reasons, my own education was interrupted whilst completing my first year at college doing my 'A' level course. However, the opportunity to return to education came when I was twenty-five years old, married and with two young children. My learning journey began at that stage, and I am still learning. Comparably, I have many students, who have chosen to return to learning due to missed opportunities when they were younger.

Despite its widely acknowledged influence on modern educational theory and practice, Dewey's perspective on education has not gone unchallenged. While Dewey and Freire emphasise transformation and empowerment, their theories on education may be seen as overly idealistic or impractical in the face of pressing social and economic challenges that require immediate and tangible skill sets that can be deployed in professional careers and economic productivity (Billet, 2028, Mason, 2017). Critics such as Kliebard argue that Dewey's focus on the 'learning process' can neglect essential content knowledge, potentially leaving students unprepared for rigorous academic and professional demands required for the modern knowledge-intensive economies and societies (Kliebard, 1987). Ravitch (2010), on the other hand, highlights potential challenges in integrating Dewey's flexible, student-driven approach with the highly formalised and rigid structures of standardised testing, measurable outcomes, and accountability metrics prevalent in today's educational systems.

Other critics argue that Dewey's emphasis on participatory, experiential learning, at the expense of concrete content knowledge, may not adequately prepare students for the realities of a modern economy. These critics suggest that Dewey's focus on democracy and social responsibility in education might overlook the equally vital goals of employability and economic productivity, which are crucial in a globalised world (Milana, 2012; Billet 2018). For instance, Billet (2010) emphasises that the educational systems should prioritise economic-technical skills that align more directly with labour market demands, pointing out a potential misalignment between Dewey's ideals and the practical economic needs of individuals and societies in the age of knowledge economies and globalisation (Milana, 2012; Mannion et al., 2011). Moreover, international bodies, such as UNESCO in their 2019 report, advocate for a balanced education that not only promotes democratic values and social justice but also addresses the economic imperatives of education. This report highlights the need for educational systems to equip students with technical and vocational skills that are critical for economic development and personal advancement (Balls, 2003; UNESCO, 2019).

The WEA was also influenced by Freire's ideology on education. His theory of learning and his philosophy on education come from modern Marxist and anti–colonialist thinkers and has a great relevance to my own research. Freire elaborates on education as being a two-way process between the tutor and learner, which is the concept very much promoted by the WEA. In his book, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000), Freire describes the four concepts of education as the 'banking'; the 'praxis'; the 'dialogue' and the 'conscientization' concepts. He defines the 'banking' concept as a form of dis-empowerment, whereby knowledge is viewed as a gift bestowed by those who are considered knowledgeable upon those who are considered to know less or nothing (Freire, 2000). In this concept, the teacher teaches, and the students are assumed to be passively receiving the knowledge. Freire suggests that this relationship of the teacher towards the student reflects an oppressive society. However, in relation to the 'praxis' concept, Freire emphasises the importance of creating a dialogue between the teacher and the learner in order to gain knowledge of their social reality. Finally, through the concept of the 'conscientization' process, the student develops a critical awareness of their social reality through reflection and action. Freire emphasises the importance of putting the knowledge required into action.

Freire's educational theories (2000) have garnered both acclaim and criticism from various scholars. While Freire's emphasis on dialogue, praxis, and conscientization resonates with the ethos of organisations like the WEA, his conceptualisation has faced scrutiny from diverse perspectives. One prominent critique stem from scholars who argue that Freire's dichotomy between the 'banking' and 'praxis' models seems to oversimplify the complexities of educational dynamics (McLaren, 1995). They contend that while the 'banking' model portrays a hierarchical and authoritarian approach to education, the 'praxis' model, with its emphasis on dialogue and mutual learning, still retains elements of power asymmetry. This arises from the fact that even in a dialogical setting, the educator may still wield considerable influence over the direction and content of discussions, potentially subduing alternative or opposing perspectives (McLaren, 1995).

Moreover, Freire's notion of 'conscientization' has been scrutinised for its potential to promote a subtle form of ideological indoctrination (Apple, 2011). Critics argue that while encouraging critical awareness of social reality is essential, Freire's approach risks imposing a predetermined or hegemonic ideological framework onto learners, limiting their ability to critically engage with diverse viewpoints or challenge dominant discourses which could be characterised by entrenched power structures and systemic inequalities (Giroux, 2011; Apple, 1995). They argue that while Freire's ideals of democratising education are commendable, the realities of institutional bureaucracy and resource constraints may impede meaningful implementation. Overall, it appears imperative for educators and organisations like the WEA to critically engage with Freire's ideas, acknowledging both their strengths and shortcomings, in pursuit of a more inclusive and emancipatory approach to education as contemplated in the WEA’s mission (WEA, 2013).

Although not an educational theorist, Rogers, an American psychologist and among the founders of the humanistic approach in psychology, states that learning is perceived as a naturalistic process, and hence, every human being is viewed as possessing and enacting the propensity to learn and develop, such that the role of the teacher is seen as merely to facilitate the learning process by providing conditions for the learners to pursue their own learning. The overall goal of education or learning is for the individual to achieve self-actualisation, autonomy, and personal empowerment.

The emphasis here is on the 'process' of learning, rather than some stable 'product', and the aim is upon the individual's ability to change and adapt to new and emergent situations. Rogers observed that "the only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realised that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security" (Rogers, 1983:104). Humanistic theories of learning, therefore, seem to bear significant levels of resemblance to the distinctive kind of learning and pedagogy emphasised within Freire's idea of radical pedagogy and democratic learning.

The humanistic theories have influenced many theoretical and practical developments in education, including student-centred learning and the andragogy of Knowles (1984). The processes and aims of education captured in Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2000) may share some features to those emphasised within the humanistic school of thought, including self-determination, self-actualisation, personal empowerment, and the autonomy of action and thought. Abraham Maslow's work (cited in Tennant, 1997) around the theory of the hierarchy of human needs, also makes substantial contributions to this type of pedagogy and learning, since it emphasises the importance of meeting higher level human needs, such as self-actualisation and belongingness.

Embedded in the humanist theories is the experiential approach to learning. It is based on equality and involves personal commitment, interaction with other people, and a willingness to engage one's emotions and feelings (Boud et al., 1993:1). Through the reading of humanistic theories of learning and through its overarching emphasis on individual empowerment and self-determination, I have developed the view that the theories offer particularly strong relevance as a framework for discussion of the pedagogical ethos at the Workers' Educational Association.

Another important theoretical perspective on learning is the one commonly known as 'andragogy', which is concerned with how adult humans learn, as distinct from the learning process among children and younger people (Knowles, 2005). Knowles states that adults are self-directed and expect to take responsibility for their own learning decisions. They need to know and understand why they need to learn something; they approach learning in terms of problem-solving; they learn best when the topic is of immediate and proven value; and

ultimately, adults need to learn through experience rather than through instruction (Knowles, 1984; Tennant, 1997).

Knowles (2005) argues that adult learning is of a different nature than children's learning, as he believes that adults are intrinsically motivated to learn and that their experience is a resource for their own and others' learning. Whereas this perspective is widely observed and accepted across different contexts, this might not always be the case for all adult learners. I have personally been involved in teaching adult learners who have been sent by the UK Government's Job Centre, for compulsory attendance, for the sole purpose of improving their chances of getting a job. These adult learners appear to be under pressure to develop their knowledge and skills to increase their employability prospects, and, as a result, do not have the same motivation to learn as others who come to learn of their own accord. Therefore, in Knowles' andragogy, there is a keen sense of optimism, motivation, and self-agency on the part of the adult learners.

This experience suggests that they do not satisfy most of the Knowles' principles of adult learning; particularly the idea that adult learners are self-motivated and are eager to take control of their own learning to solve practical experiential problems. These learners, therefore, tend to be less proactive; demonstrate less motivation and autonomy to drive their own learning; and may seem to require additional support with their learning. Notwithstanding these criticisms, the practice of adult learning and its associated underlying principles have direct and important implications for the practice and organisation of learning and teaching in post-compulsory and life-long education (Tennant, 1997).

According to the WEA's educational ethos, learning opportunities, both formal and informal are provided to empower communities and individuals to achieve higher levels of social mobility. Although there is an instrumentalist element of individuals being equipped to attain better potential for social mobility in terms of occupational employment or other forms of gainful economic activity (OECD, 1998), the overarching ethos and emphasis of education at the WEA remains predominantly on achieving individual empowerment, social justice, and transformative learning (WEA, 2022).

As outlined above, Knowles' (1984) notion of adult learning is relevant to adult learning and embraces the WEA's key characteristic of democracy and empowerment, where student-centred learning is encouraged and promoted (WEA's Development Plan, 2012-13). In practical terms, Knowles' theory of andragogy suggests that adult learning should emphasise the process of teaching, rather than the content being taught, as well as a sharper focus on the use of practical demonstrations, problem-solving, fieldwork, and case studies (Knowles, 2005).

One of the key objectives of adult education is to build good, successful relationships both socially and economically (Billet, 2018), particularly the capabilities and appropriate skills to participate in gainful employment, enterprise, and general economic self-sustenance (OECD, 1998; World Bank, 2003; Billet, 2018). This social objective appears to be broadly promoted within the WEA through the teaching of the '*Social Purpose'* module, as part of their commitment to inclusion and democratic learning. The purpose of the module was to prepare adults for the world of work and be active in social settings (WEA, 2022).

This kind of broad educational goal that focuses on employability and economic self-determination would be expected to draw significantly and coherently from Knowles' (1984) ideas of adult learning, particularly those concerned with practicality and instrumental relevance of learning to the adult's demonstrated needs. The extent to which learning and teaching at the WEA measures up to these ideals, including the democratisation of learning, remains debatable and forms a core part of this doctoral research project. The humanistic learning perspectives and principles embedded within the works of Freire (1967), Rogers (1969), Knowles (1980), and others provide useful frameworks for examining and evaluating the extent to which teaching and learning practices at the WEA are consistent with these ideals.

2.9: Synthesis and Contributions of Key Theorists

The educational philosophies of Dewey, Freire, Carl Rogers, Malcolm Knowles, and other humanistic theorists reviewed above jointly and significantly inform and enrich the pedagogical framework of adult education as practiced by the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). This synthesis of theories underpins an educational model that promotes

lifelong learning, critical consciousness, and personal empowerment, which are central to the WEA's mission. Dewey's advocacy for an educational system that is lifelong, democratic, and participatory underpins the philosophy of active engagement in learning. Dewey emphasised that education should be a continuous, socially interactive process, an ideal that aligns with the WEA's commitment to fostering environments where learners are active participants rather than passive recipients of information (Dewey, 1916).

Building on Dewey's principles, Freire introduced 'critical pedagogy', which challenges the traditional 'banking' model of education - where knowledge is supposedly deposited into learners' minds - to instead foster critical consciousness through dialogic education. Freire's concepts of 'praxis', 'dialogue', and 'conscientisation' are particularly resonant with the WEA's objectives to empower individuals through education, enabling learners to both understand and transform their social conditions (Freire, 1970). Rogers contributed a humanistic perspective to this educational framework, focusing on the personal growth and self-actualisation of learners. His approach emphasises creating facilitative learning environments that support self-directed learning and personal empowerment, echoing the WEA's learner-centred ethos (Rogers, 1969).

Further defining the specifics of adult education, Knowles introduced the concept of 'andragogy', which highlights the unique needs of adult learners, including the importance of self-directedness and the practical application of knowledge. Knowles argued that adult education should be relevant and directly applicable to the learner's life, complementing the WEA's approach to engage adult learners through experiential learning (Knowles, 1984).

These foundational theories collectively advocate for a learner-centred approach that values autonomy, personal growth, and empowerment. The integration of Dewey's democratic engagement, Freire's emancipatory education, Rogers' emphasis on self-actualisation, and Knowles' focus on practical application creates a robust theoretical framework. This framework not only educates but also empowers, closely aligning with the WEA's goals and philosophies in adult education.

The concept of lifelong learning further enhances this framework, emphasising that education is an ongoing process that extends beyond traditional schooling into all stages of life. Lifelong

learning is fundamental to democratic learning processes, emphasising inclusivity, empowerment, and active participation. Scholars like Billet (2010) and Mezirow (1997) have noted that lifelong education contributes to personal and social development, providing individuals with the skills to adapt and engage constructively in societal change.

This comprehensive theoretical foundation is critical for analysing the democratic and transformative aims of the WEA. It supports an interpretivist analysis that examines how the WEA's educational practices align with broader educational goals focused on democracy, critical engagement, and humanistic values. By integrating these educational theories, this analysis in this thesis explores how the WEA's approach facilitates empowering and participatory educational experiences, and how these practices reflect the predominant ethos of democratic learning within the organisation.

Taken altogether, the educational theories of Dewey, Freire, Rogers, and Knowles, coupled with the principles of lifelong learning, provide a substantive framework to investigate the WEA's educational practices. These theories not only justify the current study's theoretical framework but also underscore the relevance and necessity of examining the WEA's commitment to democratic and transformative education. This integration of humanistic and democratic educational philosophies ensures a comprehensive understanding of how WEA practitioners conceptualise and enact the ideals of democratic learning in their professional practice, as well as the WEA's broader impact on adult learners and their communities, highlighting the transformative power of education.

2.10: WEA and Radical Educational Reform

According to Jennings (2003), Mansbridge (one of the founders of the WEA) persisted in promoting radical educational reforms. It is said that Mansbridge demanded a national system of creches, education for all individuals, preservation aid for low-income people, connecting to academic institutions for receiving benefit, and sometimes even public vacations for all workers so they could enjoy educational opportunities. Mansbridge's educational radicalism and fervent devotion exposed the propaganda to the claim that his aim was to retain the current system of class privilege and 'draw the teeth' of the workers, according to the majority of those who encountered him (Jennings, 2003; Fieldhouse 1996).

Jennings suggests that Mansbridge was dissatisfied that the labour movement did not always support the WEA. In 1914, the WEA had established affiliations with 953 labour unions and organisations, although, this represented a small proportion of the total potential affiliations. A far greater population was represented by the 388 co-operative affiliations (Jennings, 2003). During its height in the 1930s and 1940s, the WEA was able to offer courses on topics such as economics, current affairs, labour history, and collective bargaining in centres spread across various countries. Early in the 1950s, the organisation saw a sharp decline because of adult education competition and detractors who falsely claimed that the WEA was 'communist dominated', a scenario which resulted in a substantial loss of popularity and support for the WEA in the context of the Cold War at the time (Jennings, 2003; Fieldhouse, 1996).

2.11: Exploring the Meanings of Democracy

Historically, the term 'democracy' finds its roots in Ancient Greece straddling back some 2,500 years, specifically to the city-state of Athens, where it was initially used to establish the evolved political structure that resulted from the power tussles between the rich and the poorer classes (Held, 2006). The political system that finally emerged went by the name 'democracy', and it had many of the features such as immediacy and the direct participation of the people. The word 'democracy' is derived from two Greek terms '*dēmos*' meaning 'people' and '*kratos*' meaning 'power or rule'. Therefore, in its purest sense, 'democracy' denotes the 'rule of the people by the people, for the people' (Held, 2006). The cradle of democracy was characterised by direct participation and immediacy, implying active citizen engagement in the decision-making processes of public affairs (Ober, 2008).

In contemporary Western societies, however, democracy has evolved and taken on a more nuanced meaning. It now tends to emphasise the protection of individual liberties, basic human rights, and the implementation of free-market economic systems (Ober, 2008). Applying these principles to the realm of education, 'democratic education' emerges, which champions an all-encompassing education, where each individual is given equal opportunities for learning and contributing to the learning journey (Gutmann, 1999). In this unique context, 'democracy' is understood as encouraging active student participation, thereby preparing them for responsible citizenry with political and civic consciousness. Echoing the spirit of

political democracy, 'educational democracy' underscores shared decision-making, respect for individual rights, and promoting equality of opportunity (Dewey, 1916). It serves as a reminder that the purpose of education is not solely skill acquisition for labour market demands, but also involves nurturing civic virtues and social responsibility (Biesta, 2011).

In examining the definition of what 'democratic' means in theory, the views and theories of renowned theorists such as Dewey and others have been examined to explore what 'democratic learning' means in practice. Dewey asserted that education is a social process; education is growth; education is not a preparation for life but is life itself (Dewey, 1897). Quinn (2003:84) identifies 'democratic education' using the Freirean concept of authenticity, and this is similar to that applied within the WEA:

"… authentic education must be socially and politically transformative as a liberating process that embodies a theory of knowledge put into practice (praxis) aimed at contributing to the emergence, development, and maintenance of a just society" (Quinn, 2003:84).

The latter is defined by such values as inclusiveness, equality, social justice and fairness. It is measured by the degree to which those who live at the margins of society are brought centre-stage, as agents who are facilitated to learn and act in such a way as to stimulate others to work together to bring about a more humanised environment for all (Quinn, 2003). Therefore, education goes beyond merely liberation at an individual level and has the potential for social transformation. The authenticity comes from encouraging critical thinking through praxis, the encouragement of critical forms of thinking, and the activity of encouraging the expression of learners' views about their way of life and society. (Quinn, 2003).

2.11.1: Democracy and the WEA

The WEA concept of democracy and democratic education is its transformative purpose or potential. This can have many aspects, but these include the possibility to change learners' perceptions and include them in an 'authentic' collaborative enterprise as an individual, but with wider social impact. This draws on aspects of radical education and mirrors some of the pioneering work of Freire (Freire, 1993; Mithra, 2014). The WEA promotes inclusion,

partnership, and social justice as the core guiding principles of their educational provision (WEA, 2012). The WEA pursues these broad objectives through working closely in partnership with a range of different organisations and community groups. This is evident in the WEA's approach which states:

"We deliver our mission by developing partnerships to meet individual and collective needs, using active learning and a student-centred approach in which teachers and students work as equals." (WEA website, 2012).

2.11.2: Democratic Education

Many articles in education theory and scholarship have been published about democratic education since Dewey's 1916 publication of *Democracy and Education*. An article published under the first title *An Introduction to Philosophy of Education* influenced theory and research in educational philosophy, as well as education scholarship more broadly (Doddington, 2018). 'Democratic education' has long served as a nodal point in educational theory and research, acting as a meeting point for many educational disciplines and discourses on democracy and education (Mannion et al., 2011). However, the legitimacy of democratic education has recently been under scrutiny, with some academics expressing concern about a dilemma and many others actively opposing it (Pennington, 2014).

Contemporary democratic countries have strong foundations both in liberalism and democracy, even though there are various historical and philosophical explanations of democracy (Macpherson, 1977). A common definition of liberalism is that it is a political philosophy that supports the separateness of powers, individual freedom, and the rule of law. Fairness and popular sovereignty are more usually linked with democracies. Liberal democracy is a fusion of democratic and liberal traditions. From this vantage point, democracy is desirable from a moral and practical standpoint. It grants its residents dignity and frequently benefits them in terms of fostering peace, stability, and harmony (Runciman, 2018).

For the majority of the 20th century, liberal democracy or democracy in general was promoted as the ideal. Different international institutions, including the United Nations,

officially dedicated itself to the advancement and defence of democratic ideas and practices during the democratic crises of the early 20th century (see Runciman, 2018). This commitment spread after the Cold War ended. At the end of the 20th century, roughly half of the world's population was governed by an electoral democracy (Isakhan & Stockwell, 2012).

Many historical and philosophical theories of democracy make implicit references to the connections between democracy and education. Theoretically, liberal democracy's forefathers believed that education was essential to creating a society in which individuals might realise their full potential (Barber, 1994). This idea has a significant impact on the creation of global education systems, especially on the universalisation and goals of formal schooling (Biesta, 2007). Since Dewey launched the discussion on *Democracy and Education,* important educational approaches and philosophies, including child-centred and analytical pedagogies, have placed a strong emphasis on the fight for democratic education. The debate over democratic education has grown to the point that issues, such as, 'Who should choose educational policies in a democracy?' are shaping learning as a discipline (Gutmann, 1996) Moreover, how might a democratic curriculum appear? (Apple, 2011).

Scholars of democratic education are currently looking at potential 'antidotes' to current difficulties, by drawing on these earlier discussions. Educational scholarship is rife with various interpretations of democratic education, including ideas for how education could counteract dangers to democracy or aid in the democratisation of nations. Democratic educators evaluate and recommend changes for education reform, while keeping in mind various (and occasionally conflicting) democratic ideals. Additionally, perhaps for the first time in many years, voices which are critical of democratic education, as well as of its current dangers, have been heard (Pennington, 2014). This theoretical review offers a thorough analysis of how democratic education is currently defined in the literature, taking into account various ethical orientations towards democracy and their recommendations for educational policy and practice.

Education in liberal democracies is viewed in two distinct ways. When compared to the ideals of liberal democracy, some authors point out potential flaws in their current or former systems. Writers in South Africa (Msila, 2013) or Spain (Aubert et al., 2016), for example, fall

into this category. From this vantage point, liberal democracy is viewed as an ideal, and democratic education as a means of achieving this potential result. Others frequently address the shortcomings of liberal democratic institutions and liberal democratic training, while writing from established liberal democracies such as the United States or the United Kingdom. In this sense, liberal democratic schooling could be seen as a counterargument to the majority of democratic educational systems.

For instance, Lim (2011) discusses how the Kantian notion of (individual) reasoned autonomy undercuts the potential role that discourse, and the public realm can have in democratic education from a deliberative perspective. Biesta & Lawy (2006) criticised the absence of engagement in liberal democratic curriculums from a participatory standpoint. Democratic education has a long history that dates back at least to the 17th century. Despite featuring in educational thought for a considerable length of time, democratic education has never been supported by a single institution, country, or major character (Provenzo et al., 2009).

2.11.3: Democracy and Dewey

Dewey firmly believed that an informed, involved, and interested populace was essential for a democratic society to flourish and to advance human values. Dewey opposed the idea that 'being', and 'experience' can exist in a dualistic relationship and he attacked the central tenet of Western philosophy that true, completely actual, or identifiable beings are unchanging, ideal, and eternal. Dewey argued that everything is open to and prone to change. Therefore, instead of rejecting change, humans should learn how to live properly and to deal with change. This interpretation of pragmatism, or what Dewey called 'instrumentalism', shows that knowledge and learning are obtained through identifying relationships between occurrences or changes that take place.

Dewey saw democratisation as interesting social organisation and group action to direct social systems to promote human happiness. As a result, democracy was seen by Dewey as a moral framework. Dewey thought that the intrinsic unreliability and experimental nature of democracy would encourage people's dedication to fostering co-operation and experimental inquiry more than other moral frameworks, such as, religion. Even without assurances of

success, humans should collaborate in a republic to tackle challenges that affect everyone (Campbell, 1995).

In his book, *Democracy and Education (1916)*, Dewey presented a new way of thinking about the role of schools in society. According to Dewey, education's primary goal should be to develop responsible citizens, rather than prepare students for specific jobs. According to him, the goal of creating a 'social spirit' in students can be realised through formal education. Rather than focusing on the acquisition of knowledge and abilities, Dewey's social spirit has a dispositional orientation, which could aid students in developing what he calls 'habits' (Mason, 2017).

For Dewey, the key to the transferability of information and skills is to have them ingrained in habits that may be applied in many situations. The curriculum envisioned by advocates of standardisation and educational technology places too much emphasis on academic accomplishment and too little on preparing children for the future workforce, which would limit teachers' ability to develop a feeling of community among their pupils. Dewey's educational beliefs state that these types of arguments are detrimental to students' social-spiritual development because they limit students' exposure to innovative ideas and encourage them to rely on mechanical algorithms as they learn to solve problems. These arguments are problematic for many reasons, not least of which is that they do not broaden students' minds. Dewey suggests four characteristics: honesty, openness, concentration, and responsibility are necessary for the growth of a social spirit. People's lives are governed by these four beliefs. The only way to successfully cultivate such perspectives in the 21st century is to re-evaluate the role of formal education.

2.11.4: Education in a Democratic Society

Dewey argued against requiring all children to follow the same set curriculum during the industrial era. He offers an educational philosophy based on democracy in *Democracy and Education*. He contends that while children should actively contribute to their education and that they need to experience democracy in order to learn about it, they, nevertheless, need adult supervision in order to grow up to be responsible adults (Dewey, 1916).

Gutmann and Thompson (2004) advocate that in a democratic society, every individual plays a crucial role in child-rearing. They argue that deliberative democracy is the optimal approach for defining these roles. This concept aligns with Van Waarden (2017) who explored democratic education by examining its philosophical foundations, socialist policies, institutional structures, and pedagogical methods. Such education aims to prepare youth for proactive participation in democracy, underpinning the significance of 'democratic education'. Additionally, the role of community and societal involvement as emphasised by Gutmann and Thompson (2004) highlights the collective responsibility in fostering environments conducive to democratic engagement. Van Waarden (2017) further asserts that effective democratic education extends beyond formal schooling to involve all societal actors.

2.11.5: Conscientization: Linking Freire to the WEA and Democracy

One of the difficulties with the concept of conscientization is that where Freire referred to 'making learners conscious', for example, of their existing knowledge and awareness and aware of their own potential, it is commonly linked to conscious making or more problematically to 'conscious raising'. When it is used in this latter form, it is linked to broader Marxist concepts of class consciousness and false consciousness (Freire, 1993). In this case, education becomes embroiled in a class struggle, rather than used for democratic ends and the conflicts assumed within class-based relationships can find their way into teaching and learning (Freire, 1993; Mithra, 2014).

In terms of developing a critical perspective on the idea of democratic education and this process of conscientization, Mithra (2014) provides a compelling critique of Freire, which focuses (as does the WEA) on how to develop this critical consciousness, as opposed to class consciousness. Mithra suggests that pedagogy must be '*participatory*', whereby students are asked to participate in making their education. It should also be '*situated*', where the course material is situated in students' thought and language. In addition, it should be '*critical*', as class discussion should encourage self-reflection and social reflection. Finally, it should be '*democratic*', as discourse is democratic in so far as it is constructed mutually by the students and the teacher.

Mithra further argues that critical pedagogy must also be '*dialogic*', in that the basic format of the class is dialogue around problems posed by the teacher and students. It should be '*de-socializing*', in the sense that it de-socialises students from passivity. In addition, it needs to be '*multicultural*', as the class recognises the various racial, ethnic, regional, age-based, and sexual cultures in society. It also needs to be '*research-oriented'*, as it expects students to be researchers inquiring into problems posed regarding daily experiences. It should be '*activist*', since the classroom itself is active and interactive, thanks to problem-posing, co-operative learning, and participatory formats, and finally, critical pedagogy needs to be **'***affective'*, as the critical, democratic classroom is interested in the broadest development of human feeling, as well as the development of social inquiry (Mishra, 2014:103).

Research conducted by Haraldstad & Kova (2022) reveals that pupils receive little systematic instruction in developing their skills in putting democratic principles into practice. Students have a great deal of leeway in expressing their views, because they are not told how to develop their skills in discussing a wide range of issues. This liberty permits a somewhat high level of personal independence. This reflects the fact that schools are, by definition, places where students are given repeated chances to practise skills, such as, listening to and understanding the arguments of others, presenting their own ideas to a group of peers or a teacher, and engaging in back-and-forth debate in order to reach compromises that satisfy everyone involved.

This is a representation of the fact that in classrooms, students have the chance to voice their opinions and be heard by their peers and the instructor (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Gutman & Thompson argue that students and their representatives need more background on the topic and guidance to grasp the possibility that the goal of education extends beyond the purely material concerns that currently dominate classroom discussions. Teachers can help students achieve this goal by providing supplemental guidance and counselling that clarifies the educational purpose of schooling. Making it clear what types of decisions schools may and cannot make may help students develop more positive views of democracy.

Democracy, as one of the keystones of school organisations in a wide range of cultural contexts, attracts attention in the realms of both theoretical and applied study. There has always been a link between education and democratic politics, which is rarely described in

the existing literature (Straume, 2016). Most of the time, the political structure is already in place, and education is viewed as a tool for sustaining stability and fostering social integration. Several ongoing debates in Western countries on citizenship education and democracy reflect the importance of education in promoting upward social mobility. There are many different facets to consider while discussing the connection between democracy and education. The fact that basic questions about the nature of democracy have been the topic of ongoing debate only serves to emphasise this point (Schmitter & Karl, 1991).

2.12: Conclusion and Gaps in the Literature

The Literature Review has provided a foundational understanding of democratic learning within the wider landscape of lifelong education (Billet, 2018), yet it also revealed various gaps in the literature that underscore the justification for this piece of research in relation to bridging or reducing the gaps. While the review discusses the theoretical frameworks of democracy and education, introduced by thinkers such as Dewey and Freire, it generally fails to interrogate the historical and practical adaptation of these theories within learning institutions across different periods and educational settings (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1993). Foremost, the review of the literature highlights a critical shortage of empirical studies specifically targeting how democratic learning is enacted by educational professionals in practice and across diverse contexts.

The review identifies a notable absence of detailed investigations into understanding and characterising how educators interpret, integrate, and possibly resist democratic educational principles and practices in their daily professional practices (Quinn, 2003). This gap is significant since understanding the translation of educational theories into practice is essential for assessing the effectiveness and authenticity of democratic education (Quinn, 2003). Within this fluid and rapidly changing ideological and policy context, there appears to be an emerging tension and lack of empirical clarity surrounding democratic learning and its linkages with professional practice within the context of lifelong learning, which constitutes the conceptual and empirical gap that underpins the focus of this current study.

Another major gap is the examination of the outcomes, characteristics, and manifestations associated with the implementation of democratic learning strategies in learning institutions. The literature largely lacks focused studies on the impact of these educational approaches in fostering critical thinking, empowerment, and active citizenship, which are the central ideals of democratic learning and form part of the core goals of the WEA's educational philosophy (Biesta, 2011; Isakhan & Stockwell, 2012). Without such empirical studies, the effectiveness of democratic learning and its manifestations in achieving its intended educational and social objectives remains questionable or unclear (Biesta, 2011).

The study, therefore, aimed to configure some of the key manifestations and components of what democratic learning looked like in practice. By providing some empirical findings on how democratic learning is perceived, negotiated, and enacted within a specific category of educational institution for lifelong learning, this research fills a substantial void in the literature. This research offers a more evidence-based understanding of the manifestations, practices, potentials, and challenges of democratic education (Straume, 2016).

In addition, while shifts in education policy are widely discussed and researched, there is insufficient analysis on how these policy shifts, particularly the rise of neoliberal educational and economic policies in the UK since the 1980s, have influenced democratic learning priorities and practices within educational institutions (Gutmann, 1999). Understanding the interplay between policy changes and educational practices is crucial for identifying the challenges posed by neoliberal ideologies to democratic education (Gutmann, 1999).

Overall, this research is justified, not only by these gaps, but also by the unique position of the WEA in the landscape of educational institutions in the UK, particularly in the lifelong learning subsector. The WEA's longstanding commitment to democratic principles amid shifting political and economic climates presents a unique case for studying the resilience and adaptability of educational practices (WEA, 2012). Moreover, at a time when neoliberal ideologies increasingly influence educational objectives and priorities, examining the WEA's adherence to democratic education principles offers timely insights into balancing economic imperatives with traditional educational ideals, such as empowerment, emancipation, self-determination, etc. (Runciman, 2018). In overall terms, this research not only addresses critical gaps in the existing literature, but also contributes to a more evidence-based

understanding of democratic learning in practice that could inform both theory and practice, supporting the development of educational practices that foster a well-informed, engaged citizenry.

Each of the theorists cited shaped the study and my desire as a researcher to investigate further democratic learning from the tutor's perspective. The cumulative impact of these theorists was felt in my growing awareness of not simply what democratic learning 'looked like' in practice, but the need to theorise my own practice as a tutor in order to fully understand the changes that democratic pedagogy require in both tutor and tutees. The need to subject these theories to empirical scrutiny became one of the key drivers to my journey to *becoming* a researcher.

Chapter 3: Methodology

"The best research you can do is talk to people." *(Terry Pratchett)*

3.1: Introduction

One of the main objectives as a researcher is to maintain "philosophical, theoretical, ontological, and epistemological coherence" (Wellington et al., 2005: 98) throughout all stages of the research process. This chapter provides the rationale, discussion and critique of the methodology and methods that I adopted in seeking to address my research questions and the ontological and epistemological consideration that informed my chosen research approach. It also draws upon theoretical perspectives to explain my position as a researcher.

The WEA was chosen as a case study to address my research questions on democracy and adult learning, in order to develop my research. This approach fits within the broader interpretative paradigm, where I explore the experiences and perceptions of my participants on the concept of democratic learning within the context of the WEA. This chapter revisits the aim of the research and discusses research methods and methodologies, ethical considerations, insider researcher and reflexivity, using the extant literature.

3.2: Research Aims

The aim and purpose of my research was to examine what 'democratic learning' means from a tutor perspective, to gain a deeper insight into the ways in which democratic or student-centred pedagogies might be enacted within the context of the WEA's teaching and learning environment and embodied within its ethos and mission statement. (WEA, 2018). This was

achieved by exploring the views of tutors regarding the concept of 'democratic learning' through the following: exploring the tutor and learner relationship, and, examining to what extent WEA policies support democratic learning in classroom and learning settings, by means of exploring both the internal and external drivers and the political influence upon adult learning agenda.

Through this research, I endeavoured to gain a better understanding of how my colleagues at the Workers' Educational Association perceived and understood the concept of 'democratic learning' and how it is applied in the classrooms and learning environments in line with the WEA's core values.

3.3: Research Design

This section discusses the research design and the approach that was adopted in this study, as well as the justification for these choices. Overall, the study was formulated within the qualitative research approach and embraced a case study research design where semi-structured in-depth interviewing was the primary technique for data gathering, and where the WEA constituted the singular case study. Research design can be understood as a comprehensive mapping of how the research questions, approaches, paradigms, methods, evidence collection, analyses, and interpretations relate to one another in a logical and integrated system during the conducting of a research study (Yin, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The research design is, therefore, the roadmap for a research project (Yin, 2003). A research design is the logic that links the research purpose and questions to the processes for empirical data collection, data analysis, and to make conclusions drawn from the data (Yin, 2009). The research design implies or relies on the chosen research paradigm (Creswell, 2009).

Denzin & Lincoln (2005) have left no doubt as to the importance of a well-defined research design. The research design enables the researcher to explain their own procedures, choices, and justifications, which partly persuades their readers to trust the outcomes of the study, and partly enables the researcher herself to achieve the purposes of the study (p.24). Taking a wider perspective, three broad purposes for social science research can be distinguished, namely: description, explanation, and exploration (Yin, 2003; Yin, 2014). Many studies often,

and quite usefully, combine more than one of these basic research purposes (Yin, 2003).

This study pursues all three basic purposes, but in varying proportions, whereby greater emphasis was placed on various purposes at different stages or parts of the study. For instance, descriptive and exploratory purposes were emphasised when the study examined how WEA tutors perceived, negotiated, and enacted the concept of 'democratic learning' in the context of their own pedagogical practices, whereas explanation took greater priority when the study tried to uncover underlying reasons and how different elements were related from the tutor's perspective. This study emphasised descriptive or exploratory approaches, since it was concerned with understanding the characteristics or operations of a particular situation, process, or phenomenon of interest (in this case, 'democratic learning'), and did not seek to verify hypothesised relationships among specific variables. (Yin, 2003).

3.4: Research Methods and Methodology

Methodology is understood as the overarching plan of action or process, or the frame of thinking that underpins the choice of specific research methods that are considered appropriate for a given research activity (Crotty, 1998). Methodology consists of the steps, as well as the underlying philosophical frame, that guides the researcher in organising, planning, and completing their research, through the full range of key elements, such as their own subject knowledge, research design, data collection, and data analysis techniques (Gerrish & Lacey, 2006). Crotty (1998) has provided an elegant definition of research methodology as "the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes" (Crotty, 1998:3). A clear distinction needs to be established between research methodology and research methods. In emphasising this distinction, Crotty (1998,) defines research 'methods' as "the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyse data related to some research question or hypothesis" (Crotty, 1998:3).

In similar arguments, Kothari (2005) states that research must be planned and placed into a series of steps which are in unison with the theoretical standpoint of the researcher for the methods to be effective. It is important, therefore, to choose appropriate research methods which will meet the researcher's aims and objectives for their research. Moreover, Guba

(1990) claims that a search approach cannot be viewed in isolation from the ontological and epistemological position adopted by the researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Therefore, the choice to apply a qualitative approach within the study research design in this specific study was informed by the appropriateness of these approaches for the area of research that this study was concerned with (educational research), as well as the nature of the overarching research question and objectives that framed the study. Due to their appropriateness and effectiveness, qualitative approaches and case study designs are widely used to explore questions in the humanities and social science research, including educational research (Creswell, 2002; Yin, 2003; Bryman, 2016).

3.5: Research Paradigms

Paradigms are a set of theoretical and conceptual frameworks which guide the design and conduct of scientific research, including ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The philosophical inclination of a researcher, which may be explicit or implicit, can be described as their research paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Placing a research project within a paradigmatic framework is a crucial matter, as it will lead researchers to reflect upon the broader epistemological and philosophical consequences of their perspective (Guba, 1990).

Paradigms enable the researcher to interpret and make sense of the world or phenomena they are researching (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Guba (1990) suggests that paradigms are defined through their characteristics: ontology explores what is reality; epistemology considers how you know this; and methodology is the exploration of information. Methods allow decisions about the way that the data is collected and analysed, which will depend on the type of research design, as well as the researcher's theoretical perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). These paradigms have their own unique functionality, and each research paradigm has certain assumptions, strategies, methods, and limitations, and the way the quality of the resultant research is evaluated differs (Guba, 1990). A researcher must, therefore, adopt the paradigm within which they will be working, understand the nature of their chosen paradigm, and document their paradigmatic choice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba, 1990).

3.5.1: Ontology and Epistemology

The field of social science contains a formidable body of intersecting philosophical and theoretical traditions and positions. However, Denzin & Lincoln (2005) explain that there are basically two major philosophical perspectives that appear to exert the greatest influence and direction on researchers' beliefs, principles, and paradigms in the research process. These are ontology and epistemology. Denzin & Lincoln (2005) define ontology as 'the nature of being' or 'reality'. Ontology can hence also be defined as 'the science or study of being' and is explained as concerned with the nature of reality (Blaikie, 2000). Ontology also constitutes the researcher's perspective or idea of reality, of how they perceive things to be, and this will dictate what they research, what they are interested in and what methodology they will use. Understanding one's ontological standpoint at the outset of the research process is vital, as it helps the researcher to make a firm decision regarding the research structure (Blaikie, 2000).

Epistemology, on the other hand, is defined as the theory of knowledge and is concerned with the mind's perception of reality (Crotty, 1998). In practical terms, epistemology refers to the way knowledge regarding the nature of reality may be investigated, understood, and interpreted (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Bryman, 2008). An understanding of epistemological standpoints helps to underpin the entire research process and enables the researcher to understand how we know what we know about the nature of reality (Crotty, 1988). It ensures that researchers' studies are founded on knowledge that is adequate and legitimate, as well as based on a solid philosophical grounding.

The stance adopted by a social scientist with respect to these two philosophical concepts fundamentally influences their perception of reality and how knowledge about reality can be acquired, as well as their idea of how to approach the overall research process: including research questions; data collection instruments; analytical frameworks; data interpretations; and conclusions. Clearly this relation implies that specific ontological positions tend to be more consistent with epistemological stances in the conducting of research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Richards (2003) distinguishes two primary ontological paradigms, the first being 'realism' and the second is 'relativism or naturalism' (Bryman, 2016). 'Realism' is basically the ontological claim that an independent reality exist that is separate from our descriptions of it, and, that given the appropriate methods and approaches, scientists can reasonably investigate and discover the nature of this external reality (Bryman, 2016). Richards explains that, whereas the realist perspective sees at the world as a real entity that has universal rules and structures that govern behaviour, the relativist holds that there is no singular account or character of reality and that humans construct social meanings and behaviour in many different and highly fluid ways. Hence, there are potentially multiple realities rather than a singular reality (Richards, 2003: 34).

Regarding how we can acquire knowledge about the nature of reality, Denzin & Lincoln (2005) distinguish two diametrically opposed epistemological paradigms, namely: the 'positivist paradigm' and the 'constructivist or interpretivist' paradigm. The same paradigms have been referred to respectively as the 'objectivist/positivist' and the 'subjectivist epistemological' stands (Richards, 2003; Bryman, 2008). These basic ontological and epistemological stances have important implications for all forms of scientific research generally, and are even weightier for social science research, where investigations focus on the complex character of human actions, interactions, and organisations. The realist or positivist approach begins with a dilemma, idea, or observation, as this is the first step associated with this philosophy. The positivist research standpoint holds that it is necessary and possible to investigate and discover the 'true' nature of reality that is independent of human thoughts or actions (Bryman, 2016).

The opposite of positivist epistemology is known as 'constructivism' or 'constructivist epistemology' (Guba & Lincoln,1994). 'Constructivism' is a theoretical framework in the social sciences that posits that individuals and groups construct their understanding of the world through their own experiences and perceptions, as well as reflection on those experiences (Charmaz, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In the context of social science research, constructivism has important implications for both the design of research projects and the interpretation of research findings. 'Constructivist epistemologies' emphasise the importance of the individual and subjective interpretation in understanding social phenomena (Charmaz,

2006; Crotty, 1998). It argues that reality is not a fixed entity but is instead constructed by individuals based on their perceptions and experiences. A central proposition in constructivist epistemology holds that social reality is constructed and relative, rather than objective and fixed, and that social phenomena are produced through social interaction and are therefore in a constant state of revision (Guba, 1990).

In addition, constructivism emphasises the importance of context in understanding social phenomena. This recognition is particularly important in social research, where context often plays a significant role in shaping the behaviours and attitudes that are being studied. By focusing on the ways in which individuals construct their own understandings of the world, constructivism encourages researchers to pay attention to the specific contexts in which their research is being conducted (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Crotty, 1998). There are, however, also criticisms of constructivist epistemology. One of the main criticisms is its relative lack of objectivity and generalisability. By emphasising the subjective nature of reality and exalting the supremacy of people's individual experiences and perceptions, constructivism can be seen to undermine the idea of objective facts or reality that can be independently discovered (Charmaz, 2006). This can make it difficult to generalise findings from constructivist research, since what is true for one individual or group may not be true for another (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Crotty, 1998).

These two types of epistemologies - positivism and constructivism - have been regarded as having laid the philosophical foundation for research methods, in which quantitative methods are best suited for studies embracing the positivistic or realist standpoint. Alternatively, the qualitative approach is appropriate for researchers who are inclined towards a constructivist approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). However, many researchers argue that it is possible to conduct research orientated by a qualitative method within the boundary of positivism research or to use a quantitative method in a fundamentally constructivist grounded research (Crotty, 1998; Charmaz, 2006).

3.5.2: Interpretivism (Anti-positivism)

Anti-positivism is also known as interpretivism in education and social science research, and it is a philosophical approach (Hayes, 2000). It is linked to ontology and works on the basis

that any “laws or principles do not exist outside of the researcher’s mind” (Salama, 2019:10). The Anti-positivism or Interpretivism approach uses methods such as unstructured interviews or participants’ observations and, by using these ways of collecting data for the research, it helps to focus on human cultural norms, values, and symbols, which have an impact on individual’s experiences (Hayes, 2000). It declares that the purpose of the research is to examine the meaning and, therefore, the interpretation must remain central (Gerrish & Lacey, 2006). This type of research enables a deeper understanding of how and why the research is being undertaken, and it is valuable in terms of understanding social processes (Salama, 2019).

In this current research project, focusing on the WEA, the interpretivist approach was embraced, as it allowed an in-depth exploration and interrogation of people’s experiences, feelings, perspectives, challenges, concerns, and opportunities from their own voices, regarding how democratic learning is negotiated and enacted in their own practice at the WEA. Overall, interpretivist epistemology holds that reality does not exist independent of human thought and experiences. Rather, it commits to the view that knowledge about reality is socially created by participants, while being embedded within social-cultural contexts, and hence needs to be interpreted in multiple ways to generate meaning and significant insights (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

In the context of this study, the researcher appreciated that the phenomenon of ‘democratic learning’ would be perceived and negotiated quite differently by different practitioners located within the WEA, which is further shaped by the individual’s own experiences, histories, socio-demographic attributes, and beliefs. In other words, there is no standardised or objective way in which democratic learning is to be understood, experienced, and enacted by everyone at the WEA. Instead, every practitioner’s account and experiences of ‘democratic learning’ is open to multiple and even conflicting interpretations. This is the reason the interpretivist paradigm provides a more robust epistemological approach for investigating and exploring the subject matter of this research, which was to explore the experiences and perspectives of teaching practitioners in relation to the ‘democratic learning’ ethos at the WEA.

3.5.3: Positivism

Positivism is a philosophical school of thought that is the opposite of relativism, hence it is also considered to stand in contrast to constructivism and interpretivism (Bryman, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The positivist philosophical approach is based on the researcher's belief of the existence of accurate and value-free data and considers that human beings and their actions should be studied as objectively as part of the natural world (Guba, 1990). Positivism is also part of ontology but, in total contrast, it works on the basis that all the research objects exist outside of the researcher's mind (Salama, 2019). This means that the reality that researchers are observing, and the research being carried out is believed to be objective, value-free, and not dependent on interpretation (Salama, 2019). The positivist approach allows the researchers to examine the underlying causes and explanations of a natural phenomenon, and why and how something happened. (Polit & Beck, 2018). The researcher does this by identifying the universal laws and principles that exist and are agreed upon (Salama, 2019).

It may be argued, therefore, that researchers who employ the quantitative paradigm tend to ascribe to realist ontology and positivist epistemology, while qualitative researchers would seem to believe in the relativist ontology and constructivist or interpretivist epistemology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Other writers, such as Richards (2003), have however, claimed that the dichotomy imposed between the quantitative and qualitative research approaches is misleading and irrelevant for theoretical and practical purposes.

3.6: Qualitative Research Approach

Yates (2004: 138) states that qualitative research attempts to "explore how individuals or group members give meaning to and express their understanding of themselves, their experiences and/or their worlds". Kvale & Brinkman (2006) also assert that qualitative research is beneficial in collating people's ideas, thoughts, feelings, and attitudes and, as such, is criticised as being not scientific in nature. It is a more widely used method in the field of education and social sciences, exploring the views and voices of people (Crotty, 1988). It is a method based on the interpretivist perspective and emphasises the meaning as well as the understanding of behaviour and is derived from social science (Gerrish & Lacey, 2006).

3.6.1: The Case Study Design

The case study research design is a popular and valuable method in many fields, including psychology, sociology, education, and business. It involves an in-depth investigation of a single individual, group, location, or event to explore in more depth the underlying processes, causes, patterns, and relationships among various phenomena (Stake, 2005). Defining case study research can be problematic as a case study can constitute an approach and a research method at the same time (Yin, 2003). The terms 'case study,' 'case study method' and 'case method' appear to be used interchangeably in the literature (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009). The case study as a research method or strategy has traditionally been undermined and viewed as lacking rigour and objectivity when compared with other social research methods, such as cross-sectional surveys (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2014).

The major critique of the case study research design is that the findings cannot be easily generalised to a larger population due to the inherent focus on a single case, making it somewhat difficult to determine whether the results from a case study are applicable in other contexts (Yin, 2003). The case study design has also been criticised for its susceptibility to subjectivity and potential bias, particularly since case studies are inherently interpretive and commonly embrace the qualitative research approach (Yin, 2003; Stake, 2005; Bryman, 2016).

However, considerable theoretical and methodological support appears to exist for the case study approach in social science research, and this is mostly on the basis that it has higher potential for producing more robust and compelling empirical findings. This is particularly as case studies typically use a variety of data gathering methods to delve deeper in order to explore people's experiences, perspectives, feelings, thoughts, beliefs, stories, and actions within their own familiar settings (Yin, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Case studies typically involve, or allow for, a variety of data collection methods (both qualitative and quantitative), such as interviews, observations, questionnaires, and document analysis, which allows researchers to gain a more holistic and multi-layered understanding of the topic of study, providing a rich context and in-depth insights that other research methods may not typically capture (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2003).

A further major appeal of case study research is its capability to provide a pathway to examine people and events in their natural settings and, to a greater depth than can be found in other research approaches. This can provide interpretations and insights into real-world situations, experiences, and processes, making case study findings more applicable to practice in relevant contexts (Stake, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Merriam (1998) explains that a case study can also offer "a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon" and therefore, it is particularly useful when applied to fields of study such as education, since "educational processes, problems and programmes can be examined to bring about understanding that in turn can affect and maybe even improve practice" (Merriam,1998: 41).

Merriam (1998) suggests that case studies have three main functional orientations: descriptive, interpretive, and evaluative (Merriam, 1998: 38). Therefore, any researcher involved in a case study can be encouraged to be descriptive, to interpret their own opinions, thoughts, and feelings about the research topic, and to evaluate their own perspective of it. The case study research design allows for the utilisation of different data collection methods and instruments simultaneously, in order to collect different types of evidence within the same study (Yin, 2003). The case study approach enables the researcher to undertake a more in-depth investigation of a limited number of phenomena and their relationship to the context in which they occur, as it applies in this case study, where the phenomenon of 'democratic learning' was explored within the context of the WEA where it is embedded.

Many writers have indicated that the case study inquiry is regarded as the most suitable strategy when the boundary of the phenomenon under investigation is not easily distinguishable from its context; or it is relatively problematic to define; or where the phenomenon bears complex interactions with its context, such that the context also becomes part of the study (Yin, 2003: 4; Stake, 2005). This aspect of case study design directly applied to my study, considering that democratic learning forms a core part of the teaching and learning ethos at the WEA, hence making it harder to avoid making the WEA organisation the subject of study while studying 'democratic learning'.

Creswell and Creswell (2014) have argued that case study research is a completely legitimate research design or methodology that is suitable to both qualitative and quantitative research approaches. They further suggested it is well suited to a holistic, democratic discipline dealing

with the understanding and change of interwoven complexities associated with interpersonal processes that emerge in a wider social context. A distinguishing feature of case study research is that although the number of cases may be small, or even as little as one, the number of variables involved can be large (Yin, 2009). The case study research design has strong philosophical underpinnings, which provide a framework for exploratory research in real-life settings (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009).

The case study is based on any mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches, which produces holistic understandings of rich, contextual, and generally unstructured, non-numeric data (Mason, 2002) by engaging in conversations with the research participants in a natural setting (Creswell, 2009). Gomm et al. (2000) identified three advantages of conducting case study research. First, the case study approach allows for depth of analysis through its emphasis on conducting rich, holistic, and in-depth investigation of a particular phenomenon, setting, individual, or event. Secondly, the case study approach focuses on real-world contexts, which adds a layer of practicality and applicability that can be missing in experimental research. Finally, the case study approach provides opportunities for the generation of hypotheses, especially useful in the initial stages of research, where the aim is to generate hypotheses for further testing. They can identify trends, patterns, and relationships which can form the basis of a hypothesis and inform future research (Gomm et al., 2000; Creswell, 2009).

The defining feature of case study research is its focus on ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions (Myers, 2009) and, for this reason, it is appropriate for descriptive and exploratory studies (Mouton, 2001). Jones & Lyons (2004) state that case studies can have multiple perspectives and tend to focus on one or two issues which are fundamental to understanding the system being examined (Jones & Lyons, 2004). This means that the researcher considers not just the voice and the perspective of the participants, or of the relevant groups of participants and the interaction between them, but also the context in which this happens.

The foregoing section presents several arguments supporting the case study research design, emphasising its potential to generate robust empirical findings by using a variety of data collection methods and providing rich, in-depth insights into real-world contexts. However, there are inherent limitations in the case study approach. Yin (2003) and Stake (2005)

advocate for the depth and contextual richness of case studies, but critics might argue that such in-depth focus can lead to issues with generalisability. The specificity and contextual nature of case studies can hinder the ability to apply findings broadly across different settings or populations.

Furthermore, Denzin & Lincoln (2005) and Merriam (1998) highlight the holistic and naturalistic investigation of phenomena, yet this strength can also be a potential weakness as the complexity of real-life settings might introduce uncontrollable numbers or categories of variables that affect the reliability and validity of the findings (Yin 2009; 2014). The reliance on qualitative data, while enriching the narrative and understanding, can also introduce subjectivity and researcher bias. Thus, while the case study design is celebrated for its detailed exploration, its methodological limitations regarding generalisability, objectivity, and control over variables pose significant challenges (Stake, 2005; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

3.6.2: Why the Case Study Approach?

The core attributes and strengths of the case study research design, as portrayed in the methodological literature, have already been examined in considerable detail in the previous section and are not revisited here. Instead, this brief section provides a summarised basis for the choice of the case study design in more practical terms, while drawing from the points raised above. In this research, the case study approach enabled me as the researcher to explore the experiences, perspectives, and perceptions of tutors regarding the concept of 'democratic learning', within the WEA context.

The phenomenon investigated was embedded in the everyday, real-life teaching and learning environment within the WEA settings, hence the WEA organisation itself also became a subject of study, since it cannot be separated from 'democratic learning' which is at the core of its ethos. The crux of this piece of research was the context in which learning occurs. Not only was the perspective of the tutors explored and illuminated, but also the context in which this happened (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2003). Considering other research designs, such as cross-sectional surveys or scientific experimental designs, these would not be particularly suitable for conducting a holistic and in-depth investigation into how democratic learning is perceived, negotiated, and enacted within the context of the WEA.

The literature is clear that the case study design is the more suitable approach for studies where a given phenomenon is to be studied holistically and within its own natural context, in order to gain an in-depth understanding and interpretation of how and why things are happening as they are (Yin, 2003). Drawing on the interpretative and holistic nature of the case study design, enabled "gathering as much information about the problem as possible" (Merriam, 1998: 39). The aim was to be able to explain and interpret the perceptions and experiences of my research participants (tutors) regarding the concept of democratic learning and how they make sense and meaning of it. Finally, it is evaluative in the sense that, through listening to the voices of the tutors with regards to the concept of 'democratic learning' within the WEA, and by means of identifying the key themes, this may help the WEA to re-evaluate the current practice, policies, and training to ensure 'democratic learning' is truly embedded within the teaching and learning environment of the WEA.

Given that the aim of the current study was to explore the perceptions, understanding and experiences of tutors and learners within the WEA learning setting and examining whether the WEA's core value of being democratic is embedded within the teaching and learning experiences of the tutors, a qualitative case study was, therefore, the approach that was best suited to this type of study.

3.7: Data Collection Approaches

One of the strengths of the case study approach is its flexibility and adaptability that allows single or multiple methods of data collection to be used to investigate a research problem (Yin, 2003). A wide variety of data collection methods can be used, including direct observation, participant observation, interviews, focus groups, documentary sources, archival records, and physical artefacts (Mouton, 2001; Myers, 2009). Using multiple sources of data and multiple participants is preferable for the purpose of triangulation (Yin, 2009) and to allow significant and multiple insights to emerge from the data gathered (Myers, 2009).

Whilst interpretivist research often relies on total immersion in a setting, this is not necessarily a requirement within case study research. A primary source of data collection in both qualitative research (Myers, 2009) and in case studies (Yin, 2009: 106) is the interview. The interview method, does not, however, automatically guarantee the collection of rich data

and production of meaningful insights, unless it is appropriately designed and implemented (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In my research, the objective of data collection was to explore the experiences and perceptions of tutors as to their understanding of what 'democratic learning' meant within the learning context of the WEA.

The in-depth semi-structured interviews were, therefore, a directly relevant instrument for data collection in this research context. In-depth interviews can indeed be a powerful tool in qualitative research such as this study, as they allow for a level of depth, nuance, and personal understanding that is often unattainable through other methods. In-depth interviews enable researchers to obtain detailed information about individuals' thoughts, behaviours, perspectives, experiences, and perceptions. It is often not possible to achieve this depth of information via other data collection methods, such as surveys or questionnaires, which may not allow respondents to fully express their experiences or feelings (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2014).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six tutors from across the North West region to obtain the rich primary data of participants' experiences that I felt could not be captured using a questionnaire. Although the semi-structured interviews proved most effective in meeting my research objective, I was aware that this method had its limitations and ethical implications, which I, as the researcher, will now take into consideration in the last section of this chapter.

3.7.1: Semi-Structured Interviews

Arksey & Knight (1999) state that interviewing, rather than being a single method, is a family of research practices, which have one thing in common, namely a discussion between people, with one of these people being the researcher: the person conducting a 'systematic enquiry' (Arksey & Knight, 1999:2). Characterising interviewing as multi-faceted, rather than having a single aspect, Arksey & Knight (1999) argue that interviews can be conducted in a variety of ways: face-to-face; over the telephone and the Internet; or in a group setting. Interviews can also range in character from spontaneous conversations to highly structured, closed interview styles associated with social survey research.

Semi-structured interviews offer the opportunity to obtain rich data about participants' perspectives and lived experiences and can facilitate learning to see the world from the eyes of the person being interviewed (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Kvale, 1996). The semi-structured interview method allows the researcher to "engage with, talk to, and question and explore the experiences of the participants" (Wellington et al., 2005:102).

The capability to conduct a conversation with participants and to probe into a range of relevant themes and topics offered a flexible and enriched opportunity to explore and gain more in-depth insight into how practitioners at the WEA perceived, negotiated, and enacted the ethos of 'democratic learning' in their everyday professional practice. As emphasised by Kvale and Brinkman (2009), the semi-structured interviews involved an interview guide or schedule that contained topics, themes, or issues to be covered seamlessly during the interview, rather than following a rigid sequence of standardised questions.

However, the idea of the semi-structured interview has been critiqued in the research literature. Several academics propose a reconceptualisation of the interview process, favouring a 'less-to-more structured' scale, instead of the conventional classification of open, semi-structured, or structured interviews. The reasoning behind this reframing is that even interviews perceived as open or semi-structured inherently embody a degree of structure, since there is invariably a guiding intention or implicit aim directing the conversation (Berg, 2007).

This suggests that it might be more effective to consider interviews along a continuum of structure, ranging from less to more, providing a more nuanced perspective on the degree to which the interviewer influences the dialogue (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Kvale, 1996). Thus, to reflect the varying dynamics of the interview process more accurately, it seems appropriate to use a spectrum-like approach of 'less structured' to 'more structured' (Creswell, 2013).

The overall approach was that I, as the interviewer, remained flexible and adaptive throughout the interview, so that the sequence of questions could change, their content could evolve, and I could probe more deeply into initial responses to gain a more in-depth answer to the question (see also Arksey & Knight, 1999). Drawing on all the core attributes and strengths associated with semi-structured interviewing and weighing these against the

subject and aims of my research, there was no doubt that the semi-structured interview was the most appropriate data collection tool in this study, which focused on exploring the experiences and perceptions of both the WEA tutors and the learners in relation to the concept of democratic learning and how it was embedded in the teaching and learning environment within the WEA.

3.7.2: Sample Size and Selection Strategy

The rationale for selecting tutors from different subject areas from across the North West region, as opposed to just from Lancashire, was to enable me to minimise the risks of homogeneity among research participants and to enhance the potential for diversity of experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives, which is known to result in richer and more diverse research findings and insights (Yin, 2003; Stake, 2005). The selection was further guided by the importance of achieving diversity and heterogeneity in terms of gender, age groups, disciplinary backgrounds, years of experience working at the WEA, and ethnicity (although white British ethnicity was over-represented in the sample, since they form the absolute majority in the WEA workforce). In interpretive research such as this study, the number of participants may be relatively small, but it is important to draw participants from a wide range of socio-demographic and geographic backgrounds to capture a diversity of experiences, perspectives, and perceptions across the sample. The need for the heterogeneity of participants is, therefore, a major consideration in selecting participants during case study research (Stake, 2005).

The sample chosen for the semi-structured interview with tutors were selected through voluntary participation and represents a small sample of tutors teaching at the WEA. The potential participants were initially contacted via email drawn from a list of WEA practitioners across the North West area. They were all provided with participation information sheets designed specifically for the study, which requested their help to participate in the study. Voluntary and informed consent is an important and well-established ethical consideration in the conduct of social research (Bryman, 2016), hence all participants in my study took part through informed and voluntary consent. Furthermore, in a case study or indeed all other social research designs, it is never possible or even reasonable to include and study everyone in the target population. A limited sample of participants must be selected for the study within

the reasonable constraints of feasibility, time, and costs (Creswell, 2006; Bryman, 2017; Yin, 2003).

Therefore, as in this study, there may be voices of other WEA tutors teaching in other areas of the curriculum with different perspectives who might have offered different experiences and perceptions on the concept of 'democratic learning' yet are not represented in the study. However, in the conduct of social research, the fact that some individuals were not represented in the sample does not normally constitute a limitation or a flaw in the study, since the study cannot include everyone (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Yin, 2003; Bryman, 2016).

3.7.3: Profiles of WEA Study Participants

The six tutors involved in the research project at WEA come from a diverse array of backgrounds and experiences. **Anna**, a white female aged between 40 and 50, is relatively new to the WEA, having joined just a year ago, but she brings with her over 20 years of prior experience from various sectors. She holds a Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) along with a master's degree, and she teaches both accredited and non-accredited ESOL courses.

Lynne is a white female and a seasoned educator in teacher training. She has been with the WEA for over 20 years, providing both accredited and non-accredited courses. Her expertise spans a considerable range, indicative of her age bracket between 49 and 59 years. Similarly, **Noddy** has been part of the WEA for six years, focusing on drama and scriptwriting for adults with learning difficulties, enriching the non-accredited course offerings. Noddy is also a white female aged between 55-65.

On the other hand, **Ken** and **John**, both white males aged between 49 and 59, teach creative writing and photography, respectively. Ken has been a part of the WEA for four years, while John joined more recently, two years ago. Both specialise in non-accredited courses, bringing fresh perspectives and contemporary techniques to their disciplines. The most experienced of the group, **Jim,** an Asian male aged between 55 and 65, has dedicated over 25 years to teaching both accredited and non-accredited IT courses at the WEA. The table below provides a summary of the key profile attributes of the six tutors who participated in the in-depth interviews.

Table: Profile of WEA tutors who participated in the in-depth interviews

Name*:	Ethnicity	Age	Subject taught	Experience
Anna	White female	40 - 50	ESOL	1 year
Lynne	White female	49- 59	Teacher Training	20 years
Noddy	While female	49- 59	Drama	6 years
Ken	White male	49 - 59	Creative writing	4 years
John	White male	49 - 59	Photography	2 years
Jim	Asian male	55 - 65	IT	25+ years
*Pseudonyms have been used in reporting the study				

3.7.4: Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews.

My initial contact with all six of my colleagues was made individually and it provided a brief overview of my research, its aim and objectives, and the time commitment required. (see Appendix 5 for a copy of the research information sheet that was emailed to the research participants). Once tutors returned their completed consent forms, a convenient day, time, and venue was arranged with the tutors to conduct the semi-structured interviews.

The interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis with the six WEA tutors from across the North West region in convenient locations chosen by the tutors themselves. These locations ranged from small coffee shops, a pre-booked room in a local library, to a community centre social room. The interviews were scheduled within a period of eight weeks, based on the tutors' availability. The interviewees were pre-briefed in relation to the interview process and were given the assurance of full confidentiality and anonymity. As is standard ethical practice regarding anonymity and confidentiality, the participants were assured that their names and identities would be totally anonymised at all stages of the study, such that it would not be possible for anyone to identify them or infer their identities.

The confidentiality of the participants was protected by ensuring that whatever the participant discussed during the interviews was entirely for the purpose of the present study and would not be disclosed to any third parties or used for any other purposes whatsoever (Creswell and Creswell, 2014; Bryman, 2016). I reassured them that there was no correct answer to the questions and that what I was most interested in were their stories and their

accounts. In addition, I also emphasised to them the participant's right to withdraw from the process at any stage. The right of a participant to withdraw voluntary participation in a research study, with or without giving reasons, is considered a fundamental part of appropriate ethical practice in the conduct of social research (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2014). Each interview with the tutors lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in an informal and relaxed environment at various locations across the Northwest. The interviews were conducted between January and April 2015. It is important to acknowledge that these interviews were conducted nearly a decade ago, and as a result, the respondents' views, feelings, and experiences may have changed over time. At an organisational level, the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) has undergone several restructures to implement new technological systems, including the introduction of the Canvas, which is the virtual learning environment, aimed at enhancing workforce efficiency. It would be interesting to explore (in future research) the impact of such technological changes on practice and practitioner experiences. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has also transformed the learning culture, with the shift to online remote learning. This brought together learners from diverse backgrounds and locations across the country. Learners were brought together from different cultural backgrounds without the need for geographical relocation. This emerged in the findings where learners found movement to fixed settings difficult. These developments could potentially affect the data and findings presented in this work, should the interviews be conducted after this restructure.

The interviews were recorded using an audio recording device with the permission of all the tutor participants. The audio recordings were stored in a password-encrypted file and laptop which was only accessible to the researcher, thus ensuring robust data security as required under the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR Act 2018). The datasets will be destroyed after completion of my doctoral studies in accordance with relevant data security regulations described within the GDPR Act. As referred to above, to protect anonymity, the tutor respondents were assigned the pseudonyms Anna, Ken, Lynne, Noddy, John and Jim.

3.7.5: Reflexivity in Research

Etherington (2004) observes that "in qualitative research, reflexivity is an inherent part of the process... while interviewing, analysing, and writing, awareness of our own presence in the

research can enhance the process and outcomes" (Etherington, 2004: 101). Thus, reflexivity is concerned with the relationship of the researcher to that which is being researched and involves a constant awareness of the effects of the presence and the positioning of the researcher on the research subject and participants. For example, I was constantly evaluating the effectiveness and relevance of my interview questions: Were the questions appropriate and did they help my participants answer my questions? Was the venue appropriate? Did I make my participants feel comfortable and enable them to share their experiences, without feeling intimidated or under pressure?

Among other things, I gained some valuable insights into the complexities of conducting research with people or colleagues who are known to you within a professional context, and where the subject of inquiry also happens to be centred on their professional practice. I noted that there was an overwhelming need to exercise the utmost care in everything you said or did, as anything can be easily misinterpreted and can result in significant damage to the study itself, and potentially affect professional and personal relationships after the study. Despite the best efforts and strongest assurances from both sides, I noted that research participants who are known colleagues would still harbour some fragments of underlying concerns and fears regarding what they disclosed and how they disclosed it, although this seemed minimal and did not adversely affect the conduct of the interviews.

3.7.6: The Insider Researcher

Being a member of the organisation that is being researched, and observing my colleagues (my peers), I was conscious that this could cause difficulties for me as a practitioner researcher and was aware of distancing myself sufficiently to analytically and critically observe in order to overcome the influences and biases associated with taken-for-granted assumptions. There is no doubt that this was a challenging undertaking, which was only achieved by a 'delicate balancing act'. However, I found that being keenly aware of my position as a colleague within the same organisation and the potential for biases constituted an important first step towards distancing myself from the context.

In other words, critical awareness of one's 'positionality' (position within the research), combined with research training, makes it slightly easier to decontextualise oneself and work

towards some degree of objectivity and disinterested positioning. I was also conscious of some of the ethical issues such as ensuring confidentiality, anonymity, role conflict and power dynamics that may influence and question my professional practice, opinions, and perspectives as previously discussed, under 'ethical considerations'. It became apparent that, I had communicated clearly and effectively my research objectives, and also in terms of explaining to my colleagues and learners what my role was as a non-participant, which allowed the participants to overcome any anxieties and barriers to participation.

A further important ethical issue I had taken into consideration was that, as an observer, I might observe colleagues' teaching practices that fell short of required standards. There could be profound consequences for those observed if the observations were not anonymised. For this reason, I used pseudonyms instead of the participants' real names. I had obtained informed consent from all involved in the research setting. I had provided my participants with details of my research approach, including the purpose of the study, what I required of the participants, and I also assured the participants of the level of anonymity and confidentiality. As discussed above, the participants were assured that their names, identities, and other personal information, such as their departments, would be totally anonymised at all stages of the study, such that it would not be possible for anyone to identify them or infer their identities.

With regards to being an 'insider' researcher, Costley et al. (2011) propose that this type of researcher is in a better position to draw upon the shared understandings and trust of their immediate and more removed colleagues. This can help with building trust and rapport when conducting the research and offers the potential for gathering different, perhaps more illuminating data, which can provide a more informed story than might have been possible to an outsider (Costley et al., 2011). On the other hand, knowing my participants well could work as a disadvantage, as there could be a possible risk of being too friendly with the participants, whereby my participants may not feel comfortable in telling me anything that is negative, thus hindering the data collection process. As discussed earlier, I navigated these 'insider researcher' challenges and dilemmas through a process of decontextualization and depersonalisation, whereby I made deliberate efforts to remove myself psychologically and emotionally from the WEA context and from the participants, so that I could play the role of

a disinterested and objective researcher, and hence, relatively less predisposed to being 'too friendly'.

Hammersley & Atkins (2007: 86-7) claim that there is more risk of "over-rapport", which can limit the data gathering opportunity. It was crucial, therefore, as the researcher, to set clear boundaries and ground rules to avoid any potential conflict and to protect my participants, as well as my position as a researcher (Hammersley & Atkins, 2007: 86-7). Ely et al. (1991: 16) argue that the setting that is "too familiar can be particularly 'loaded' and can place us in role conflicts that can be almost unbearable." Coghlan & Brannick (2005) caution that while the insider-researcher has access to valuable knowledge about the culture and informal structures of an organisation the disadvantage is that of being potentially too close to the data.

Coghlan & Brannick (2005) note that it is important for insider-researchers to be open to disconfirming or confounding evidence, even to actively seek it through the interviews. I did this by ensuring that I avoided the use of leading questions and by ensuring that I followed up interview answers with gentle interventions and probes. As discussed earlier, I navigated these 'insider-researcher' challenges and dilemmas through decontextualization and depersonalisation to minimise the predisposition of being too familiar or developing over-rapport towards the interview participants.

I also made sure that the purpose and strategy for the research and its implications were made clear to the people I interviewed, as I have a responsibility to those accountable within the system and to those personally involved. I was also aware of the fact that there could be potential issues, as well as advantages, when conducting research as an insider. As Costley et al. (2011) state, these potential issues could affect the outcome of my research. I was conscious of this possible dilemma, nevertheless, my position is that this research is my own initiative and my own personal interest in the field of equality and diversity. Being supported by my employers has enabled me to have several privileges, such as having easy access to resources and to the participants. However, I was also aware that this could make my position as an insider researcher less comfortable.

For instance, my employer may have placed certain expectations on me in terms of the process and progress of my research. They may also have wished to influence the research to suit and meet the organisation's objectives and targets. Thus, I was very clear about my aim and the objectives of my research and ensured that this was communicated clearly with my employers to avoid any confusion or misunderstanding. I was conscious that my relationship with my peers at the WEA could be influenced by my role as a researcher in asking them to talk to me about aspects of their lives and of their experiences and perceptions. I was mindful that some participants might feel that they 'had' to agree to the interview and that some interviewees might worry that their interview answers were not the 'right' answers or not what they thought I wanted to hear.

3.7.7: Gaining Ethical Approval and Clearance

I wrote to the Director of the WEA North West region with my research proposal, detailing the scope of the research, and in order to seek permission to proceed. On studying the proposal, the Director of the WEA in the North West region was happy to support my research and gave his permission to conduct the interviews within the setting of the WEA. Once I received the approval from the director, I contacted the senior management team within the department to seek permission to contact my fellow colleagues in relation to my interview sample. I described the research aims, explained the interview process and the procedures to ensure confidentiality and anonymity and to highlight that any potential ethical issues would be taken into consideration.

I was given authorisation to send an introductory email to a pool of fifteen tutors across the North West region, requesting volunteers to take part in my research, and I received a positive response from ten tutors expressing an interest in being part of my research. From the ten tutors who expressed an interest, six tutors were selected based on their geographical spread within the North West region. Ethical clearance for this study also entailed first going through the application and approval procedures of the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) Research Ethics Committee, which has the mandate to review and determine the ethical appropriateness of all research projects proposed by all staff and students at the university. This rigorous ethical clearance process involved submitting to the Research Ethics Committee of the university the entire research proposal, together with all the miscellaneous material to

be used during the research project, which were then reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee.

3.7.8: Ethical Considerations

Guided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA)'s extensive guidance on research ethics, there are several fundamental principles to be adhered to while conducting social research within educational contexts, and they remain broadly applicable to all forms of research (BERA, 2018). The principle of informed consent stipulates that participants should be provided with comprehensive information about the research and their involvement, and requires their affirmative agreement before involvement (BERA, 2018; Bryman, 2016). This ensures participant autonomy and self-determination in their decision to take part in the research. Simultaneously, researchers must ensure the confidentiality and privacy of participants, including safeguarding their personal information and responses (BERA, 2018; Resnik, 2015). This commitment protects the participants' identities and prevents misuse of their data.

Non-maleficence, another vital principle, mandates that researchers ensure their work inflicts no harm, be it physical, psychological, or emotional on the participants (BERA, 2018; Neuman, 2014). Conversely, the principle of beneficence requires that research contributes positively to societal development or that it advances knowledge (BERA, 2018). Furthermore, integrity is of utmost importance, with researchers expected to conduct their studies with honesty, transparency, and responsibility, strictly avoiding any form of misconduct (BERA, 2018; Neuman, 2014). Finally, respect for people's principles acknowledges and upholds the dignity and autonomy of every individual, providing additional safeguards for those with diminished autonomy (BERA, 2018; Beauchamp & Childress, 2013). This principle ensures a humanistic and ethical treatment for all research participants.

Guided by the recognised ethical norms for social science research as outlined above, I embarked on my research journey at the WEA. Aware that my unique position as a practitioner-researcher conducting interviews in my own workplace with colleagues would pose distinctive ethical challenges, I was vigilant in considering issues beyond mere methodological implications. Being sensitive to the hierarchical dynamics and potential

power imbalances present within a working environment, I understood that individuals might harbour apprehensions regarding their status, anonymity, and the handling of the information they divulged. Such anxieties can be amplified during face-to-face interviews, especially amongst colleagues, due to the personal relationships and professional ties involved (Sikes, 2010).

Another important aspect I was conscious of was the contextual ethical considerations arising from the focus of my research. Given that my research could potentially bring to light issues regarding the effectiveness of teaching practices, the potential for discomfort and defensiveness was heightened. However, it was critical to underscore that the research's ethos was fundamentally exploratory, primarily seeking to understand the lived experiences and perceptions related to the concept of 'democratic learning' within the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). As pointed out by Bryman (2012), the nature of the workplace research requires careful navigation, balancing the quest for knowledge with the consideration for individuals' feelings, confidentiality, and the potential implications of the findings. This perspective informed my approach, ensuring that my research remained grounded in terms of respect, integrity, and ethical soundness, while being illuminative and informative.

Costley et al. (2011) discuss how insider researchers draw upon the shared understandings and trust of their immediate and more removed colleagues with whom normal social interactions of working communities have been developed. It promotes reflections and collegiality. I attempted to reduce some of the variables, for example, anxieties about the research findings affecting professional standing were addressed to some extent by clarifying and emphasising the ethical safeguards in place that would ensure the interviewees rights and promote confidentiality.

I ensured appropriate protocols were in place to ensure anonymity and confidentiality by using pseudonyms during data processing, analysis, and reporting, as required by the ethical standards of research practice (Creswell, 2013; Bryman, 2016). I ensured that the interviewee's formal and written permission to record their comments had been obtained and that they were aware of my research aims and what would happen to the information

provided. I checked that my interviewee knew the purpose of my research and that they had given their formal permission to take part in the research (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

Although I had received my senior management's consent to undertake my research, out of courtesy, I had also notified their managers. I was conscious of the interpersonal variables that might affect the interview dynamic, such as real and perceived power, status, ethnicity, gender, age, and personality. In every research activity or ordinary human interaction, the operation of underlying interpersonal dynamics cannot be completely ignored or removed, since human beings are involved. The best a researcher such as myself could do was to first become critically aware of these dynamics and to then mitigate against these by taking deliberate measures, including being rational, embracing diversity and equality principles, and cultivating mutual respect and common decency during the interviews.

Ethical issues were taken into consideration when shaping the overall design, implementation, and reporting of my research project as already discussed above. I was also conscious of how I worded my questions to ensure that I did not intimidate my participants. I also ensured my questions were non-biased and non-discriminatory by asking a critical friend to read through them. As referred to earlier, I ensured confidentiality and anonymity by assigning the pseudonyms: Anna, Ken, Lynne, Noddy, John and Jim, as opposed to using their real names, to enable the participant to feel less anxious or worried when sharing their views and opinions.

3.8: Chapter summary

This chapter has focused on explaining how the study was designed and conducted. The first part of the chapter examined some of the basic ontological and epistemological concepts that underpin the quantitative and qualitative research paradigms, such as positivism, realism, interpretivism, and constructivism. The case study research design and research methodology were described and adopted as the more appropriate research strategies for this type of research. The justification for the choice of the in-depth semi-structured interview technique was shaped by the nature of the research questions and the focus of the study itself, exploring their experiences, views and thoughts regarding the manifestations and outcomes of democratic education in their own practice.

The chapter discussed the methodological literature and has put forward my methodological stance in the research. I have outlined the methods of data collection, and I have discussed the ways in which the research was conducted, paying attention to the importance of being an 'insider researcher', reflexivity and the ethical consideration for this study. The next chapter discusses my data analysis process, drawing on the fieldwork data for the study.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

4.1: Introduction

This chapter presents the analysis of the textual data drawn from the in-depth semi-structured interviews with six WEA teaching practitioners. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed before being analysed using a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is the search for themes that emerge as being important and meaningful to the description and explanation of the phenomenon under study. Thematic analysis is also defined as a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within a set of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2008). A theme in this study can also be understood as a category that "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data" (Braun & Clark, 2006: 82).

In this study, thematic analysis was employed as a robust framework for dissecting and examining the rich qualitative data collected from interviews with the practitioners at the Workers Education Association. This methodology is particularly valued for its utility in identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data, allowing researchers to analyse, synthesise, and interpret various aspects of the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The procedures of thematic analysis embraced some of the six steps discussed by Braun & Clark (2006), including: (1) familiarisation with the dataset; (2) generating initial codes; (3) combining initial codes into sub-themes; and (4) then reviewing the themes; (5) defining and organising the themes; and subsequently (6) writing a narrative report based on the resulting themes. Below is a more detailed walk-through of each step involved in the thematic analysis process as applied in my study:

Step 1: Familiarisation with the dataset:

The initial phase of thematic analysis involves immersing oneself in the data to become intimately familiar with its depth and breadth (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In practical terms, this meant engaging in a series of in-depth interactions with participants before, during, and after the interviews. These interactions helped to create a rapport and provided a relaxed environment that encouraged candid discussions. After conducting the interviews, I listened

to the recordings several times and transcribed them meticulously. This repetitive listening and transcription process was not simply about converting speech into text but was integral to understanding the subtleties and nuances of the participants' experiences. As Kvale & Brinkman (2009) highlight, accurately capturing the participants' voices is crucial for a true representation of their perspectives, which forms the backbone of qualitative analysis.

Step 2: Generating initial codes:

Once familiar with the data, the next step was to generate initial codes. Coding in thematic analysis is essentially the process of selectively segmenting the textual data into units of meaningful categories, elements, objects, components, and patterns that are indicative of the phenomenon being investigated in the study (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). This initial phase of data segmentation and labelling has been widely referred to as 'open coding' in sections of the key literature (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). Open coding is understood as a fundamental process in thematic analysis, particularly during the initial stages of qualitative data analysis. Open coding allows researchers to develop a set of preliminary codes or units of meaningful categories directly from the textual data without reliance on preconceived ideas or categories, thereby facilitating a more grounded approach to data analysis.

This method encourages a deep engagement with the content, whereby data is broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, labelled, and categorised (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). This process is crucial for establishing a comprehensive framework of themes that reflect the depth and diversity of the participants' experiences and perspectives as portrayed in the interview transcripts (Richards, 2015). Initially, this involved creating labels for data segments that appeared significant, which could be a single word or a short phrase that appeared to succinctly or insightfully describe the essence, or meanings embedded within a given passage or segment of text. This process was iterative and dynamic, and as I progressed, some codes were merged, refined, or discarded, based on their relevance to developing themes.

Step 3: Searching for themes:

The transition from initial or open coding to the search for overarching themes is closely related to a technique found in *Grounded Theory* known as 'axial coding', which basically entails a more analytical approach, where a researcher looks for connections between the codes, arranging them around emergent themes or 'axes.' (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). After the open coding phase, where large numbers of initial codes were freely developed, axial coding, or the 'search for themes', then involved organising and synthesising these open codes into more integrated categories and sub-categories.

These would become potential themes and sub-themes which seemed to share a common underlying narrative element, showing relationships and connections between them (Corbin & Strauss, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This step resembled putting together the scattered pieces of a puzzle - looking at the bigger picture that emerges from these codes when grouped together in particular ways, and categories based on alignment with the research aims and questions (Richards, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each group was then reviewed and refined in **Step 4** below to ensure they formed a coherent pattern that was relevant to the initial research questions and that reflected the structure of the textual data as closely as reasonably possible.

Step 4: Reviewing themes: The next phase involved a systematic review of these themes and sub-themes to ensure they accurately reflected the coded data and the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This step facilitates a deeper understanding of how the sub-themes interrelate and support the development of larger, more comprehensive themes. This required revisiting the data multiple times, ensuring that each theme was supported by data and could stand up to scrutiny. This is a critical stage where themes are refined, combined, or even discarded. This step is crucial for developing a nuanced understanding of the data, which aligns closely with the thematic analysis' goal of constructing a rich narrative from the dataset (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). The aim is to ensure that these themes are not only representative of the data but are also aligned with the overarching research questions, thus providing meaningful insights into the studied phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Step 5: Defining and naming themes: Defining and naming themes was the next step. This required a detailed and focused analysis to clearly define what each theme was about and what aspect of the data each theme captured (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each theme was named,

not just by a descriptive label but, in a way that it reflected the underlying meaning of the data it represented and with consideration of the research aims. This was crucial for providing clarity and insight when presenting the findings.

Step 6: Producing the narrative report: Finally, the entire thematic analysis process culminated in the production of a narrative report, which involved weaving together the analytical narratives of each theme coherently with the broader theoretical framework and literature. This report not only highlights the findings but also discusses their implications for multiple understandings, meanings, and practices surrounding 'democratic learning' among practitioners at the WEA (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This step is pivotal, as it synthesises and presents the insights drawn from the identified themes in a coherent and comprehensive manner. However, in conducting thematic analysis or qualitative data analysis of any kind, it is essential to recognise how one's own potential biases, experiences, and sociocultural background can shape both the analytical process and the interpretation of findings. My positionality as a woman of Hindu background and a product of adult education (which is the subject of this research), my own cultural beliefs and perspectives inevitably influenced how I approached and understood the data and resulting thematic analysis. Moreover, being an 'insider' within the WEA institution (the site of the research project) offered unique insights but also presented the challenge of balancing personal familiarity with critical objectivity during the analysis.

Overall, thematic analysis is undoubtedly a popular qualitative research tool known for its flexibility and versatility, yet it faces substantial challenges related to subjectivity, simplification, and reproducibility (Nowell et al., 2017). The reliance on the researcher's individualised judgment can introduce bias, which could lead to inconsistent findings across studies and across different researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This subjectivity, coupled with the general absence of a standardised methodology, complicates comparisons between studies and may compromise the rigour and validity of the analysis if the methodological procedures are not transparently described (Nowell et al., 2017). Moreover, thematic analysis may also tend to oversimplify data, particularly through overlooking minority viewpoints in favour of more dominant themes, hence there is a risk of failing to capture the full complexity and nuances of the dataset (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Despite these limitations,

when applied with reflexivity and a clear methodological framework, thematic analysis can offer deep insights into qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In this study, six themes emerged that encapsulate the understanding and practices concerning 'democratic learning' among practitioners at the Workers Education Association. The themes are: ***inclusive practice and pedagogy***; ***democratisation of learning*** (student voice, empowerment, and choice); ***informality and fluidity***; ***social purpose; diversity and inclusivity****; and* ***policy-practice nexus***. Each theme is defined based on the data and represents a distinct, yet interconnected, aspect of the broader concept of 'democratic learning', enabling a multifaceted discussion that constitutes the focus of the remainder of this chapter. This major chapter now presents the findings which are organised into a set of themes and sub-themes that were identified from the textual data. By weaving these themes into the narrative report that follows below, the final step of thematic analysis not only presents the findings but also subsequently contextualises and critically evaluates it in relation to existing literature.

4.2: Inclusive Practice

The importance of inclusion and inclusive practice in pedagogy is increasingly recognised and promoted in academic and policy literature, reflecting the global trend towards an emphasis on valuing diversity and equal opportunities for all (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Inclusive education is a critical component in creating and maintaining democratic learning environments, especially for lifelong learning organisations such as the WEA, with 'democratic learning' being an integral part of its philosophy and mission. Florian & Black-Hawkins (2011) argue that acknowledging and valuing the heterogeneity of students' backgrounds and abilities is crucial in the inclusive practice paradigm, which entails adapting teaching and learning practices to embrace all learners.

At the heart of inclusive practice is the commitment to ensure everyone is given an equal chance to fully engage in the learning process, thus promoting social justice in education (Artiles, 2011). The inclusive approach fosters a sense of belonging among all learners, acknowledging their unique characteristics, and learning needs. The semi-structured interviews with tutors at the WEA demonstrate inclusion and inclusive practices more

generally, as widely emphasised and practised within the WEA's teaching and learning activities.

Anna, one of the WEA tutors who participated, mentions that the WEA believes in learning for all and access for all. She also emphasises the importance of creating a democratic and inclusive learning environment where all learners are equal and bring their own strengths to the learning experience. These statements suggest that the WEA aims to provide inclusive education that is accessible to individuals from diverse backgrounds and abilities. The values and principles mentioned by Anna indicate a commitment to fostering an inclusive learning environment at the WEA, as highlighted in the sample extract below:

"WEA attracted me in that way and then also the sense that it was working in the community, so you were working in different environments… so that was sort of before I really knew much about the WEA in a way and then when I started looking a bit more into their sort of ethos and what have you, about, you know, learning for all, access for all, then that kind of thing attracted me" (Anna).

The interview transcripts further show that Anna's students from various multi-ethnic backgrounds are encouraged and empowered to help each other during the class, by teaching and learning from each other. To deepen cultural inclusivity and diversity even further, learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds are encouraged to use their own indigenous languages to support and assist each other, rather than using English, especially where learners may have limited English language skills. Anna describes the case of a Chinese lady who joined the WEA largely because she knew she would get assistance from other Chinese students who spoke Mandarin:

"*she wanted to feel that there were other learners that could help her, and, in those classes, they very much help each other in Mandarin, and I think I do rely a little bit on some of them in that because she is at a much lower level*." (Anna).

Anna mentions that she encourages learners to teach each other, recognising that she cannot teach them everything. This implies that students with diverse backgrounds and experiences can share their knowledge and skills with each other, creating a collaborative learning

environment. It can be inferred that they engage in peer-to-peer learning, sharing their knowledge, experiences, and perspectives to enhance the learning experience for everyone in the class. The following extract shows how Anna encourages learners to participate and take ownership of their own learning by engaging in peer-to-peer learning and learner-centred discovery of learning strategies:

"*when they are at a much lower level I will use the other learners at that level, at a higher level I take it as it is part of their learning so for example if they don't know what a certain word means or something, I will automatically turn to the class and to say right who can tell so and so what it means, but I take that as that is part of their learning anyway really, so it isn't always me giving the information, but that is part of your plan as a teacher, isn't it, where you are meant to be using those learners"* (Anna).

Anna's comment reflects a progressive, learner-centred approach to education that emphasises democratic learning and the empowerment of students. By encouraging students to explain concepts to one another, she fosters an inclusive classroom environment where knowledge is not solely imparted by the teacher, but instead, co-constructed by the learners themselves. This method not only utilises the diverse levels of understanding within the classroom to enhance learning, but also promotes flexibility in teaching. Instead of maintaining a rigid teacher-centric stance, Anna adapts her strategies according to the students' abilities and needs, thus facilitating a more dynamic and responsive learning atmosphere. Her approach underscores the principle of empowering learners, giving them the autonomy to take control of their own learning processes.

In a democratic learning environment, every individual student is seen as a valued member of the learning community, with the right and the opportunity to participate fully in the learning process. Inclusion fosters this type of environment by ensuring that all students, regardless of their background or abilities, are seen as equal partners in the learning process, and fosters a sense of belonging to the learners:

"I think I am really lucky, all my classes they are really nice learners. I would say 90 to 95 per cent really want to be there, really want to learn, I have had students in tears because they have wanted to get on courses and things, so they really do want to be there, so that's great.

I hope I create a sort of a friendly, positive environment and they feel like friendly positive environments." (Anna).

The inclusive pedagogical approach emphasised at the WEA allows learners to learn from each other and promotes equality and inclusivity in the classroom as illustrated in the extracts below:

"*In my functional skills class that you mentioned… I remember saying I think it is about the second week in and I said we had about twenty teachers in the room… and you can all teach each other, I can't teach you everything so again, I think it is that sense of having learners learn from each other, so that I feel that is hopefully kind of a democratic way of teaching."* (Anna).

"WEA also suffers from this idea to make sure that your lesson follows procedures of equality and inclusion…" (Ken).

Additionally, Anna considers the learners' preferences and interests while planning her teaching and curriculum content. She tries to cater to their specific learning goals and focuses on topics or areas that the students want to learn or review. This responsiveness to the learners' needs and their preferences promotes inclusivity and flexibility to the class and contributes toward a more democratic learning environment.

"*The other thing is being responsive to them, so if they are saying well we want to learn a certain thing, seeing how much you can actually cater for that, or we want to sort of focus in on something, or we want to go over something again, so you know it's sort of responding to them and different courses that I have got probably work differently… now they completely shape the entire scheme of work, where they have been saying this is really what they want to do"* (Anna).

"We do negotiate as well the learning outcomes so if we turn up with a scheme of work and the students are clearly wanting to go down a slightly different route, we can say well we will look at that or next term we will put that in, when we get towards the end of a short course we ask students for their opinion and we can take their interests into account in planning the next term" (Lynne).

The emphasis on inclusive practice at the WEA can also be observed from another tutor, Ken, who, despite holding a rather ambivalent view of the WEA's ethos of inclusion and equality, still affirms that he practices inclusion when designing content and learning activities to ensure its relevance to age and the ethnic backgrounds of the learners, as required in WEA policy. Ken's ambivalent and negative view of the WEA's approach to inclusion can be seen in his remark: *"WEA also suffers from this idea to make sure that your lesson follows procedures of equality and inclusion".* However, he still strongly acknowledges his belief and practice of inclusivity and equality as suggested below:

"I will have set up a scenario and gear it towards the age group of the class, or the ethnic make-up of the class or just something like that… So, I try and draw on the experiences of their lives when setting exercises…" (Ken).

Inclusive practice at the WEA also appears to encompass a range of other elements, including the appropriate use of language while teaching ethnically and culturally diverse groups of learners ensuring that differences in students' behaviours and personalities do not alienate other students. Likewise, there is also the need to ensure that provisions are made for accommodating learners with disabilities and special educational needs.

"It's hard to push them without alienating them as well. Certain language could alienate people - social purpose or social documentary and I think I am going to drop the sort of social purpose phrase, because I think that could alienate people a little bit and concentrate on calling it social documentary because that is an area of photography anyway." (John).

"Got to make sure that some people don't dominate, which we tend to find can happen, that you have different personalities in your groups, some are more forceful than others, some are leaders, and some are followers, you have got to make sure that the followers also have a chance to put across their point of view, so we talk to our students an awful lot." (John).

According to one tutor (Anna), the learners at the WEA are involved in marking each other's work through a peer assessment process. Anna mentions that she implemented an exercise where the learners wrote a letter and then passed it to the next person, who had an assessment sheet. The learners then assessed each other's work based on a provided format,

going through the letter in detail and providing feedback. This peer assessment allows the learners to actively participate in the evaluation and feedback process, giving them the opportunity to learn from each other and develop their own assessment skills:

"I did one exercise where they wrote a letter and then they had to pass to the next person who had an assessment sheet so they did a peer assessment, so I had given the assessor a sort of format to follow, they assessed each other and then they worked through … so although it took a long time and then they had to re-write it basically to what their peer had said, they loved it, they absolutely loved it and they said we could do that again every time" (Anna).

4.2: Democratic Learning and Participation

The themes of 'democratic learning' and 'participation' emerged prominently from the thematic analysis of the data. 'Democratic learning' is a pedagogical approach that emphasises the importance of learner participation, shared decision-making, and equality in education (Giroux, 2011). 'Democratic learning', widely characterised by open dialogue, learner empowerment, and collaborative decision-making, is considered a transformative approach to education which embraces ideals such as social justice and civic emancipation (Freire, 2000).

The idea of 'participation' in a learning and teaching context is understood to refer to the active engagement of learners in their educational process. Participation encompasses students' involvement in activities, dialogues, and decision-making related to their learning journey, and aiming to foster a deeper understanding and improved retention of knowledge (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). From a pedagogical perspective, participatory learning acknowledges learners not as passive recipients of information, but as co-creators of their educational experiences, fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, and autonomy (Freire, 2000). This approach is particularly pertinent in lifelong learning institutions, such as the WEA, which are dedicated to fostering continuous learning and development beyond traditional schooling. Interviews with WEA practitioners revealed substantial awareness and clear emphasis on democratic learning and participatory approaches to pedagogy and learning:

"*Well to be honest the word democratic learning when you mentioned it, meant initially nothing, I thought I have just done all this training and I don't think we ever referred to democratic learning in a formal way, so I think for me what do you really mean by that, or maybe how do I display that in a classroom and I guess for me everybody in a classroom is equal for one, all the learners are equal whether they know more or less than each other, they all bring their own strengths, they all bring their own characters*" (Anna).

Anna's reflection reveals a genuine engagement with the concept of 'democratic learning', albeit from an intuitive rather than theoretical perspective. Her uncertainty about the term 'democratic learning' suggests a gap in formal training, which highlights a broader issue in teacher education where crucial pedagogical concepts might not be explicitly addressed. Despite this, Anna intuitively practices democratic principles by treating all learners as equals in her classroom. This approach aligns closely with the essence of 'democratic learning', which emphasises equality, respect for individual differences, and the empowerment of all learners. By acknowledging that each student brings unique strengths and character to the learning environment, Anna supports a learner-centred approach that values individual abilities and contributions. Her practice, therefore, not only empowers students by recognising their potential and individuality, but also fosters a collaborative and inclusive classroom culture. This approach inadvertently champions the core principles of democratic education by enabling students to feel valued and engaged, thus enhancing their learning experience and participation.

Anna's approach underscores the intrinsic alignment with learner-centred teaching, where the unique strengths and characters of students are integral to the educational process. This personalisation in learning is reflective of the ethos of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), which advocates for educational inclusivity and diversity in learning environments. However, while Anna highlights the appealing aspects of the WEA, such as learning for its own sake and the lack of exam pressure, a critical examination reveals that these features, though beneficial in reducing learner anxiety, might also challenge or erode the measurement of educational outcomes and accountability. Furthermore, the emphasis on 'access for all' suggests a democratic intent, yet it necessitates a deeper inquiry into how effectively this

inclusivity is implemented in practice, ensuring that it truly accommodates the varied needs and potentials of all learners.

The core theme of 'democratic learning' was extensively explored in this study, and its various dimensions or manifestations emerged during the thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews with the WEA tutors. It emerged that the WEA demonstrates democratic values through inter-related sub-themes or elements, namely: *student voice, empowerment, choice,* and *informality (structure* and *relations).*

4.2.1: Student Voice, Empowerment, and Choice

Thematic analysis showed that the democratic learning model at the WEA is centred around the concept of 'student voice', which refers to recognising students as key stakeholders in the learning process and giving priority consideration to their needs, preferences, and interests. In lifelong learning institutions, this entails promoting open dialogue, where learners are encouraged to express their views, concerns, and ideas (Cook-Sather, 2006). By incorporating student voice, these institutions become more responsive to learners' needs, interests, and aspirations. Decision-making becomes a collective responsibility, involving students in everything from curriculum development to the establishment of learning strategies, goals, and activities (Cook-Sather, 2006). When asked about their understanding of how the concept of 'democratic learning' is understood and practiced at the WEA, the tutors made reference to various types of instances where the 'student voice' was emphasised.

One tutor (Ken) understood 'democratic learning' as promoting the student voice by means of tutors being open and accommodating to student feedback, however undesirable it may be, and giving precedence to student's preferences and interests as they pertain to the overall learning process.

"I mean to me democracy means in the classroom if my students come to me and say what you have been doing in the last two weeks doesn't interest us, I don't like the way you are doing it, will you do something else next week, I will say yes, we will do something else next week" (Ken).

The WEA's democratic ethos and student voice was propagated in many ways across the different tutors who were interviewed. These extracts from one tutor (Lynne) are particularly significant, since they introduce a unique dimension of the democratic learning ethos: the participation of students in the governance affairs of the WEA, including the right to vote on governance matters.

"I think that the learning that we do is very democratic because we invite the students to become members of the WEA and they get the chance to vote for how it's run, it's democratic because we arrange the times of the classes to suit the learners, so we will negotiate" (Lynne).

These extracts illustrate how 'democratic learning', and participation are fostered in the WEA's learning environment. By involving learners in decision-making processes, offering flexible scheduling, and encouraging negotiation and active participation, the organisation embodies democratic principles in its educational practices. The fact that students are invited to become members of the WEA's governing body and are given the opportunity to vote on how the organisation is run is a strong demonstration of 'democratic learning'. This approach not only gives learners a say in their education, but also empowers them by involving them in decision-making processes.

Secondly, the provision to negotiate learning outcomes with the learners and the scheduling of the classes to suit the learners' preferences are important examples of 'democratic learning', student-centredness, and participatory decision-making. By negotiating class times, the organisation ensures that the learning environment is accessible and responsive to learners' needs and gives students a sense of mutual ownership of the learning process. Overall, this approach encourages learners to express their preferences, engage in dialogue, and reach a consensus, all of which are key elements of democratic participation.

The theme of student voice can also take the form of a collaborative approach to setting learning goals and designing curriculum content, with the student taking a leading role while the teacher assumes a more peripheral role as a facilitator and guide, as illustrated in these extracts from one of the tutors:

“We set them [goals] together, I set them with either the student’s carer or the student themselves, so sometimes it might just be joining in and getting involved in what we are doing, just being an extra on the stage and other times it’s taking a speaking role or a more central role, in what we are trying to perform…. so, everybody has a say, they have got the confidence to sort of say to us, we had an idea this is what we think, can we do it, yes let’s do it” (Noddy).

Thematic analysis of tutor interviews suggests that ’learner empowerment’ is an important aspect of the broader theme of ‘democratic learning’ and is closely intertwined with the sub-theme of student voice. In fact, most textual material coded under ‘student voice’ was also simultaneously coded under the ‘learner empowerment’ sub-theme. Empowerment, in the context of ‘democratic learning’, involves providing learners with the tools, autonomy, and confidence to take charge of their educational journey (Freire, 2000). Through ‘democratic learning’, learner empowerment extends to learning responsibility and autonomy.

Students at the WEA are encouraged to actively engage in their learning process, contributing to the curriculum, setting personal learning goals, and evaluating their progress. In a lifelong learning institution such as the WEA, this begins by acknowledging and celebrating the rich reservoir of experiences that adult learners bring into the classroom, as widely captured in the interviews with the WEA tutors. These experiences create the opportunities and spaces through which new knowledge and understandings are co-created and shared among the learners themselves, as well as between the learners and the tutor. In turn, this enhances the learners’ ability to take ownership of their own learning journeys, providing a sense of community, increased confidence, and self-improvement.

The extract below from one of the tutors (Lynne) illustrates an interesting example of learner empowerment and a participatory approach, whereby the tutor gives the learner the opportunity to be directly involved in the decision-making affecting their course:

"...we had a class last year where everybody was late so I had to say right ladies this is a problem what can we do, and we negotiated that we would start the class half an hour later and carry on half an hour later and that was at their suggestion, and it worked out..." (Lynne).

The excerpt from Lynne's interview exemplifies the implementation of learner-centred principles in education, particularly highlighting themes of learner empowerment and the significant role of the learner's voice and choice in shaping the learning environment. By involving students in the decision-making process to adjust class timings in response to their collective lateness, Lynne not only acknowledges and respects the students' inputs but also empowers them by shifting decision-making responsibilities from the instructor to the learners themselves. This approach enhances learner engagement and fosters a sense of ownership and community among the students, as they see their contributions directly impacting their educational experience.

Moreover, Lynne's flexibility and responsiveness to students' needs showcase a dynamic and adaptive teaching style that prioritises student welfare and participation over rigid adherence to predetermined schedules, ultimately promoting a more inclusive and co-operative learning environment. Such strategies not only address practical issues like attendance but also strengthen the educational process by embedding democratic values and collaboration in everyday classroom management, thereby enhancing overall student satisfaction and educational outcomes. Empowering learners in this way can enhance their motivation, engagement, and sense of ownership over their learning process, as well as the learning environment, which helps to create a more egalitarian and inclusive learning environment where all voices are heard and valued.

Lynne further encourages empowerment and student voice by involving her students in the planning and delivery of the lessons. She believes that it would be boring for students to listen to her talk for two hours, so she tries to give students a chance to participate actively through role-playing and her ‘icebreaker’ initiatives. By giving students choices and involving them in decision-making, Lynne empowers them to take ownership of their learning and express their creativity. In addition, Lynne emphasises the importance of equality and diversity in her teaching, creating an inclusive and participatory learning environment that values the voices and perspectives of all students:

“so it’s about finding out what students like to do, we did things like making masks out of papier-mâché well he liked that, he liked the gooeyness, some of them were very creative, but they all made something they could take away to hang on their wall, but I think with that it

was working and giving them the choice of media to work with, so some were painting, some were sticking material on them and they could choose from a lot of materials and they could choose what they used, that was quite fun". (Lynne).

4.2.2: Limits of Democratic Learning

It emerges that 'democratic learning', with all its credits, is not without its limitations. The tutors suggested that the effectiveness of 'democratic learning' and the learner empowerment approach can depend on the learners' readiness and ability to take ownership of this role and exercise it. For instance, some students may lack the confidence, skills, and adequate language capability to effectively teach or interact with their peers, while others may be unwilling or unprepared to take on this responsibility. Additionally, it could potentially create a power dynamic among the students, where some voices are privileged over others.

Likewise, in relation to student-centred learning, implementing a truly student-centred pedagogy requires more than just having students teach each other. It also involves designing learning activities and assessments that cater to the diverse needs, interests, and abilities of students, in addition to providing adequate support and feedback to facilitate their learning. The findings from the in-depth interviews suggest that it is also important to ensure that the teacher's role does not become completely passive in this process, as they still have a crucial role to play in guiding, scaffolding, and facilitating the learning process.

According to Anna, for example, there are certain factors that can prevent learning from being totally democratic. One factor is the level of the learners. Anna mentions that she teaches some English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Entry 1 classes, where the learners do not have the vocabulary in English to express what they want to learn, and some learners may not like to make decisions. In such cases, the teacher may need to take a more directive role in the learning process. Another factor is the need to assess learning against certain criteria, such as functional skills or exam guidance. In such cases, the teacher may need to provide more guidance and structure to ensure that the learners are meeting the required standards.

Overall, while a completely democratic learning environment may be desirable, there may be certain factors that limit the extent to which learning can be fully democratic:

"*so I am much more in those classes the person that's teaching them, I mean I know that they think that for one, they have not got the vocabulary in English to really tell me what they do want to learn you know by the very nature that it is an Entry 1 class and think there are some people who don't like to make a decision, so I think if I say I would like you to do this or that, they are like oh you are the teacher, you tell me that's your job you know*." (Anna).

The extract above illustrates some of these challenges that limit the achievement of democratic learning objectives. The findings indicate that despite 'democratic learning' being held as the overarching ethos of learning and teaching at the WEA, and regardless of its demonstrated usefulness in the context of adult lifelong learning, the traditional hierarchical teacher-learner relationship is still persistent and firmly held in the minds of most of the learners. Adult learners still expect to be led and guided in the learning process, and teachers, to some degree, expect and accommodate the role of leadership and the associated power imbalances to help facilitate the learning process:

"I think they still want to be led but, their reactions are different culturally but I think in terms of having that assurance, yes I will lead them to the right place and yes they can take an exam at the end, I think they still do put the trust in you as the teacher and it's interesting because I have a volunteer in that class and although obviously he is far more experienced than me, he will mark work, they still want me to mark it." (Anna).

Another key limitation to the fullest realisation of 'democratic learning' at the WEA is the unavoidable reality that for a large majority of the lifelong learning courses, the students are required to take mandatory examinations and there are defined expectations that they must achieve prescribed performance targets. Without over-emphasising, these examinations are formulated, marked, and monitored based on objective criteria that are beyond the reach of the learners and where they have limited opportunities for participation, despite the

principles of student voice and learner-centredness being emphasised in the teaching-learning process. One of the tutors (Anna) observes that in some of her classes, such as ESOL Entry 1 classes, the expectation is for students to take exams, which may make the learning environment less democratic. This suggests that the requirement for exams and accreditation can be a potential barrier to 'democratic learning'.

Additionally, Anna mentions that some learners in her classes may not have sufficient vocabulary in English to express their learning preferences, and some may be hesitant to make decisions, relying on the teacher to guide them. These factors may also hinder the full realisation of 'democratic learning':

"Definitely, definitely because these courses are for fairly high-level learners, I do think when you have mentioned again thinking about democracy in the classroom, I do some ESOL Entry 1 classes so again they are not accredited but again the expectation is they will take exams, which is much less democratic I would suggest." (Anna).

"Assessment in that way, all the work that they do, that they hand in I will mark, I mean again in terms of functional skills, there are certain skills that you are looking for, from the exams and guidance for exams, you know certain things that you are looking for so that you can mark against that…so I am assessing it against sort of the criteria for that so that is City and Guilds and then feed that back to the learners." (Anna).

As demonstrated in these extracts, Anna expressed mixed feelings about exams and standardised learning targets set by the WEA. On the one hand, she appreciates the idea of learning for learning's sake, which she believes is offered by the WEA. She likes the fact that the WEA offers learning opportunities without the pressure of exams and accreditation, which can be off-putting for some learners. She also recognises that functional skills courses, which are more exam-based, are becoming more prevalent at the WEA, putting learners under growing pressure, as well as a loss of control of the learning process.

Overall, while Anna values the idea of learning for learning's sake and the flexibility that the WEA offers, she recognises that exams and learning targets are sometimes necessary, particularly on certain accredited courses. The tutor portrays the view that exams are typically

standardised, designed to measure specific skills or knowledge based on a fixed set of criteria. This uniform exam-oriented approach may not fully capture the diverse range of skills, interests, and learning styles of students from diverse or disadvantaged backgrounds, thus limiting the democratic principle of acknowledging and valuing individual differences.

Tutors such as John have highlighted further limitations of the WEA's democratic education in relation to the institution's sluggishness and lack of adaptability to rapid change. The excerpt below illustrates a significant drawback of 'democratic learning' within larger, traditional educational organisations like the WEA. John criticises the organisation's slow response to change and the cumbersome administrative processes that do not align well with modern educational needs and technologies. His observation highlights a challenge in implementing democratic principles effectively within established educational frameworks that may resist rapid change and adaptation:

"...I have found [WEA] to be slow, I think it's like a big dinosaur that lumbers along. I think when suddenly something needs doing urgently, it's all hands waving all over the place and things suddenly get done. I think it's still very stuck in an older time and it's having difficulty moving forwards into the modern age and the modern way of doing things." (John).

4.3: The Social Purpose

The theme of 'social purpose' was strongly represented across the in-depth interviews with the WEA tutors. As an overview, social purpose in adult education refers to the idea that education should not simply serve the individual's needs but should also benefit the whole society. This idea stems from the belief that education is a powerful instrument that can be used to shape societal norms and values; promote social cohesion; expand opportunities; and address social challenges (Jarvis, 2006). In democratic learning contexts, the social purpose of education is often linked to the promotion of democratic values and active citizenship among the learners (Biesta, 2007). For instance, adult education can be used to equip individuals with the knowledge and skills needed to participate effectively in civic life and the democratic processes of their communities. The social purpose of education also extends to fostering a sense of community and shared responsibility; promoting social integration; and addressing social inequalities and barriers to social mobility (Jarvis, 2006).

The WEA promotes social justice and the social purpose, by providing education and learning opportunities to individuals from diverse backgrounds and communities. Anna mentions that the WEA believes in equality, justice, and education for all. She also emphasises the importance of creating a democratic learning environment where all learners are equal and bring their own strengths and characters. This approach promotes inclusivity, equality, and empowerment within the classroom, which are key principles of social justice. In addition, the WEA offers courses and programmes that are designed to address social issues and challenges, such as poverty, inequality, and discrimination. By providing education and learning opportunities that are aligned with social justice and the social purpose, the WEA aims to empower individuals and communities to create positive change and contribute to a more just and equitable society:

"I guess for me everybody in a classroom is about that everybody is equal for one, all the learners are all equal whether they know more or less than each other, they all bring their own strengths, they all bring their own characters." (Anna)

The kind of education offered at the WEA is widely portrayed by tutors as being beyond passing examinations and finding employment.

"Mainly, again, I think it was the idea of learning for learning's sake, that I know as an adult myself in my 40s the idea of learning a new skill and having to do an exam is really scary and really off putting for me, so it was a sense that there was an organisation that you work for, for one that did offer learning without it having to be exam-focussed and exam-based." (Anna).

This tutor, Anna, expresses apprehension towards the traditional exam-based learning model, suggesting that it can be intimidating or off-putting for adult learners, such as those at the WEA, including herself as an adult. This echoes a broader critique of exam-centric education that it might not cater to all learning styles and can create undue distress to learners. Instead, Anna values 'learning for learning's sake' which aligns with an approach that emphasises understanding, curiosity, and the intrinsic joy of learning over examination performance.

Anna finds this attribute relatively attractive with regards to the WEA. The comment suggests that the WEA offers learning opportunities that are not exam-focused, thus making education more accessible and inclusive to more disadvantaged people.

This aligns with broader social justice goals of equal educational opportunity, as it acknowledges and addresses barriers that might prevent certain individuals (such as adults who are apprehensive about exams) from pursuing education and, thus, from transforming their lives. By providing an alternative to exam-based learning, the WEA demonstrates a social purpose through promoting equity and access in education. The notion of 'learning for learning's sake' inherently empowers learners by endorsing their personal interests and motivations as valid reasons to pursue education, rather than pursuing education for the purpose of examination performance, credentialism, and employment. It also suggests that the WEA empowers individuals to learn in a way that suits them best, free from the pressures of exams or job-seeking.

Some tutors described the WEA's democratic approach to education as something designed to transcend beyond individual socio-economic goals, towards the achievement of broader social goals and purposes, such as expanding democratic ideals and civic participation. As suggested in the extract below (Jim), a key element of the social purpose of democratic education is the promotion of the student voice, as well as giving space to students to speak up freely, without hindrance, about whatever is of interest to them, which is something similar to the idea of freedom of speech in a political democracy.

"I don't think anyone in the room has any hesitation to contributing, saying what they want, I mean that's partly the aim of it, you know, it works. I suspect the WEA sees itself as democratic and using the education as making society more democratic or something like that." (Jim).

"You have to tie [social purpose] into the way the class has been sold to people, and as a consequence it isn't going to be an overriding thing. It's alright the WEA saying social purpose is our big thing for the next five years, but if the students aren't buying into it, it's a lot more difficult." (John).

Some tutors portrayed WEA education as a journey and an experience, whose goals and vision are larger than that of passing examinations and gaining educational credentials. Anna emphasises the importance of wider goals of personal development and confidence building as some of the outcomes that WEA education seeks to deliver to its adult learners, especially since these learners are largely from economically disadvantaged and socially marginalised groups. The social purpose in WEA education denotes a departure from the instrumental perspective on education, whereby the attainment of education is for the sole purpose of gaining educational credentials and opening opportunities for employment and economic mobility (Billet, 2008). Instead, the WEA embraces or emphasises the wider humanistic ideas of personal improvement and empowerment, combating inequalities, social justice, and promoting social democracy.

"I think it is something more, because like I say, I think it's wherever they started and wherever you see them end, at the end of a course, now that might not be at the point, they have passed an exam, but it might be that they have grown in confidence." (Anna).

"*Well, I think the WEA is about giving continuing learning possibilities for people and particularly lots of people who left school early…. through organisations like the WEA, I was able to go onto university later in life and I think that the WEA can provide that."* (John).

"Don't write these people off, they have got a lot to offer, not just in the term of performing, but in everyday life, they have got a lot to offer to the world." (Noddy).

The above statement from Noddy acknowledges that individuals have much to offer both in specific roles (such as 'performing') and in their everyday lives. This implies an understanding that people's worth is not tied to specific roles or educational achievements but is intrinsic and realised through varied contributions in various aspects of life. The phrase: 'Don't write these people off' suggests that there may be societal biases or prejudices leading to the undervaluation or dismissal of certain individuals or groups. From a social justice perspective, this is a call to challenge and dismantle these embedded biases, hence moving towards promoting equality and fairness. This challenge to biases echoes the theme of empowerment, which entails enabling individuals to take control of their lives, make their own decisions, and fulfil their potential. The acknowledgement that everyone has something valuable to offer

can empower individuals, boosting their self-esteem and motivation, in order to contribute to their communities (Zimmerman, 1995). The remark above by Noddy could be seen as an implicit critique of societal structures that fail to recognise the worth and potential contributions of all individuals, particularly those from marginalised or disadvantaged backgrounds (Young, 2000). This further suggests that WEA education seeks to align with social justice efforts to dismantle systemic barriers and create more equitable societies.

The theme of empowering students, of personal development, and of raising aspirations is portrayed further in the interviews:

"Get the students to raise their own awareness of what they can do. I think we do make a difference and that's what the WEA does, it gives people that sort of confidence, I would love it if they were to say to me, do you know what, I am going to do a college course and I think I can do" (Noddy).

By helping students raise awareness of their own capabilities and aspirations, the statement acknowledges the equal potential of all individuals, which is a fundamental principle of social justice. It also hints at inclusivity and accessibility, implying that educational opportunities are available to all, irrespective of their backgrounds or circumstances. Noddy's comment also illustrates empowerment through the process of building students' confidence and self-efficacy. Empowerment involves enabling individuals to take control of their lives, make their own decisions, and fulfil their potential (Young, 2000). By nurturing the belief in students that they can pursue a college course (or any goal), the statement shows that the WEA is empowering them to make decisions about their own futures. The WEA is portrayed as a facilitator of learning.

This learner-centred pedagogy or approach, where students have the autonomy to explore their interests and capabilities, aligns with the principles of 'democratic learning'. Learner-centred pedagogy is widely understood but its meanings can vary in the literature. According to the UNESCO's IIEP (International Institute for Education Policy), learner-centred pedagogy emphasises a constructivist approach where the students are placed at the centre of the

learning process. This approach fosters active and participative roles for students, transforming the acquisition of knowledge into a collaborative negotiation between teachers and students (IIEP, n.d.). Harvard University's *Initiative for Learning and Teaching* (HILT) describes learner-centred pedagogy as an approach that empowers students to engage deeply with complex material and learn to navigate the hidden curriculum, such as norms and beliefs specific to disciplines (HILT, 2021). Collins & O'Brien (2003: 338) have defined learner-centred pedagogy as

"an instructional approach in which students influence the content, activities, materials, and pace of learning … [that is] dialogical and reciprocal between the teacher and students and among students".

Taking all these diverse definitions, learner-centred pedagogy can be understood generally as an approach to teaching and learning whereby learners' interests, motivations, abilities, agency, and outcomes are placed at the core of designing the learning process.

In a democratic learning environment, students are active participants in their own education, having a say in their learning process and its outcomes. This learner-centred approach emphasises personal development, as it describes the transformation of students gaining confidence in their abilities and expanding their educational aspirations. This aligns with the concept of personal development, which focuses on the growth of individuals in various aspects of their life, including their self-confidence, educational attainment, and personal goals. Overall, this learner-centred approach showcases the critical role of organisations such as the WEA in promoting social justice, empowerment, democratic learning, and personal development.

4.4: Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion

The democratic education theme also strongly encompassed practices, or at least narratives, of equality, diversity, and inclusivity for people who may have developmental and/or learning disabilities. When asked about the status of diversity and the inclusion policy and practice at the WEA, one tutor responded that this is firmly embedded at the WEA:

"*I think it is ingrained now, that, I feel we are very good at equality and diversity, I think we are very good at it, it has to inform everything we do, it has to.*" (Lynne).

The practice or narratives of diversity and inclusion was captured in numerous ways by different tutors:

"I did try to ask them what sort of things they liked to do, many of them in that class had learning difficulties, we had one young man who had learning difficulties and was profoundly deaf, but I found through observing him that he loved textiles he didn't so much like to paint, but he loved textiles and the feel of different things he liked working with wool, working with leather, so it's finding out what students like to do." (Lynne).

"Like I have a young man who is quadriplegic and has very little speech and you would think that you would get nothing out of him, but if he doesn't like something he lets you know, he will have a real frown on his face, if he likes something the smile on his face is absolutely wonderful." (Noddy).

"We help people with a disability, we try to accommodate any needs that they have so for dyslexia we will do bigger hand-outs, bigger print, coloured paper, that type of thing and that's how they can submit their work. I have had a student on an accredited course who had a learning difficulty and couldn't write but did understand the material and we submitted her file in a recorded version." (Lynne).

The last two poignant anecdotes from these WEA tutors emphasise the inherent value and potential of every individual, regardless of their physical abilities or communication challenges. This aligns with the broader social purpose of creating an inclusive society where everyone is recognised for their unique contributions and capabilities. The theme of social purpose here also involves challenging societal biases or prejudices that might underestimate or hinder the potential of individuals with disabilities. The two students referred to in the dialogues, despite their developmental limitations and learning disabilities, are depicted as having the agency to express their preferences, achieve learning outcomes, and to submit an alternative format of their work for assessment.

Recognising the students' limitations and providing responsive adjustments to suit their needs, not only respects their voice and autonomy, but also empowers them by validating their means of expression and alternative communication and their learning styles. Overall, the aspect of WEA education portrayed in this anecdote underscores the significance of acknowledging and valuing the agency of individuals with disabilities, aligning with the principles of social purpose and empowerment. Furthermore, it suggests a shift from a deficit-focused perspective of disability, which might only see the individual's limitations, to a strength-based perspective, which acknowledges their capabilities and potential.

Lynne provides additional insight into the practices of diversity and inclusion at the WEA. She also narrates a story of the day she had to cancel a class and take students to a coffee shop when the class was on the third floor, the lift was not working and there was a disabled student stuck at the ground floor, as there was no way she could make it to the third floor without a lift:

"If you know for example that you have got somebody with epilepsy in your class, be open and talk to them about it and say what's normal for you, you know if you do have a problem, how long is normal for you to have a fit if it becomes more than a minute, or more than five minutes what do I do….do I phone an ambulance for you, but there are contingences aren't there and I think we need to have that at the front of our minds all the time, but it's just second nature now working for the WEA that we are good at equality and diversity". (Lynne).

The tutor discusses the importance of being open and talking to the student about their condition, understanding what is normal for them, and discussing contingency plans in case of a seizure. It is suggested to have an open conversation with the student to determine if they need a helper, if they should sit near the door, and what actions they would want to be taken in case of an emergency. The tutor emphasises the need to be proactive and considerate in accommodating the needs of students with epilepsy, ensuring their safety and well-being in the learning environment.

4.5: Informality and Fluidity: Structure, Practices, and Relationships

'Democratic learning', following on from the seminal work by Dewey, calls for a shift away from the rigid, top-down structures and relations that are widely prevalent in traditional learning environments towards more informal, flexible environments and systems of learning. This shift, particularly significant in lifelong learning institutions, provides space for people to operate and interact with more spontaneity, flexibility, and individualisation (Field, 2012). Informal structure and relationships within an educational context can promote peer-to-peer learning, where learners learn from each other, forming a community of learning and practice.

This approach encourages free interpersonal interactions, open communications, and flexibility, as well as learning that is self-directed and self-paced, allowing students to learn according to their individual needs and at a pace that suits them (Dillenbourg, 1999). Informality and flexibility can be particularly beneficial for adult learners such as the WEA students, who often juggle learning with other responsibilities such as work or family commitments. This theme of informality was relatively widespread among WEA practitioners, encompassing teaching approaches; curriculum content design; student-student interactions; and teacher-student relationships. It appears that informality is the hallmark of the WEA operations and provision.

"Single demographic and less social cohesion compared to a spread demographic, this resulted in better quality of work. Yes... a lot of friendships have been made; I think there has been a positive health aspect from those people". (John).

"in fact, I think that is the crux of the success of the WEA really that it is an informal structure, classes are very informal, classes are very friendly you know, but it's like with some of the learners we have had for years, now I regard them as friends now, you know what I mean, so it is almost like that tutor/learner thing does not exist anymore". (Ken).

The tutor (Ken) emphasises the informal structure of WEA classes, suggesting this is a key factor in the organisation's success. Informal learning environments can foster a sense of ease and comfort among learners, making education more accessible, enjoyable, and empowering.

The informality reported by WEA tutors seemed to help break down barriers between educators and learners, creating a more collaborative and equal learning environment, as clearly illustrated in the blurring of boundaries and hierarchies between WEA teachers and students. Ken's statement above suggests a flexible relationship between the educator and the learners, since the speaker actually regards long-term learners as friends.

This can lead to a more personalised and adaptive learning experience, as the educator may better understand the learners' individual needs, interests, and learning styles. This flexibility in roles can enhance the learning experience and potentially lead to better educational outcomes, including more democratic learning, greater individual empowerment, social justice, and the breaking down of social inequalities. The extract also suggests a shift from a traditional teacher-student dynamic to a more equal relationship, which can empower learners and promote democratic learning principles.

Analysing John's remarks further, the formation of friendships within the learning environment suggests an informal atmosphere within WEA course groups. When learners form friendships, as described here, it often signifies a level of comfort and informality that enables them to engage more deeply and freely with the learning material and with each other. This informality can also lead to a more enjoyable learning experience. It could be interpreted that, the positive health aspect mentioned in the statement is particularly significant, due to both the informal nature of the learning environment and the sense of community. It appears possible that informal learning environments could enhance satisfaction, and a keen sense of community can provide social support, which could, in turn, have positive effects on both the mental and physical health of the WEA adult learners.

Informal relations and friendships are further captured in another tutor's remarks, who likens the WEA to a "social club" and demonstrates how WEA learners build a sense of community and provide informal support for each other in their studies:

"I think for some learners it's just a bit of a social club. I actually have a lady who comes from Liverpool because she specifically wanted to go to a Chinese Community Centre because she wanted to feel that there were other learners that could help her and, in those classes". (Anna).

This statement gives insight into how some learners perceive their educational environment, emphasising the role of informality and sense of community that seems to flourish at the WEA. The tutor refers to the learning environment as a "social club" for some learners at the WEA. This characterisation suggests an elevated level of informality and social fluidity in the WEA educational setting, where learners can feel relaxed, welcome, and sociable. The fact that the lady travels from Liverpool to Bolton to attend the classes at the WEA implies that the informal, welcoming atmosphere at the WEA is a significant draw for her.

The woman's choice to attend the WEA, as she wanted help from other learners, indicates a powerful sense of community in this learning environment. This kind of supportive, co-operative atmosphere can significantly enhance the learning experience, considering that the lady and her circle of Chinese friends could also provide help to each other in their native Mandarin language during class sessions at the WEA. The comment implies that learners help each other in the classes, suggesting an environment of peer learning.

This can enhance the sense of community and promote democratic learning, where learners are both teachers and students, contributing to and benefiting from the shared knowledge and experiences in the group. Rich cultural connections are also emphasised in the WEA learning environment. The woman's choice to take her education at the WEA specifically may suggest a desire to connect with a particular cultural community, either because of her own background or out of interest. This aspect of community can provide additional support and enrichment for learners, connecting them to wider informal social and cultural networks.

"So, it is friendly, and I hope I am approachable, and most people do seem to come to me if they have got a query, I will always try and go the extra mile as well for them… so I am happy to do that. I am not their friend though, so I don't think I have time really in terms of what we have to cover to sit and chat about who are they, what's their family doing and what have you". (Anna).

This extract demonstrates that Anna endeavours to build a positive and supportive relationship with her learners, and she strives to create a friendly and positive learning environment. This friendly and supportive teacher-student relationship is created through informal engagements and interactions within and outside the learning environment. Anna

strives to create a supportive and inclusive environment where learners feel comfortable and valued. She wants her learners to feel that they are immersed in a friendly and positive environment. While she maintains boundaries and acknowledges that whilst she is “not their friend”, she still fosters a positive and mutually respectful relationship with her students.

The same themes are mirrored by another tutor (Lynne) who promotes informality and flexibility in her teaching and relationships with students by creating a friendly and approachable atmosphere, while also keeping necessary boundaries in teacher-student relations, as illustrated in the extracts below. She believes that students learn better when they like their teacher and find them friendly and approachable. Lynne emphasises that the learning environment should be less formal than a school setting. She also mentions the importance of enjoying the classes and “having a bit of fun”, incorporating variety into the lessons to keep students engaged and interested. By incorporating icebreakers and interactive activities at the beginning of the class, Lynne ensures that students are actively involved in the learning process from the start. Overall, Lynne's approach focuses on building positive relationships with students; fostering a relaxed and enjoyable learning environment; and incorporating flexibility and variety into her teaching methods:

*“Well, as I understand it (democratic learning), it’s to give a role to the learners to actually take charge of their learning” (*Jim)

“*Well, we want to cover this and that and I obviously knew more, and I picked up on skills that they needed to cover and then I did change the scheme of work to fit more around the things that they did need to focus on ESOL Entry 1 classes.”* (Anna).

The extracts above from WEA tutors provide insight into a teaching approach that is flexible, responsive, and learner-centred, reflecting a high degree of informality and spontaneity. The educators ask the learners what they want to cover, indicating a learner-centred pedagogical approach. This is a key aspect of informality in education, as it shifts the power dynamic from a traditional top-down approach to a more democratic, spontaneous, learner-led path. It gives learners agency and a voice in their learning, which can increase their engagement, motivation, and success. The extracts portray how the educator adjusts the scheme of work based on the learners' needs, demonstrating flexibility in curriculum planning. This is another

aspect of informality, as it shows the curriculum is not rigid or fixed but can be adapted to best serve the learners' diverse and shifting needs. This flexibility can make the learning experience more relevant and meaningful for the learners.

Furthermore, the educators not only listen to the learners' wishes, but also use their expertise to identify the skills that the learners need to focus on. This illustrates a responsive teaching approach, which is characteristic of an informal learning environment. The educator's ability to adapt their teaching to meet the learners' needs can enhance the learners' learning experience and outcomes. The decision on what to cover in the class seems to be made collaboratively between the educator and the learners. This shared decision-making is a key feature of informality, breaking down traditional hierarchies in education and fostering a more democratic learning environment. Overall, these comments portray the theme of informality through an emphasis on a learner-centred approach to teaching, a flexible curriculum, responsive teaching, and collaborative decision-making. These aspects of informality can enhance the learning experience by making it more relevant, engaging, and empowering for the learners, as anticipated in a democratic learning environment.

4.6: WEA Practitioners' Perspectives

The study interviewed the WEA practitioners regarding their views on the prevailing policy, which has been thematically coded as 'policy-practice nexus' to denote the fact that the WEA practitioners reflected on the real and perceived influence of policy upon their practice as tutors (see next section). Overall, practitioners had mixed perspectives on the influence of policy on their practice, both regarding internal policy within the WEA, as well as regarding over-arching government policy. Some practitioners made critical comments regarding the impact of government policy as depicted in the extract below:

"Well, half the courses have been lost, because of Government grants being slashed and everything...I mean a few years ago I mean they used to have loads of courses...but it seems to have all disappeared and for ordinary people you know." (Jim).

This comment suggests that recent government policy has had a significant and adverse impact on the number and variety of courses offered by the Workers' Educational Association.

The tutor making the comment seems to be expressing frustration over a perceived reduction in the number of courses over recent years, which they attribute to cuts in government grants. The comment in question reflects a sentiment about the tangible impact of recent neoliberal economic policies in the UK on the educational sector, particularly on lifelong learning organisations like the WEA. Neoliberalism, as an economic ideology, promotes privatisation; the introduction of market forces; and a reduction of state intervention in all sectors of the economy. This often translates into cuts in public spending on key social infrastructures like education, particularly adult education, which appears to be at the heart of the issue raised in the comment (Olssen et al., 2004). Significantly, the reduction in the number of courses implies a decrease in access to education, particularly for "ordinary people", as the practitioner mentions. This could mean that fewer people could benefit from these courses, which could increase inequalities and barriers in access to education.

The following tutor also voiced concerns about the implications of government policy on teaching and learning in lifelong education.

"I think learning and teaching now is difficult in mainstream education in particular with OFSTED and everything seems to be geared towards a results-based system, rather than what have we achieved in terms of personal growth which what I think the WEA is brilliant at." (Noddy).

Noddy's comment points to a tension in modern education between performance metrics and wider personal growth, which is a dichotomy often manifesting in the clash between mainstream educational institutions and alternative educational providers, such as the WEA. Noddy's comments illuminate the significant influence of regulatory bodies like OFSTED in shaping the landscape of mainstream education, in relation to what is worth teaching and for what purposes. With their focus often on measurable outcomes such as exam results, mainstream education can become a predominantly results-oriented system. This contrasts with the more holistic approach that the WEA champions, which values personal growth, empowerment, and lifelong learning, all of which are not explicitly prioritised by OFSTED. The emphasis on results-oriented outcomes can impact the teaching and learning process.

Teachers may feel pressured to ‘teach to the test’, potentially narrowing the curriculum and the scope of learning. On the other hand, an emphasis on personal growth and empowerment, as seen in the WEA, can allow for a more diverse, flexible, and learner-centred approach, which can be more enriching and engaging for learners.

Tutor Lynne was asked if there are any WEA policies which she considered to be conflicting with her own principles of professional practice or personal philosophies, and she replied as follows:

“No, I think I am a good fit here, I do support the equality and diversity policies completely and the safeguarding policies completely, I have had to be involved in a couple of safeguarding issues. Health and Safety I would say is perhaps a problem that we have, working in premises that aren’t ours and are less than ideal.” (Lynne).

She also remarked extremely positively with regards to her views on WEA policy on equality and diversity:

“I think it [equality and diversity] is ingrained now, that, I feel we are very good at equality and diversity, I think we are very good at it, it has to inform everything we do, it has to.” (Lynne).

According to the extracts above and wider reading of her other responses, Lynne reveals various key themes regarding her perceptions of the WEA's policies and practices. Firstly, a deep-rooted commitment to equality and diversity emerges as a prominent theme. Lynne asserts that these principles are "ingrained now" and that the organization is "very good at equality and diversity." Her repetition that it "has to inform everything we do" underscores not only personal conviction but also suggests that these values are integral to the WEA's operational ethos. This indicates that equality and diversity are not just policy statements but are actively embodied in daily practices, aligning with best practices in inclusive education.

Secondly, Lynne expresses unequivocal support for the safeguarding policies, highlighting her complete endorsement and active involvement in related issues. This suggests a more proactive stance towards student welfare and indicates that safeguarding is a well-implemented aspect of the organization's responsibilities. However, a contrasting theme

arises concerning health and safety, which Lynne identifies as "perhaps a problem." The challenges stem from working in "premises that aren't ours and are less than ideal," pointing to systemic issues related to resource limitations or infrastructural constraints at WEA, which raises critical questions about the WEA's ability to ensure consistent and adequate learning environments, which could have implications for both staff satisfaction and student experience.

However, other tutors such as Ken and John have views that are critically opposed to the WEA's overall policy approach to equality and diversity, which both Ken and John seem to perceive as being overzealous. The WEA appears to include too much administration in their diversity and inclusion policies, which may upset the needs of the teachers (John).

"Because the WEA also suffers from this idea of make sure that your lesson follows procedures of equality and inclusion and all that which is fantastic and I fully support that, but the WEA also wants you to sort of put that in your lesson plan, for example, what have you done in your lesson that shows inclusion or diversity or equality, I don't do that. I am not going to put that all on the lesson plan, you know, a) because I haven't time, b) I don't think it is necessary." (Ken).

This comment reflects a tension between policy and practice in the context of the WEA and its focus on inclusion, diversity, and equality. The speaker acknowledges the importance of these principles but questions the requirement to explicitly incorporate them into lesson plans. The WEA's policy to promote diversity, equality, and inclusion is designed to ensure that all learners feel welcomed, respected, and have their needs provided for in the learning environment. However, the implementation of this policy, such as the requirement to incorporate these aspects into every lesson plan, might be seen by some as burdensome or unnecessary. The speaker seems to imply that they naturally incorporate these values into their teaching as a matter of course, and hence do not see the need to explicitly describe these in every lesson plan. This highlights a common challenge in policy implementation, whereby the practical aspects of enforcing a policy can be at odds with the realities of day-to-day teaching, which is characterised by time-constraints and heavy workloads.

Surprisingly, Ken appears rather ambivalent in his view regarding WEA policy and practice. After sounding summarily critical of the WEA's policy requirements in some areas, he then 'reinvents' himself as a dedicated supporter of WEA's overall policy approach. He seems to suggest that the WEA operate a 'leaner and smarter' policy regime stripped of many of the intersecting layers of complex policies:

"My experience of the WEA has generally been very good, to me it is education without all the nonsense that has come to dominate education generally. when I say nonsense, I am talking about, just ridiculous things like form filling, policies of this and policies of that, all of those things which just tend to dominate the teaching experience in other areas." (Ken).

Like Lynne, another tutor (Anna) also seems to be agreeable to the large volumes of paperwork involved at the WEA. She remarked that *"paperwork is not so bad if you have experience in admin. I actually rely on the structure of these things as a new teacher."*

The overall picture that emerges from the analysis is that the majority of WEA tutors involved in this study expressed views only in regard to internal policy within the WEA. There was relatively limited mention of wider government policy or priorities. Nevertheless, the tutors' views on WEA policy range from negative to positive, with some indications of ambivalence and contradiction.

4.7: Policy-Practice Nexus

UK education policy is generally expected to exert considerable influence on tutors' practices within the WEA as it does across all other learning institutions, despite the striking lack of prominent mention of wider government policy among the participating tutors. The WEA, known for its claims to democratic learning ethos, prioritises learner-led education and encourages active participation from learners in shaping their educational journey (WEA, 2012). Prevailing education policy in the UK influences tutors' practices within the WEA – whether they acknowledge it or not- by steering them towards key government policy priorities, including more inclusive practices regarding equality and diversity policy and legislation; a focus on quality of education and outcomes; an emphasis on effective teacher training and development; and the continuous adaptation of the curriculum (OFTED 2023)

These aspects can be seen as both challenging and enriching the democratic learning ethos of the WEA. It is important to recognise that policy exists at multiple layers, including within the WEA organisation itself, which also directly impacts the professional practice of WEA tutors. The overall impression is that many of the WEA tutors spoke mostly about the implications of the WEA's internal organisational policy. There was little mention of government policy.

4.8: UK Education Policy Landscape: A Snapshot

This section will highlight some over-arching issues within the UK education policy landscape that are relevant to the WEA organisation and its practitioners. From the latest UK education policy generally, several key themes emerge that impact the WEA's approach to education. Firstly, there is a clear policy focus on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities students (SEND). The UK Government has highlighted the inconsistency in support and provision for SEND students across the education sector (OFSTED, 2023). This policy direction encourages tutors to adopt more inclusive teaching practices, ensuring students with special needs are well accommodated. This aligns with the WEA's ethos of democratic learning, which emphasises inclusivity and equal opportunities for all learners. The new framework, released at the end of 2022, aimed at promoting improvement in the SEND system, further strengthens this focus.

The second theme of policy emphasises the quality of education and its outcomes. The overarching policy indicates a strong focus on the quality of education and learning outcomes. The annual report provided by Ofsted in 2023 suggests a clear link between a good quality of education and a school's outcomes (OFSTED, 2023). This focus may encourage WEA tutors to involve learners more in decision-making processes, enhancing their learning experience and outcomes. A third thematic focus within UK education policy is effective teacher training and development. The policy emphasises high-quality teacher training and their ongoing development, suggesting a need for tutors to engage in continuous professional development in order to improve practice and boost learner outcomes (OFSTED, 2023). This might impact how WEA tutors approach their teaching practices, by encouraging them to continuously improve and adapt their pedagogical methods and content knowledge in line with best

practices and emerging educational research. These policy priorities and themes pertain to the education sector in general terms, which encompasses the WEA.

This overview also captured the policy landscape that pertains specifically to the lifelong learning subsector, which is where the WEA is embedded. The UK's policy on lifelong learning is encapsulated in the *Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Bill* (2022), which aims to support more people in accessing high-quality courses that meet the skill needs of employers. From 2025, this legislation will offer people a loan worth £37,000 in today's tuition fees, which can be used flexibly over their working lives to pay for short courses, modules, or full courses, whether at a college or at a university. This policy provides flexibility for individuals to decide when they want to study throughout their career, helping them to upskill and progress.

Furthermore, a white paper titled *Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth* outlines the UK's approach to supporting people to develop the skills they need to get good jobs (DfE, 2021). The measures include giving employers a greater say in the development of skills; providing higher level technical skills; offering a flexible, lifetime skills guarantee; simplifying and reforming funding and accountability for providers; and supporting outstanding teaching (DfE, 2021).

The Workers' Educational Association (WEA), which is the UK's largest voluntary sector provider of adult education and one of Britain's biggest charities, already aligns with these principles. The WEA is a democratic and voluntary adult education movement, delivering learning throughout England and Scotland (Field, 2012), with its provision usually locally based for its students. The WEA creates and delivers about 9,000 courses each year in response to local need across England and Scotland, often in partnership with community groups and local charities. These courses provide learning opportunities for around 65,000 people per year, taught by over 2,000 professional tutors (WEA, 2022).

Given this overarching policy context, the UK's policy on lifelong learning could influence teaching practitioners at WEA in several ways. First, with the coming of the lifelong loan entitlement, the WEA and its teaching practitioners can design and offer more flexible learning opportunities, including venturing into courses directed towards helping adult

learners to acquire skills for improved employability, in addition to its current course portfolio, which is geared towards humanistic and empowerment ideals. The WEA could offer short courses, modules, or full courses that align with the needs of the learners and the skills demanded by employers.

Another implication of UK government's lifelong learning policy on WEA's educational provision relates to the emphasis on a community-based approach to lifelong learning (DFE, 2021). The WEA's existing model of delivering courses in response to local needs aligns well with the policy's emphasis on flexibility and providing skills that are relevant to local employers and businesses. This approach can be enhanced further with regards to the lifelong learning policy. The final area of implications relates to funding and support. The focus of the DfE's new policies, with regards to simplifying and reforming funding and accountability for providers, could potentially make it easier for the WEA to secure funding and to offer their courses, given that the WEA is already supported by the Government through funding from the Skills Funding Agency in England, and in Scotland by the Scottish Executive and Local Authorities.

4.9: Synoptic Summary and Conclusions

The analysis reported in this chapter was intended to explore how and the extent to which democratic learning ethos and its multiple manifestations are incorporated into the daily teaching practices, experiences, and thoughts of a small sample of 6 WEA educators. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied in identifying, analysing, and reporting themes that significantly reflect the categories of meanings portrayed within the data in relation to the research questions. Through iterative coding and interpretation, the data from the six in-depth interviews was broken down into smaller units of meanings and categories. These small units were then amalgamated into larger categories, eventually forming a coherent set of six major themes that constitute the results of the study. These themes serve as the framework for the summative synthesis that follows in the next subsections.

4.9.1: Summary of Key Themes

Following thematic analysis approach as elaborated above, blocks of transcribed interview texts were coded into smaller units of meaning, before being grouped progressively and iteratively into larger categories that constituted sub-themes and subsequently built up into themes. A set of six key themes were identified and defined as summarised below:

❖ **Inclusive Practice and Learner-centred Pedagogy:**

Central to this theme is the transformation of the teacher's role from a primary source of knowledge to that of a facilitator of learning and knowledge. Learner-centred pedagogy denotes that learners' interests, needs, abilities, and outcomes are located at the centre of the learning process and are empowered and facilitated to drive the learning process (Collins & O'Brien, 2003; HILT, 2021). This shift is aimed at fostering an environment where learners actively contribute and engage, promoting a more egalitarian classroom dynamic. Challenges noted include managing classroom dynamics to ensure no student feels overshadowed by more dominant personalities.

The detailed analysis under this theme illustrates various instances where educators have successfully implemented strategies that promote inclusivity. This includes adapting teaching content and methods to meet diverse learner needs, peer-to-peer learning, as well as integrating students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds into the classroom activities.

- Central to the findings under this theme is the shift in the teacher's role from being the primary source of knowledge to a facilitator of learning. This shift is crucial for creating an egalitarian learning environment where learners are viewed as equal stakeholders in the learning process, embracing the democratic ethos of education.
- The practice of inclusive pedagogy was illustrated by various strategies employed by educators, such as adapting teaching methods to the diverse needs of learners and integrating students' own languages and cultural backgrounds into the learning process, such as allowing the use of native Chinese language among Chinese students during peer-to-peer learning.

- The findings highlighted that, despite the positive outcomes of inclusive or democratic learning, challenges remain. For instance, managing classroom dynamics to prevent dominant personalities from overshadowing quieter learners, or the inability or reluctance of some learners to articulate their own interests and priorities is a concern that still need addressing.

❖ **Democratic Learning**

This theme encompasses the core values of student voice, empowerment, and choice, placing students at the heart of the learning process. The findings reveal that these elements are crucial in cultivating a learning environment that is both inclusive and participatory. Evidence from the interviews indicates that such an approach not only enhances student engagement but also fosters a responsive educational setting where learners feel valued and empowered.

Under this theme, the chapter discussed how educators at the WEA prioritise learner input and involvement in decision-making processes related to the curriculum and teaching methods. This approach is shown to foster a sense of ownership and empowerment among students, crucial for adult learners and aligned to the ethos of democratic education.

- This theme underscores the importance of student voice, empowerment, and choice within the learning process. It is evident that placing students at the centre of their educational journeys fosters a participatory and inclusive environment.
- The analysis revealed that when students are involved in decision-making, their engagement and motivation increase, leading to more effective learning.

❖ **Informality and Fluidity:**

The theme of informality was found to significantly enhance learning by breaking down traditional barriers between educators and students. This informal and less structured environment allows for spontaneity and adaptation in teaching, curriculum development, and teacher-student relationships. The benefits of such an approach include increased learner engagement and a shift towards more egalitarian (or democratic) relationships within the classroom.

The benefits of an informal educational environment were explored, showing how flexibility in teaching and curriculum planning can lead to more personalised and engaging learning experiences. This approach helps dismantle traditional hierarchies in education, promoting a more democratic and inclusive learning environment.

- The benefits of informality in educational settings include increased flexibility in learning and teaching approaches, which can lead to better adaptation to the needs of adult learners.
- This theme highlighted how an informal atmosphere encourages spontaneity and individualisation in learning, breaking down the traditional barriers between educators and learners and promoting egalitarian relationships.

❖ **Social Purpose:**

Education at the WEA is depicted as extending beyond individualistic goals to encompass broader societal benefits. This theme emphasises the role of education in promoting social justice, inclusivity, and community empowerment. The analysis criticises traditional exam-centric education models, advocating instead for a learning approach that prioritises personal growth, curiosity, and the intrinsic value of education.

The social purpose of education is emphasised as extending beyond the classroom to have a societal impact. This broader view of education's role aligns with the principles of social justice and aims to produce not just educated individuals but also responsible citizens.

- The analysis emphasised that education at the WEA is intended not just to serve individual needs but to contribute to societal well-being. This aligns with the broader educational goals of fostering social justice, inclusivity, and community empowerment.
- The preference for ‘learning for learning's sake’ over traditional exam-centric education highlights a commitment to deeper understanding and the intrinsic value of learning, rather than just preparation for examinations.

❖ **Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion:**

This theme highlights the importance of creating an educational environment that respects and values the diversity of all learners, including those with disabilities. The WEA's practices are geared towards accommodating various learning needs and promoting an inclusive atmosphere. Specific adjustments, such as the use of alternative communication methods and materials, are discussed as ways to support learners with different abilities.

The analysis under this theme stresses the importance of recognising and valuing each learner's unique potential. The WEA's commitment to diversity and inclusion is manifested through various adapted teaching practices that cater to the individual.

- This theme stressed the importance of an educational environment that respects and values the diversity of all learners. The WEA's approach includes various strategies to accommodate learners with disabilities, showcasing a commitment to inclusivity.
- Adaptations, such as alternative communication methods and materials tailored to different abilities, underscore the WEA's dedication to ensuring every individual has the opportunity to learn.

❖ **Policy-Practice Nexus:**

The final theme explores the impact of both internal organisational policies and wider governmental policies on the practices at the WEA. The analysis reveals a complex interplay between policy and practice, with some policies enhancing the democratic ethos, while others are viewed as burdensome by educators. The findings call for policies that are supportive of educational objectives without imposing excessive administrative burdens on educators. This theme explores the interface and tensions between policy and practice, capturing the impact of both internal WEA organisational policies as well as, to a lesser extent, the wider governmental policies on the practices at the WEA.

- The findings under this theme revealed a complex relationship between educational policy and teaching practice. While some policies support the democratic learning ethos of WEA, others are perceived by the tutors as being burdensome.
- The need for a balance between policy requirements and the practical realities of educational settings seemed evident from the tutor interviews, suggesting that policymakers- both

internal and external – should consider the implications of their decisions on the day-to-day experiences of educators and learners.

- WEA tutors had mixed perspectives on the influence of policy on their practice, with a small minority expressing concerns and tensions about the implications of wider government policy on teaching and learning in lifelong education. Other tutors had positive views on internal WEA policy whereas the majority did not express any views pertaining to government policy.

4.9.2: Key Conclusions

The thematic analysis conducted in this study reveals a significant commitment to democratic learning principles and ethos at the WEA, as evidenced by the practices of inclusivity, student empowerment, as well as the informality and adaptability in teaching and curriculum development practices. However, challenges such as managing classroom interpersonal dynamics, balancing the burdens of policy compliance with practical teaching needs, and ensuring the inclusivity of all learners remain and continue to demand increased attention.

One of the key conclusions from thematic analysis is that democratic learning practices, which emphasise student voice, choice, and empowerment, significantly enhance learner engagement. This finding underscores the effectiveness of adopting democratic principles in adult education settings, particularly in fostering an inclusive and participatory learning environment. Inclusive practices, particularly those that adapt to the diverse needs of learners, including those with disabilities, are crucial for creating equitable educational opportunities. The study highlights that inclusive pedagogy, which integrates various adaptive strategies and respects learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, not only supports individual learner needs but also builds a stronger learning community.

The findings suggest that informality in educational settings - characterised by less rigid structures and more fluid teacher-learner relationships - leads to greater flexibility in teaching and curriculum adjustments. Such environments are better suited to meet the needs of adult learners, allowing for spontaneity and individualisation of the learning process. This informality supports a more democratic and egalitarian learning atmosphere, where learners feel comfortable and empowered to contribute actively to their educational experiences. A significant conclusion from the analysis is the complex interplay between policy and practice.

Policies that are overly restrictive or market-oriented can hinder the implementation of democratic learning principles and the growth of lifelong learning more broadly.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings of this study add significant weight, in a variety of different ways, to the growing body of literature on democratic learning and inclusive pedagogy. Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework was instrumental in coding and examining the textual data transcribed from the in-depth interviews with the WEA practitioners and the development of the six major themes, which are:

• *inclusive practice and pedagogy*;

• *democratic learning* (student voice, empowerment, and choice);

• *informality and fluidity*;

• *social purpose;*

• *equality diversity and inclusion;*

• *policy-practice nexus*.

Among these, the range of pedagogical and relational practices that foster inclusivity, equality, informality, and the democratic learning ethos stood out, echoing the notions of democratic education discussed by Gutmann (1987). This was especially evident in the shift of the teacher's role from a transmitter of knowledge to a facilitator of peer-to-peer learning, which aligns with Freire's (1970) dialogical and participatory learning that aims at personal empowerment and civic emancipation.

Inclusive Practice and Pedagogy

The theme of inclusive practice is fundamentally embedded within the WEA's core principles. According to the study's findings, this commitment is exemplified through practices that echo

the works of Florian & Black-Hawkins (2011), who emphasise that inclusive pedagogy must inherently believe in the potential of every learner to engage and benefit from educational opportunities. However, while the principles of inclusive pedagogy are noble, the practical application as indicated by the data from the WEA shows a varying degree of adherence to these ideals. Tutors reportedly strive to mould their instructional strategies to meet diverse learners' needs through differentiation, a concept supported by Tomlinson (2014), and to integrate peer-to-peer learning and cultural inclusivity. Yet, the efficacy of these approaches can sometimes hinge on the individual tutor's ability and the resources available, which can lead to inconsistencies in practice.

Fleming et al. (2021) argue that these inclusive methods should be intrinsic to the educational framework, not merely supplementary. They propose that learner-centred, responsive teaching practices are crucial for fostering inclusive learning environments. This perspective is crucial as it suggests a systemic integration of inclusivity, rather than isolated efforts (Molina et al., 2021). Research completed by Hockings (2021) indicates that while adaptive strategies are beneficial, they require robust support systems to be fully effective in benefitting leaners' outcomes.

Limitations of Inclusivity and Learner-centredness

While Dewey championed the idea of democracy in education, focusing on learner-centred and participatory approaches, the practical implementation of such ideals, as demonstrated by the WEA, can encounter nuanced challenges and limitations across different educational contexts (Kliebard, 1987; Ravitch, 2010). Dewey's principles stress learner involvement (Dewey, 1916), yet the extent to which this is feasible and effective in diverse adult learning contexts may vary considerably as shown clearly in the findings from the WEA, where tutors widely observed that linguistic and sociocultural limitations can circumscribe a learner's ability to articulate their choices and freedoms. Moreover, Freire's dialogic methods offer a radical approach to empowerment and learner-centeredness but may not be universally applicable or accepted in all educational settings (Freire, 1970).

Knowles emphasises the autonomy of adult learners (Knowles, 1997), but this presupposes an educational environment that is fully supportive and equipped to handle diverse adult learning needs. The work of Knowles (1984; 1997) on andragogy also resonates with the findings of this study, in that, the different ways in which adult learners prefer to learn, as opposed to that of young people, suggests that adult learners, such as those at the WEA, would benefit more from inclusive practices that emphasise greater learner agency and ownership of their own learning journey. Hockings' work further suggests that while inclusive pedagogies aim to cater to varied learning preferences, the actualisation of these theories often demands extensive resources and institutional support, which can be inconsistent (Hockings, 2010). Therefore, the application of inclusive learner-centred pedagogies must critically consider the variability in resource availability and socio-cultural contexts within adult education settings.

Learner Voice and Empowerment

The focus on accommodating learners with disabilities and special educational needs reflects the principles of *Universal Design for Learning* (Rose & Meyer, 2002). The implementation of peer assessment supports Panadero et al.'s (2017) argument that this approach fosters autonomy, enhancing learners' evaluative judgement. However, the issue of some students dominating the spaces and discussions brings to light potential pitfalls of this approach, which echo the discussions by hooks (1994) on power dynamics within the classroom. The study's exploration of 'democratic learning' aligns with Dewey's emphasis on active student participation in the learning process. In this regard, the findings also extend Dewey's arguments, revealing that WEA tutors embrace student voice and empowerment as fundamental aspects of democratic education, fostering participation and inclusivity, thereby aligning with Freire's (1970) perspective on the importance of learners' active participation and voice.

The promotion of student voice within the WEA highlights a commitment to democratic learning. However, it also brings to the surface the challenge of ensuring equitable participation among learners. As demonstrated in the findings of this WEA case study, the issue of more dominant students overshadowing quieter ones is a significant concern (Brookfield, 2017). This imbalance in dialogue and vocality can be mitigated by employing

structured discussion formats that distribute speaking opportunities more evenly among all learners. Additionally, the inclusion of multilingual teaching strategies, as advocated by Cummins (2021), and as illustrated in the WEA case study through the use of indigenous languages during peer-to-peer learning among students, could further democratise learning environments by respecting linguistic diversity.

To enhance this approach, Wrigley (2018) suggests that teachers should actively facilitate and monitor interactions to prevent dominance by the minority of vocal learners, while Gonzalez et al. (2019) recommend the integration of technology that can give quieter students alternative platforms to express their thoughts, ensuring a more inclusive participation framework. These strategies collectively support a more balanced and inclusive application of democratic principles in education.

The theme of 'learner empowerment' resonates with the work of Ryan & Deci (2000) on self-determination theory. The study provides practical examples of how WEA tutors foster learner autonomy and ownership, which are both key components of intrinsic motivation and learning according to Ryan & Deci's theory. Empowerment as a significant sub-theme of democratic learning is further affirmed by scholars such as Illeris (2014) who suggests that empowerment is a crucial aspect of adult learning or lifelong education.

This element is firmly embodied by the WEA's approach, fostering confidence and autonomy in learners. Such empowerment is, however, not without its potential pitfalls (Brookfield, 2017; Hockings, 2021). The findings of this study illustrated some of the limitations of learner autonomy and empowerment, suggesting a range of factors, such as the learner's own capabilities, personalities, and cultural belief systems, which can adversely affect their ability or desire to take control of their own learning as required within a more democratic learning ethos (see also Wrigley, 2018).

The study's findings further show that despite democratic learning being the overarching ethos at the WEA, many students still manifested the need and expectation to be taught, guided, and led by their designated teacher, which indicates the persistence and pervasiveness of traditional teacher-student hierarchies. This important finding is supported by previous studies, such as that of Merriam & Bierema (2014), who suggested that an

overemphasis on learner autonomy could inadvertently shift too much responsibility onto the learners, potentially overwhelming them. The WEA may need to remain cognisant of this potential risk to ensure a balanced approach to learning, even as they promote the ethos of 'democratic learning'. The underlying narrative is that learning, however inclusive and learner-centred, cannot always be entirely democratic in practice.

Parallels of Democratic Learning and Andragogy

The focus on celebrating learners' experiences and voices within the classroom further aligns with Knowles' (1980; 2005) adult learning theory, which values and utilises learners' experiences as a rich resource for learning (Tennant, 1997). Knowles' principles of andragogy, emphasising autonomy and learner-centred approaches, align closely with the democratic ethos of the WEA. The WEA practices mirror Knowles' portrayal of educators as facilitators, who support peer-to-peer interaction and self-directed learning, whilst moving away from the traditional 'tabula rasa' model of passive knowledge reception (Knowles, 1984; Tennant, 1997). This shift is crucial in adult education, where learners bring diverse experiences and require practical, applicable knowledge.

Knowles (1984) posits that adult learners bring a wealth of experience to the learning process, are self-directed, and are more interested in immediate, problem-centred approaches, rather than subject-centred ones. Adults are also internally motivated to learn, and their readiness to learn is often related to the developmental or instrumental tasks of their broader professional or social roles (Tennant, 1997; Knowles, 2005). A critical examination might question the uniform application and effectiveness of these practices across all WEA settings, suggesting a need for continuous adaptation to fulfil the andragogical vision. Additionally, the study suggests that such educational practices not only empower learners but also contribute to their ability to apply learning outcomes, aligning with Knowles' emphasis on the relevance of learning to adult students' lives (Knowles, 1984; 2005).

However, Knowles' ground-breaking theory of andragogy is not without its critics. For instance, some opponents argue that Knowles' theory of adult learning is too individualistic and not always suitable, especially for less educated adults or those from more collective cultures (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Critics challenge his distinctive adult-child learning

dichotomy, noting that characteristics attributed to adults do not necessarily exist in all adults as presumed in the theory, and can apply to some young learners too (Illeris, 2004; Brookfield, 2017).

Further critiques contend that Knowles' model lacks empirical evidence and overlooks embedded systemic issues affecting adult learning, such as socio-economic or racial inequalities (Brookfield, 2017). Nevertheless, despite these valid criticisms, Knowles' core principles offer significant insights into the democratic and inclusive practices within the WEA. The shift from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred model, as discussed in the findings, mirrors the Piagetian principles of constructivism (Piaget, 1970). It is the transformation of traditional learning paradigms to create an environment that supports shared decision-making and learner autonomy.

Democratic Learning and Social Purpose

The study's theme of 'social purpose' resonates with Giroux's (2011) critical pedagogy, which views education as a means of fostering social justice and strengthening civic participation. The focus on personal growth, empowerment, and confidence development, rather than solely instrumental goals such as employment and economic mobility, also resonates with the concept of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997), which emphasises a profound shift in one's beliefs, attitudes, and worldview because of learning as pioneered in the classical works of Freire (1993) and Dewey (1916).

Interestingly, the WEA's portfolio of courses includes a module with the title *Social Purpose*, which is intended to prepare adults for the world of work and being active in social settings (WEA, 2012; 2022). This type of broad educational goal, that embraces social justice ideals, while also focusing on employability and economic self-determination, would be expected to draw significantly from Knowles' (1984) ideas of adult learning, particularly those concerned with practicality and instrumental relevance of learning to the adult's demonstrated needs, such as employment and socio-economic mobility. The emphasis on employability also resonates with the instrumental perspective on adult education as expounded in the wider

literature on lifelong learning (such as Milana, 2012; OECD, 1998; Billet, 2010; Duckworth & Ojo, 2016).

The study's findings on the theme of social purpose in adult education further echo the theoretical perspectives of key agencies who argue that adult education should extend beyond narrow instrumental goals to foster broader societal benefits (UNESCO, 2019; OECD, 1998). The WEA's approach, as revealed in the study, aligns with this perspective, highlighting the crucial role that adult education can play in promoting social justice, inclusivity, and empowerment. However, as Field (2012) points out, the challenge is in maintaining this broader humanistic and social focus amidst economic pressures and policy changes that often emphasise employment-related outcomes.

The WEA emphasis on the social purposes of education and the focus on 'education for its own sake' is broadly connected to the debates surrounding the nature and purposes of lifelong learning and adult education (for example, Billet, 2008; 2018). Over the years, the discourse on lifelong learning and adult education has seen a paradigm shift. It has moved away from a focus on developing vocational skills towards a more holistic understanding, encompassing personal development, civic engagement, individual empowerment, and cultural enrichment (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

Lifelong Learning: Humanistic and Instrumental Perspectives

The findings reflect the contrasts between the sociological and humanistic perspective, which views lifelong learning as a tool for achieving equity and social justice with the economic perspective, which frames lifelong learning within the context of human capital theory. These perspectives reflect the broader debates in the literature between authors such as Vargas (2017), who advocates for the humanistic perspective, and Milana (2012), who examined the influence of human capital theory and instrumentalist perspectives on lifelong learning practices and policy discourses (see also DfE, 2021; OECD, 1998).

Whereas this comprehensive and distinctively humanistic approach to adult education and lifelong learning emphasised by the WEA has been hailed as progressive and discursively empowering to individuals who have been socially disadvantaged, there have also been

critiques which emphasise its limitations. For instance, critics argue that this broad humanistic lens of examining lifelong learning potentially dilutes the significance of socio-economic empowerment and skill development for economic employability, which remain central to many adult learners' needs and their socio-economic mobility and higher quality of life (Rubenson, 2006).

In other terms, the pursuit of humanistic and social justice ideals at the expense of seeking skills for economic empowerment can undermine opportunities for the socio-economic mobility of adult learners, which can lead to the reproduction of disadvantage and marginalisation (Milana, 2012; Klees, 2016). The UK's latest white paper on *Lifelong Learning* (DfE, 2021) emphasises the importance of the economic or instrumentalist perspective to lifelong learning, portraying lifelong education as a core element in the UK's long-term skills development strategy to "increase productivity, support growth industries, and give individuals opportunities to progress in their careers" (DfE, 2021:6).

This predominantly economic view of lifelong learning is associated with the growing economic imperative which demands continuing adult employability and occupational competence throughout people's productive lifespan, in the context of changing occupational dynamics, workplace requirements, and technological transformations in modern society (Vargas, 2017; Poquet & de Laat, 2021). This economic perspective on adult learning is further emphasised within the policy discourses of various leading supranational development organisations (OECD, 1998; World Bank, 2003). Overall, it can be shown that, whereas the findings of this study reveal a predominant focus on humanistic and social justice goals in WEA education, this approach is contrary to the overarching policy emphasis on economic and the instrumental purposes of adult education in the national and international policy arenas.

The humanistic claim that adult education inherently promotes social equality has also been interrogated in the literature. Critics argue that, in many instances, adult education inadvertently reinforces existing social hierarchies and unequal power dynamics, providing opportunities primarily to those already privileged, while at the same time, reproducing disadvantage and marginalisation to those who are already facing inequalities and barriers to better opportunities (Gouthro, 2019). This critique of adult education, while valid, must be

considered alongside the transformative potential of adult education (Billet, 2008), and it underscores the importance of designing inclusive adult education programmes as demonstrated in the findings of this study of the WEA.

A preference for 'learning for learning's sake' is clearly evident in the findings of this study, which echoes intrinsic motivation theories which promote and prioritise empowerment, self-discovery, and understanding over test performance (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The emphasis on personal development and empowerment is echoed in Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory, which advocates for personal growth and social change through education. This perspective challenges the traditional focus on educational credentials and employment, aligning with Billet's (2010) assertions on the broader social benefits of lifelong learning. In contrast, the study also acknowledges that implementing this social purpose and democratic ethos largely depends on students' abilities, acceptance, and engagement. This nuance brings to light Rogers' (1983) student-centred learning approach, suggesting that the learning process is highly subjective, and that learners must be highly motivated and must actively participate for learning to occur effectively.

Diversity and Inclusion in Democratic Learning

The findings of this study capture the themes of diversity and inclusion as indispensable components of 'democratic learning', given that the democracy's strength is fundamentally rooted in its heterogeneity and multivocality (Bellamy, 2020). As evidenced in recent scholarship, when learners with varying backgrounds, perspectives, abilities, and experiences are included in educational settings, it fosters a more comprehensive understanding of democratic principles and values in education. Furthermore, the democratic learning process is enriched when differences are seen as assets and opportunities, rather than as deficits or limitations (De Jaeghere, 2022).

The exploration of 'diversity and inclusion' within the democratic education context parallels Armstrong et al.'s (2011) emphasis on strength-based perspectives in special education. The current study provides real-life examples of WEA tutors adapting their teaching methods to

the unique abilities, strengths, and communication styles of students with developmental disabilities, providing a counterpoint to deficit-focused models of special education where learners with developmental disabilities are viewed as facing inadequacies, and hence are not considered capable of achieving what non-disabled learners can. Responsive adjustments within WEA education reflect the principles of *Universal Design for Learning* (Rose & Meyer, 2002). The numerous personal accounts and illustrations of the WEA tutors providing alternative communication and assessments for dyslexic students and contingency plans for students with conditions such as epilepsy highlight inclusive educational practices that value student agency and seek to meet diverse learning needs.

However, achieving true diversity and inclusion within democratic learning environments can pose significant challenges. Critics argue that, while diversity may exist within educational settings, the practice of genuine inclusion, where all voices are heard and valued, and have an impact on decision-making processes, is often lacking or harder to achieve (Ortega, 2023). In addition, inclusive democratic education requires ongoing reflection and adaptation to changing societal contexts, which can be met with resistance in educational institutions with deeply ingrained traditional structures (Ortega, 2023). Ravitch (2010), on the other hand, highlights challenges in integrating the Deweyan idea of a student-driven approach with the highly formalised and rigid structures of standardised testing and accountability requirements prevalent in today's educational systems (also Mason, 2017; Billet 2018).

Thus, it can be argued that the pursuit of diversity and inclusion within the ethos of 'democratic learning' should focus not only on the mere presence of different identities in the classroom but also on fostering a culture of active engagement, respect, and mutual understanding. All of these being further intertwined with, and shaped by, the learner's own characteristics, interests, and capabilities, as is suggested in the findings of this study. For instance, some WEA tutors reflected that, despite the democratic ethos, learners who have limited knowledge of the English Language, or alternatively, little understanding of a specific subject matter, will certainly lack the ability and confidence to articulate their needs, perspectives, and preferences. As a result, they will, therefore, remain marginalised, passive, and excluded within a supposedly 'democratic' and 'inclusive' learning environment.

Informality: Practices and Relationships

The theme of 'informality and fluidity' and its impact on shaping learning experiences and outcomes was strongly captured in this study to portray how learning experiences, curriculum content, and social relationships were highly informalized and fluid. This finding dovetails with Crossan et al.'s (2005) exploration of the informal learning landscape. Their focus on spontaneous, flexible, and individualised learning mirrors the findings of this study. The tutors' flexibility in reshaping learning content, as well as teaching and assessment approaches based on student needs and input, are illustrations of an application of student-centred learning (Rogers, 1969).

The observation of informal friendships between tutors and students, as well as social cohesion among and between students and tutors, aligns with Wenger's (1998) *Communities of Practice* theory, which proposes that learning is a social process occurring within a community setting where both formal and informal processes and structures coexist and merge into each other. These social bonds enhance the learning environment and support democratic principles, suggesting that creating a supportive community can foster more effective and engaging learning. A good illustration of the depth of informality at the WEA is the observation by one of the WEA tutors that students view the WEA as some kind of “social club” (Anna’s interview).

The informality in curriculum design and selection dovetails with Torrance's (2007) critique of standardised assessment. By giving learners, a greater voice and choice in their learning and responding to their diverse needs, the WEA's approach contrasts with traditional, rigid curriculum planning, promoting increased student engagement and success. This theme generally aligns with contemporary educational theories advocating for the shift from traditional, teacher-centred pedagogies toward more egalitarian, flexible, learner-centred approaches that value learner autonomy, diversity, and social cohesion. While the study recognises the complexities of implementing these approaches, the findings lend strong support to their effectiveness and potential for promoting social justice and transformative education. Quinn, known for his work on transformative learning, highlighted the role of dialogue, critical reflection, and collaborative learning in promoting transformative educational experiences (Quinn, 2003). In the context of democratic learning at the WEA,

Quinn's thoughts resonate with the emphasis on creating a participatory and inclusive learning environment where students can learn from and teach each other, and where teacher-learner relationships are remodelled to remove traditional hierarchical power relations.

Contested Nexus of Policy and Practice

The exploration of policy influence on the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) practice resonates with Ball's (1998) assertion that policy is a significant driver of educational practices. Ball's work highlights that, while policy can provide a framework, its interpretation and implementation can vary depending on the context, reflecting the current study's findings regarding differing tutor perspectives on policy influence. The exploration of the policy-practice nexus within the WEA context reflects ongoing debates in the literature on adult education and lifelong learning policy in the UK and elsewhere. Scholars such as Rubenson (2011) and Milana (2012) highlight the tension between policy mandates and actual educational practices, with the latter often significantly shaped by the former. The ambivalence and contradictions expressed by WEA tutors echo these tensions, with tutors both benefiting from, and feeling challenged by, the same policy influences. The WEA's practice could benefit from a deeper engagement with the critical insights provided by these scholars, who advocate for a greater alignment between policy and practice, while also acknowledging and navigating the complexities and contradictions inherent in this relationship.

The current study's findings further mirror Apple's (2004) examination of the politics of official knowledge, wherein the educational curriculum is significantly influenced by governmental policies. Apple's critique aligns with the expressed concerns of some WEA tutors about government policy implications on lifelong education. Further, the policy focus on special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) aligns with Florian et al.'s (2010) argument that inclusive educational practices require supportive policy frameworks. The study's observation of the influence of SEND policies on the WEA's educational approach provides real-world evidence supporting Florian et al.'s assertions.

The findings regarding the emphasis on *Quality of Education and Outcomes* in UK policy echo the assertions of Madaus et al. (2009), who argue for a balance between accountability measures and comprehensive, high-quality education. These findings suggest a potentially productive tension between policy emphasis on outcomes and the WEA's commitment to democratic, learner-centred education. Another key policy arena disclosure in the analysis is the *Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Act (2023)* and its potential impact on the WEA. The policy presents an interesting intersection of policy and practice, reflecting Levin's (2001) examination of policy as a means of shaping educational access and equity. This suggests the possibility of increased opportunities for adult learners through policy measures that support lifelong learning, which could potentially translate into increased student numbers and larger funding for the WEA's adult educational programmes.

Gaps in WEA Policy Enactment

The current study's finding that some tutors perceive the WEA's overall policy approach to equality and diversity as overzealous and burdensome echoes the debates surrounding the operationalisation of equality and diversity in education (Bhopal, 2018). This points to the challenges in translating policy directives into practice in a way that is both meaningful and manageable to practitioners who are expected to enact the policy. In conclusion, the study offers valuable insights into the complex relationship between policy and practice in the context of the WEA. The findings reinforce existing literature on the influence of policy on educational practices, while revealing the nuances and tensions that can arise in the process (Olssen et al., 2004). This provides a basis for further exploration into how policy can effectively support the ideals of democratic learning and inclusive pedagogy.

This study acknowledges the institutional aspects of adult education, as embedded within organisations such as the WEA, demonstrating their role in providing structured learning experiences and interventions which are geared towards a range of different purposes, including humanistic, social justice, and instrumental objectives. This corresponds with the assertions of Illeris (2014), who contends that adult education institutions play a pivotal role in creating conducive learning environments and providing the necessary support and resources for learning to occur. Notably, this study highlights that these institutional interventions do not guarantee learning outcomes which, in turn, reflect Field's (2012)

argument that adult education must be context-specific and sensitive to individual learners' needs and motivations, in order for learning to take place effectively.

This discussion on policy discourses offers valuable insights into the tensions and challenges that adult education providers, such as the WEA, might face in aligning their practices with policy mandates. This echoes the arguments of Rubenson (2011), who stresses that education providers must navigate these policy complexities to uphold their commitment to fostering inclusive, democratic, and empowering learning environments. The study broadly underscores the importance of recognising the individualised, continuous, and spontaneous nature of lifelong learning (Billet, 2010; 2018), while also acknowledging the role of institutional arrangements and provisions in supporting adult learning and lifelong education, as demonstrated in the case study of the WEA.

The WEA organisation represents a formal and institutionalised approach to adult education, in contrast to the concept of lifelong learning, which is portrayed as a ubiquitous, ongoing, spontaneous process that extends beyond formal educational settings and is driven by the individual's personal interests, capacities, and circumstances (Billet, 2010; 2018). Furthermore, the study highlights the need to navigate policy complexities and align practice with both humanistic and economic perspectives on lifelong learning to achieve a truer form of empowerment which embraces both economic productivity as well as social justice and emancipation.

5.1: Summary and Conclusion

The discussion and analysis contained in this chapter underscores the significance of democratic learning and inclusive pedagogy within the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), highlighting how these approaches support theories posited by Dewey, Freire, and Knowles on learner-centred education. This shift from a teacher-led model to one that emphasises learner autonomy and peer learning reflects Freire's (1970) dialogical method, which aims to foster personal empowerment and civic emancipation (Freire, 1970). The

WEA's implementation of inclusive practices aligns well with Florian & Black-Hawkins' (2011) perspective that effective pedagogical approaches should recognise and nurture every learner's potential. Moreover, the study's findings reflect Dewey's emphasis on the importance of student voice and agency in educational settings, demonstrating that the WEA's approach promotes active participation and engagement, essential for a democratic learning environment.

However, the practical challenges of democratic education highlighted in the chapter resonate with existing literature on the delicate balance between learner autonomy and the structured guidance needed to ensure equitable participation in educational settings. The tendency for more assertive students to dominate discussions reflects concerns about power dynamics within democratic education settings as discussed by hooks (1994). These findings suggest the necessity for careful moderation and facilitation within learner-centred approaches to ensure that all voices are heard and valued equally, aligning with Brookfield's (2017) advocacy for an equitable distribution of voices in adult education settings. These nuanced pedagogical approaches could offer potential to truly democratise the learning space, ensuring equity and inclusivity in learning practices (hooks, 1994).

Furthermore, the study's emphasis on the integration of social purposes and community engagement in adult education or lifelong learning ties back to the principles of transformative learning as discussed by Mezirow (1997) and the social justice orientation of critical pedagogy as outlined by Giroux (2011). The WEA's focus, not only on employability but also on broader social outcomes, reflects a commitment to the transformative potential of adult education, aiming for both personal growth and wider social justice ideals (Billet, 2010; Rubenson, 2011). This dual focus parallels Knowles' (1984) assertions on the significance of aligning adult education with learners' immediate life contexts and their broader social roles, advocating for a holistic approach that transcends traditional vocational training and embraces comprehensive personal and social development (Knowles, 1984; Billet, 2010; Rubenson, 2011).

Further analysis reveals the critical intersection of educational practice with policy, suggesting that while the WEA aims to uphold a democratic and inclusive ethos, there are significant challenges posed by existing educational policies and the pervasive traditional teacher-

student hierarchies. This observation aligns with Ball's (1998) insights on the impact of policy on educational practices, highlighting how even well-intentioned policies can complicate the implementation of democratic and inclusive education (Ball, 1998). Moreover, the persistence of traditional teacher-student hierarchies, despite efforts to promote more egalitarian educational models, resonates with Brookfield's (2017) discussion on the ongoing dominance of teacher-centred approaches in adult education settings, underscoring the need for a conscious shift towards more genuinely participatory learning environments (Brookfield, 2017, Rubenson, 2011).

In a contrasting finding, the chapter discusses the potential pitfalls of an overly autonomous learning model, which can place undue pressure on learners and might not adequately accommodate the varied capabilities and socio-economic contexts of all students. This issue is reflected in Merriam & Bierema's (2014) critique of Knowles' andragogical model, suggesting that such autonomy-focused approaches can overlook the need for more guided learning experiences, particularly for those from less privileged backgrounds (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Furthermore, while democratic learning aims to empower students, the findings highlight a need for balance to prevent dominant voices from overshadowing quieter ones in the learning environments. This concern is supported by hooks' (1994) discussion on power dynamics within the classroom, emphasising the need for strategies that ensure all voices are equally heard and valued (hooks, 1994; Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

Chapter 6: Conclusions

The phenomenon of 'democratic learning' is complex and multi-faceted, frequently referenced, yet perhaps less understood in its practical application, particularly in the unfamiliar terrain of education. As an inherent part of educational discourse, it is both a catalyst and a product of pedagogical, social, and political forces, shaping our educational landscapes and practices. In the face of diverse interpretations and the delicate constraints of governmental policy concerning funding based on marketisation and commoditisation that emphasise learning targets (Ball, 1998; Olssen et al., 2004), the investigation of the democratic learning concept becomes paramount.

This doctoral research sought to deconstruct and explore the construction and practices that constitute and underpin 'democratic learning', focusing specifically on teaching practitioners at the WEA.

The primary research question which guided this study was*:*

How is 'democratic learning' constructed and embedded within the practice of teaching and learning provision at the WEA?

This inquiry emanates from and intertwines with my personal experiences as an adult education practitioner, having often encountered the term 'inclusion' interconnected with the term 'democratic' within the WEA mission statement. This study aimed to delve into the essence of 'democratic learning' in the context of teaching and learning, investigating its construction, negotiation, implementation, and contestation through the narratives and experiences of teaching practitioners within the WEA setting. The ambition is not merely to elucidate what the term 'democratic learning' means in theory but to shed light on how it is

realised, communicated, and sometimes even disputed in the reality of the classroom and organisational policy.

The study was guided by four objectives:

1. to explore and evaluate the tutors' perceptions and interpretations of ‘democratic learning’ within their practice at the WEA;
2. to critically examine how practitioners negotiate and translate the concept of ‘democratic learning’ into their pedagogical strategies in the classroom;
3. to investigate the manifestation of ‘democratic learning’ within teacher-learner relationships and its repercussions for learning outcomes;
4. to critically evaluate the internal and external influences on the WEA's teaching and learning policies within the broader framework of government policy, with a specific focus on the incorporation and negotiation of the democratic learning narrative.

The purpose of this research is not simply to contribute to academic discourse, but to generate insights that could prove instrumental in refining educational practices and policies at the WEA and beyond, across the adult education landscape in the UK. By focusing on ‘democratic learning’, the study aimed to shed light on the intricate interplay between policy, practice, and the lived experiences of educators in adult education settings. This brief final chapter now provides overarching broad conclusions that can be drawn from the findings of this study, capturing some of the contributions of the study that might be considered significant, before suggesting some recommendations for practice, policy, and further research.

6.1: Dimensions of Democratic Education

- **Tutors' Perceptions and Practices**: The study delved into tutors' perceptions and interpretations of ‘democratic learning’ within their practice at the WEA. Through qualitative analysis, it became evident that tutors interpret democratic learning as not simply a pedagogical approach but as a holistic educational philosophy that encompasses respect, choice, equality, and inclusivity. These findings are illuminated by narratives that demonstrate

how tutors integrate 'democratic learning' into their pedagogical strategies, fostering environments that encourage dialogue and collaborative learning.

- **Teacher-Learner Dynamics and Learning Outcomes**: The research also investigated the dynamic relationships between teachers and learners under the lens of 'democratic learning'. It was found that these relationships significantly influence learning outcomes. The transformation from teachers as primary knowledge holders to facilitators of peer-to-peer learning highlights a shift towards more inclusive and democratic educational environments. This shift promotes greater learner engagement and fosters a sense of community among students, which is crucial for effective learning.
- **Policy Influences on Teaching Practices**: Critically, the study evaluated how both internal and external policies affect the WEA's approach to teaching and learning. It was observed that governmental policies, especially those related to funding and educational targets, play a significant role in shaping the practice of 'democratic learning'. These policies often pose challenges but also provide opportunities for integrating democratic principles into educational practices.

6.2: Key Implications and Contributions: Theory and Policy

- **Educational Theories and Pedagogical Shifts**: This research aligns with seminal educational theories proposed by Freire, Dewey, and Knowles, emphasising a transformative shift in pedagogical practices from traditional didactic methods to those that are more inclusive, and learner-centred. This shift is not merely theoretical but is observed in the practical applications within WEA classrooms, where the focus is on empowering learners as active participants in their own education.
- **Limitations of Democratic Learning**: Despite its strengths, the study also highlights certain limitations of 'democratic learning'. A significant finding is that while there is a push towards learner-centred pedagogies, there remains a strong expectation among learners for traditional, teacher-led instruction. This indicates a tension between the ideals of 'democratic learning' and the practical expectations of learners, suggesting the need for a balanced approach that respects both learner autonomy and the benefits of structured guidance.
- **Learner Empowerment and Its Limitations**: The study emphasises the importance of learner empowerment, a principle deeply rooted in Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory.

However, it also identifies challenges that can hinder its effectiveness, such as learners' personal capabilities, cultural beliefs, and the varying degrees of autonomy they may comfortably handle. These insights call for adaptive teaching strategies that are sensitive to the diverse needs of learners.

- **Informality and Fluidity in Learning Environments**: Further, the findings elaborate on the role of informality and fluidity in creating engaging and effective learning environments. These aspects are crucial for fostering an educational atmosphere that promotes autonomy, engagement, and success. The study suggests that less formal, more adaptable approaches to teaching and learning can lead to richer educational experiences, greater inclusivity, and better learning outcomes for all learners.
- **Inclusivity and Diversity Challenges**: Promoting inclusivity and diversity remains a significant challenge in adult education. The study identifies barriers to achieving true inclusivity, where every learner's voice is heard and valued. It suggests that creating genuinely inclusive environments requires ongoing effort, sensitivity to individual needs, and a commitment to embracing diversity as an educational asset.

6.3: Contributions and Connections to the Literature

The study underscores the Workers' Educational Association's (WEA) commitment to ‘democratic learning’ and inclusive pedagogy, resonating with the educational theories of Freire, Dewey, and Knowles. This pedagogical approach promotes respect, equality, and inclusivity, transitioning from traditional teacher-led instruction to a model where teachers act as facilitators of peer-to-peer learning. This shift facilitates collaborative learning environments where participants can engage and support each other, including using their native languages (Freire, 1970; Knowles, 1984).

Such a shift aligns with Freire's idea of dialogical and participatory learning, which emphasises the empowerment and emancipation of the learner. Similarly, this ethos aligns with Dewey's and Knowles' theories that the learners' interests, experiences, and needs should be at the heart of the educational process. This inclusive and democratic approach fosters a sense of belonging among learners, which significantly influences their learning outcomes and their engagement within the learning community.

This further study contributes to discussions on democratic education by illustrating its limitations, notably that despite its focus on learner-centred approaches, there is still a persistent and significant preference among learners for traditional teacher-led instruction, particularly within adult education or lifelong learning (Billet, 2008; 2010). These findings suggest that while democratic pedagogy aims to flatten traditional hierarchies, learners often feel overwhelmed by the increased responsibility it entails, indicating the persistence of conventional teacher-student dynamics (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

This conclusion supports previous research by Merriam and Bierema (2014), which suggests that an overemphasis on learner autonomy can potentially overwhelm learners, inadvertently leading to them feeling lost or burdened. This suggests a need for a balanced approach to 'democratic learning' that respects both learner autonomy and the necessity of teacher guidance. These conclusions help educators understand that inclusive and learner-centred design cannot wholly democratise learning in practice, since traditional pedagogical elements still play a crucial role.

The study highlights the WEA's strong focus on learner empowerment and agency, aligning with Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory (2000) and Illeris' adult learning framework with its emphasis on learner autonomy (Illeris, 2014). While empowerment is central to the WEA's educational approach, reputed for enhancing intrinsic motivation and autonomy in the Deweyan or Freirean traditions, it is also subject to underlying limitations and inequalities. These limitations and inequalities are shaped and influenced by individual differences in capabilities, personalities, socio-economic class, and cultural contexts, which can all hinder individual learners' willingness or ability to fully embrace the autonomy as was demonstrated in the findings of this study.

The findings of this study emphasise the importance of informality and fluidity in creating democratic learning environments that enhance student engagement, autonomy, inclusivity, and success, resonating with the theories of Crossan et al. (2005) on flexible learning; Rogers (1969) on student-centred education; and Wenger's (1998) community of practice. The observed dynamics, inclusivity, and curriculum flexibility reflect these theoretical perspectives, while also aligning with Torrance's (2007) critique of rigid educational models, advocating for a learner-driven approach. Additionally, the formation or consolidation of

informal social bonds and community structures observed in this study between learners and teachers, as well as among learners, emphasise the principles of democratic education, and support Quinn's (2003) focus on dialogue, critical reflection, and collaborative learning. Despite the complexities in implementation, these approaches are validated by the study as effective means to promote social justice and transformative education.

The study emphasises the critical role of promoting inclusivity and diversity in adult education, as advocated by Bellamy (2020) and De Jaeghere (2022), while recognising the challenges in ensuring that all student voices are equally heard and valued, as some may dominate discussions, overshadowing quieter individuals (Ortega, 2023). True inclusivity goes beyond the mere diversity of learners, it involves creating a respectful environment where diverse experiences and perspectives are integral to learning outcomes. Achieving this requires ongoing adaptation and sensitivity to learners' unique needs and underscoring the importance of implementable and meaningful policies (Bhopal, 2018). Education providers such as the WEA could view differences as assets and tackle the practical complexities involved in operationalising equality and diversity policies.

This study underlines the need to balance humanistic and economic perspectives in adult education, highlighting a robust approach that aims to integrate intrinsic, social justice goals with economic and employment outcomes, as emphasised by Vargas (2017), Billet (2010; 2018), and Rubenson (2006). Adult education serves multifaceted purposes including personal development, social justice, and equipping learners with skills for economic mobility. Policymakers and education providers such as the WEA could navigate these dual aims to fulfil the diverse needs and aspirations of adult learners, ensuring that the pursuit of personal empowerment does not sideline the critical importance of employability and socio-economic betterment. This balance is essential to support the socio-economic mobility of adult learners effectively.

This study emphasises the complex influence of policy on adult education practices, highlighting that, while policy provides essential frameworks, its implementation varies by context and can both enable and constrain practices (Ball, 1998; Apple, 2004; Levin, 2001). Adult education providers such as the WEA must critically engage with these policies to ensure alignment with mandates and effectively manage inherent tensions (Rubenson, 2011;

Milana, 2012). In addition, policy measures supporting lifelong learning could enhance opportunities for adult learners, potentially increasing enrolment and funding (DfE, 2021). The study also underscores the role of institutions in delivering structured learning interventions that cater for diverse learner needs and motivations, promoting inclusive and empowering environments (Illeris, 2014; Field, 2012), while also noting the contrast between formal educational structures and the fluid nature of lifelong learning (Billet, 2010; 2018).

6.4: Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The WEA could strive for a balanced approach to pedagogy that respects both the democratic and the traditional learning models, acknowledging the importance of both learner autonomy and teacher guidance. While student participation and voice are essential, the teachers' role as facilitators and guides should not be neglected. The emphasis is on the need for a balanced pedagogical approach that combines elements of democratic learning models, which prioritise learner autonomy and participation, with more traditional models that underscore the role of teachers as facilitators. This concept is aligned with the theory of andragogy as proposed by Knowles (1980), which asserts that adult learners are self-directed and require educational settings that allow them autonomy. At the same time, the work of Vygotsky (1978) emphasises the importance of guidance in the learning process, particularly the role of more knowledgeable ‘others’ (such as teachers) in scaffolding the learning process.

To prevent certain learners from dominating discussions and decision-making processes, WEA educators could implement strategies for ensuring an equitable distribution of voices in the classroom. Teachers should ensure that all learners are heard and contribute to the learning process. This recommendation aligns with Brookfield's (2005) concept of a balanced approach to discussions, emphasising the importance of creating a democratic learning environment where each learner's voice is equally valued. Essentially, teachers, while maintaining their guiding role, should ensure that discussions and decision-making are not monopolised by a few learners, but rather are representative of the diverse perspectives in the classroom. Such an approach could enhance collaborative learning, boost learner engagement, and foster a sense of equity and mutual respect among learners.

A key recommendation for WEA managers is to continually foster an environment that promotes informality, flexibility, and a learner-centred approach. This entails encouraging tutors to adapt teaching styles, curriculum design, and assessment techniques based on individual learner's needs. Simultaneously, efforts should be made to enhance social cohesion through activities that foster relationships among students and tutors. Incorporating dialogue, critical reflection, and collaborative learning, in alignment with Quinn's (2003) perspective, should be a significant element of the educational approach. To achieve these, professional development programmes for tutors could be introduced, focusing on these key areas.

Based on the conclusions drawn, it is recommended that adult education institutions like the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) adopt a more nuanced approach to policy implementation that acknowledges the diverse contexts and the individual needs of learners. This would involve a careful balancing act between policy mandates and educational practices in order to foster an environment that supports both accountability measures and high-quality, learner-centred education. In addition, navigating policy complexities would require an alignment between economic and humanistic perspectives on lifelong learning, thus fostering a truer form of empowerment that embraces both economic productivity and social justice. Furthermore, the WEA and similar institutions should continually re-assess their practices to effectively operationalise equality and diversity mandates, to prevent these important aspects from becoming burdensome or overzealous in their execution.

To foster greater inclusivity, particularly for learners with diverse linguistic backgrounds, the WEA could adopt more multilingual strategies in its teaching practices. This could enrich the learning environment and contribute towards a more democratic and inclusive learning experience. This recommendation aligns with the work of Cummins (2000) and Garcia & Wei (2014), who advocate for the use of multilingual strategies in teaching to cater to linguistically diverse student populations. In line with Cummins' *Interdependence Hypothesis* (2000), which posits that knowledge and skills acquired in one language can be transferred to another, implementing multilingual strategies could facilitate understanding and participation among learners who are not native speakers of the language of instruction (Cummins, 2000). In addition, the recommendation aligns with Banks' (2004) concept of multicultural education,

which emphasises the need for educational practices that respect and incorporate diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, contributing towards a more democratic and inclusive learning experience.

6.5: Personal Reflections on Professional Practice

Reflecting on the policy recommendations from this study, one crucial aspect that resonates with my professional practice in adult education is the balanced approach to pedagogy, which emphasises both democratic and traditional learning models. This dual approach not only acknowledges the importance of learner autonomy, as suggested by Knowles (1980), but also reinforces the value of teacher guidance, reflecting Vygotsky's (1978) insights on the role of knowledgeable others in scaffolding learning. In my own work, integrating these approaches can help foster a more inclusive and effective learning environment where students feel empowered yet supported. It would encourage me to constantly evaluate my facilitation techniques, ensuring they adapt to the varying degrees of independence and guidance needed by different learners.

Another key insight is the importance of ensuring equitable participation in classroom discussions, aligning with Brookfield's (2005) advocacy for balanced discourse. The study's suggestion to implement strategies that prevent domination by vocal learners and promote inclusivity can be transformative in my practice. By actively managing classroom dynamics to ensure that all voices are heard, I can better foster an environment of mutual respect and collaborative learning. This approach would not only enhance learner engagement but also contribute to a richer educational experience by harnessing the diverse perspectives present in adult learning settings.

Lastly, the recommendation to continually foster an environment of informality and flexibility speaks directly to the core of adult learning. By encouraging adaptability in teaching styles, curriculum design, and assessment methods to meet individual learner needs, and enhancing social cohesion, I can more effectively support each learner's journey. The focus on professional development programmes for tutors to embrace these aspects could greatly enhance the way I support and engage with my learners. Emphasising dialogue, critical reflection, and collaborative learning, as Quinn (2003) suggests, can further enrich the

learning experience, making education a more empowering and inclusive process that truly addresses the diverse needs of adult learners.

6.6: Limitations and Further Research

This study was designed using research methodologies and approaches that were the most promising for the purposes of investigating how 'democratic learning' was understood and embedded into the practice of teaching and learning at the WEA. The use of a singular case study research design using qualitative approaches was the most suitable approach and indeed yielded significant and compelling findings. Nevertheless, as is the case with every study, however well designed, the current study still suffered some limitations that could potentially have impacted on the robustness of its findings, analyses, and conclusions. The following limitations can be identified:

Limited Perspectives: Whereas learning is a two-way phenomenon involving both learners and teachers, the evidence and findings reported in this thesis focused on the perspectives and experiences of teachers alone. The absence of student perspectives in the analysis significantly limits the understanding of 'democratic learning' in the institution. Learners are key stakeholders in the learning process, and their insights into how democratic learning is experienced and perceived could add significant value to the study. It is important to note, however, that I conducted in-depth focus group discussions with WEA learners and collected a valuable body of evidence on their experiences and perspectives of democratic learning. Despite the collection of this valuable evidence, due to time constraints and the volume of data involved, the data collected from the WEA students was not included in the current analysis but was instead kept safely for future use in subsequent analyses and publications.

Limited Sample Size: The fact that the study was conducted with a small sample size of only six tutors from one institution can limit the extent to which the findings can be generalised. Although qualitative studies often work with smaller sample sizes, the insights derived from the tutors' experiences and perceptions may not be representative of the broader population of tutors within adult learning institutions in the UK, or even within the WEA itself. Further to that**,** it focussed on one branch of the WEA in the North West of England, which restricts the wider applicability of the findings. 'Democratic learning' could be experienced and practiced

differently across various geographical locations and cultural contexts within the UK (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Single Data Source and single case study: The use of only interviews as a data collection method may not capture the full depth and complexity of 'democratic learning' in practice. Multiple data collection methods, such as document analysis or observations, could also provide a richer, more comprehensive understanding. The absence of an analysis of key internal and external policy documents also limits the study, as these could offer insights into the institutional and broader policy contexts that shape democratic learning practices (Yin, 2018). Though case study research can provide rich insights, the findings from a single case study are not always transferable to other contexts. The WEA's understanding and practice of democratic learning could be influenced by unique factors that may not necessarily apply to other adult learning institutions (Stake, 1995).

Single Analytical approach: Thematic analysis, while widely used with remarkable success, can be subjective and influenced by the researcher's own interpretations and theoretical or disciplinary biases. It may not fully capture the complexity of democratic learning or address the relationships between themes or the context in which the data was produced (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis could have been combined and triangulated with other analytical methods, such as discourse analysis, document analysis, or policy analysis.

Future research could address these limitations by including learner perspectives; expanding the data collection methods to include document analysis; broadening the geographical scope, using multiple case studies; and incorporating more robust or varied analytical methods. Drawing on these limitations, as well as the methodological approaches and the findings of this study, the following areas are suggested for further research endeavours:

Challenges and strategies for balancing learner autonomy and teacher guidance: The study acknowledges the tension between promoting learner autonomy and the persistence of traditional teacher-student hierarchies. Further research could explore effective strategies for striking a balance between empowering learners to take control of their own learning, while providing necessary guidance and support from teachers. This strand of research would

incorporate perspectives and experiences from both learners and teachers, rather than focusing entirely on the views of teachers at the expense of the learners.

The impact of inclusive practices on marginalised learners: The study highlights the importance of diversity and inclusion within democratic learning environments. Future research could delve deeper into how inclusive practices in adult education affect the learning experiences and outcomes of marginalised learners. For example, this might involve adapting teaching methods for learners with disabilities or accommodating linguistic diversity.

Long-term effects and sustainability of democratic learning: The study provides insights into the benefits of democratic learning approaches in adult education. Further research could investigate the long-term effects of 'democratic learning' on learners' personal empowerment, civic engagement, and social justice awareness. In addition, exploring the sustainability of democratic learning practices within educational institutions and the broader policy context may prove valuable.

Epilogue:

"True knowledge is that which is practiced. The rest is mere information."

(HH Mahant Swami Maharaj, BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, 2017)

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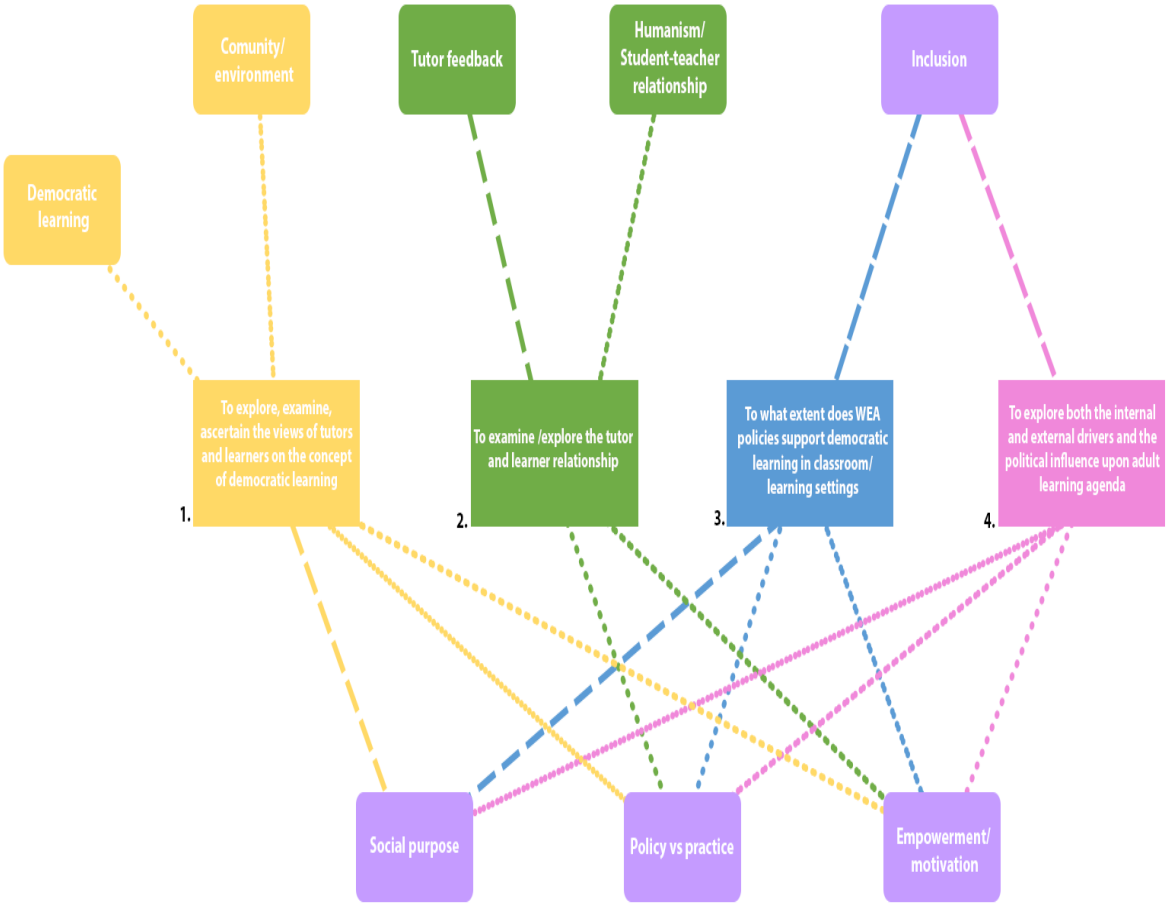
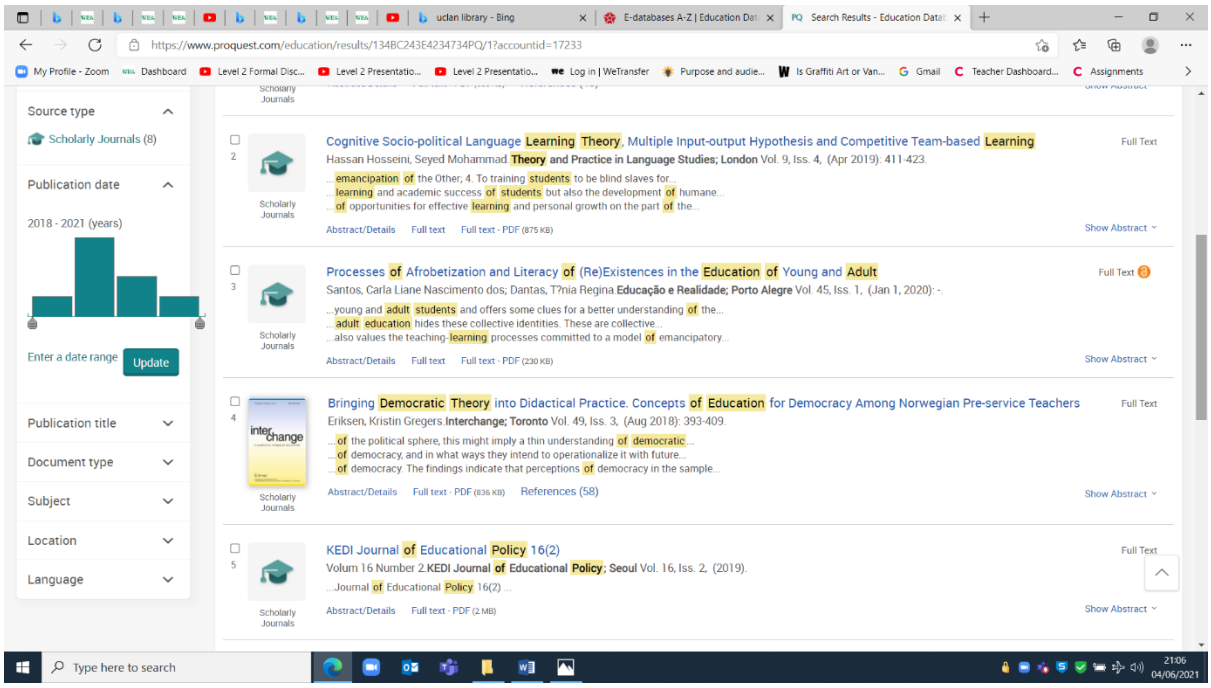
Appendices

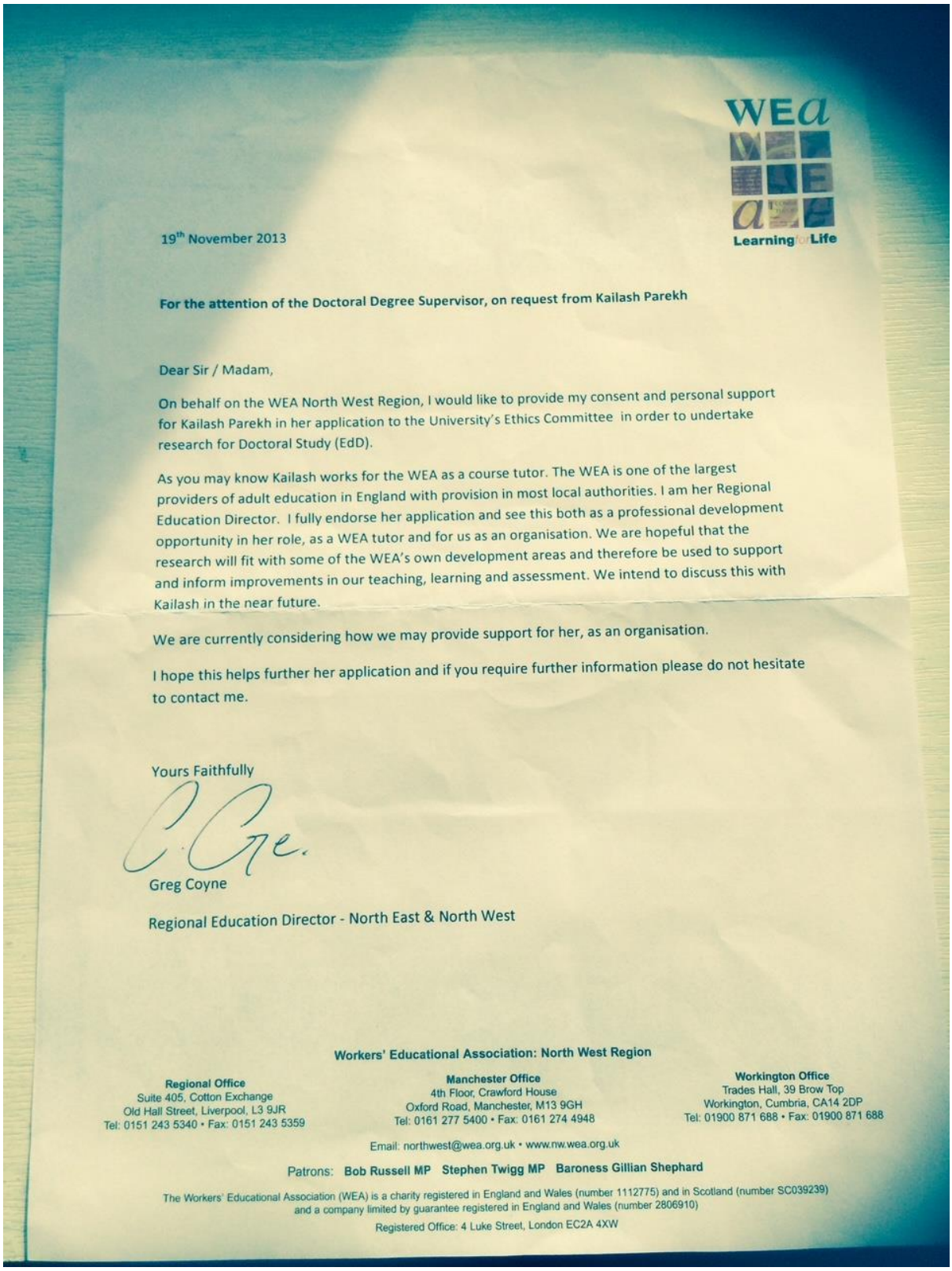
Appendix 1: Thematic landscape emerging from initial data analysis.



Appendix 2: Screenshot of Initial Literature search



Appendix 3: Letter of Approval from WEA Regional Director



WEA
Learning for Life

19th November 2013

For the attention of the Doctoral Degree Supervisor, on request from Kailash Parekh

Dear Sir / Madam,

On behalf on the WEA North West Region, I would like to provide my consent and personal support for Kailash Parekh in her application to the University's Ethics Committee in order to undertake research for Doctoral Study (EdD).

As you may know Kailash works for the WEA as a course tutor. The WEA is one of the largest providers of adult education in England with provision in most local authorities. I am her Regional Education Director. I fully endorse her application and see this both as a professional development opportunity in her role, as a WEA tutor and for us as an organisation. We are hopeful that the research will fit with some of the WEA's own development areas and therefore be used to support and inform improvements in our teaching, learning and assessment. We intend to discuss this with Kailash in the near future.

We are currently considering how we may provide support for her, as an organisation.

I hope this helps further her application and if you require further information please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours Faithfully

Greg Coyne

Regional Education Director - North East & North West

Workers' Educational Association: North West Region

Regional Office
Suite 405, Cotton Exchange
Old Hall Street, Liverpool, L3 9JR
Tel: 0151 243 5340 • Fax: 0151 243 5359

Manchester Office
4th Floor, Crawford House
Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9GH
Tel: 0161 277 5400 • Fax: 0161 274 4948

Workington Office
Trades Hall, 39 Brow Top
Workington, Cumbria, CA14 2DP
Tel: 01900 871 688 • Fax: 01900 871 688

Email: northwest@wea.org.uk • www.nw.wea.org.uk

Appendix 4: The Consent Form for Research Participants

CONSENT FORM

Title: **Exploring the Characteristics of WEA's Learning Experience**

Please tick as appropriate

1. I have read and understood the information sheet about the study.
2. I have been able to ask questions about the study and those questions have been answer adequately.
3. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any point without having to give reasons.
4. I understand that any personal information collected through the study will be anonymised and t this information will be treated as confidential.
5. I agree to be audio recorded during interviews.
6. I agree that quotations from interview can be used in the final research report and understand th these will be anonymised so that no participant can be identified.
7. I agree to take part in the study.

Signature of participant .....**Date**:……..

Name in block letters…… **Date:**

Signature of researcher …… **Date:**

Researcher Information

Kailash Parekh Mob: 07958649814 Email: kailashmbe@googlemail.com

Appendix 5: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

About the research project

I am a post graduate student at the University of Central Lancashire and am undertaking this research as part of my professional doctorate study. I have chosen to explore what 'democratic learning' means from a tutor perspective at the Workers' Education Association's (WEA) learning experience. It will look at the following issues:

- to explore tutors' interpretations of democratic learning
- to examine its translation into pedagogical strategies;
- to investigate its manifestations within teacher-learner relationships
- to evaluate the influence of internal and external policies on the WEA's teaching and learning practices.

Questions you may have about the research project.

What is required of me?

You are being asked to take part in a short semi-structured interview. Your responses will be recorded if you permit it.

How long will it take?

The interview will take between30-45 minutes; however, you are free to end the interview at any point.

Who will be responsible for the information?

The researcher (contact details below)

Who will have access to it?

Me the researcher and university tutors

How will the information I give be used?

The information you provide will be stored securely and not shared with a third party. All data will be processed in keeping with current data protection requirements and used for research purposes only. The information you provide during the interview will be transcribed, analysed and findings will be written up as part of my findings for my final thesis. Participants will be anonymised in any report or subsequent publication.

How can I find about the results?

I the researcher will contact you to brief you on the results if you would like to be informed.

What if I decide I no longer want to be involved in the research project?

You can withdraw from the project at any point you wish without providing any explanation. You are also free to retract anything you have said that has been recorded.

Do I need to sign anything?

You will need to sign a consent form prior to participation, this simply confirms that you have received sufficient information about the research beforehand in order to make an informed decision to participate or not.

If you have any further questions, feel free to contact me the researcher directly (details below).

Contact information.

Researcher: Kailash Parekh

Mobile: 07958649814

Email: kailashmbe@googlemail.com

Below are the details of the supervisory at the University of Central Lancashire if you wish to consult with him about any aspect of the study.

Supervisor: Paul Doherty

Tel: 01772-893975

Email: PWDoherty@uclan.ac.uk

Appendix 6: Participant Interview Protocol (Flexible)

Tutor semi-structured interview schedule

PREAMBLE

This doctoral research endeavours to critically examine the concept and practice of 'democratic learning' within the context of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), a UK-based adult education institution with branches across the country. The study aims to understand how democratic learning is perceived, interpreted, and enacted by WEA tutors in their professional practice.

As part of this your perspectives as tutors on WEA courses will help my research. The interview should last 30-45 minutes, and can I just ask again that you have all read the information and are happy to take part.

Are you happy for me to record the interview?

About you:

- **Could you tell me a little bit about your background, how you came to work for the WEA?**

- **How long have you been with WEA and where were you before?**

- **What subjects do you teach?**

PREAMBLE: I would like to explore if WEA's stated policy (one based on equality and diversity) is in your view evident in teaching.

- **Do you feel that your practice is informed by WEA equality and diversity policy?**
  - **IF YES – how is this?**
  - **IF NO – why not?**

- **Is there anything unique to WEA as a teacher?**

- **What contributes to high levels of recorded student satisfaction among female learners?**

- **How are WEA's values promoted and embedded in teaching?**

- **In your view is WEA teaching and learning underpinned by key learning theories**

Appendix 7: Declaration of UCLan Research Ethics Clearance

Section 8

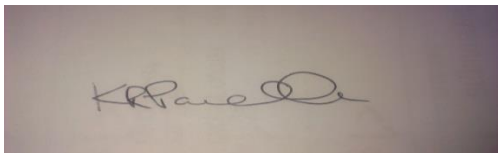
DECLARATION

This section needs to be signed by the Principal Investigator (PI), and the student where the study relates to a student project (for research student projects PI is Director of Studies and for Taught or Undergrad project the PI is the Supervisor). Electronic submission of the form is required to roffice@uclan.ac.uk. Where available insert electronic signature, if not a signed version of the submitted application form should be retained by the Principal Investigator.

Declaration of the:
◉ Principal Investigator
OR
○ Director of Studies/Supervisor and Student Investigators
(please check as appropriate)
The information in this form is accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief, and I take full responsibility for it.
I have read and understand the University Ethical Principles for Teaching, Research, Knowledge Transfer, Consultancy and Related Activities.

I undertake to abide by the ethical principles underlying the Declaration of Helsinki and the University Code of Conduct for Research, together with the codes of practice laid down by any relevant professional or learned society.
If the activity is approved, I undertake to adhere to the study plan, the terms of the full application of which the Ethics Committee* has given a favourable opinion and any conditions of the Ethics Committee in giving its favourable opinion.
I undertake to seek an ethical opinion from the Ethics Committee before implementing substantial amendments to the study plan or to the terms of the full application of which the Ethics Committee has given a favourable opinion.
I understand that I am responsible for monitoring the research at all times.
If there are any serious adverse events, I understand that I am responsible for immediately stopping the research and alerting the Ethics Committee within 24 hours of the occurrence, via roffice@uclan.ac.uk.
I am aware of my responsibility to be up to date and comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data.
I understand that research records/data may be subject to inspection for audit purposes if required in future.
I understand that personal data about me as a researcher in this application will be held by the University and that this will be managed according to the principles established in the Data Protection Act.
I understand that the information contained in this application, any supporting documentation and all correspondence with the Research Ethics Committee relating to the application, will be subject to the provisions of the Freedom of Information Acts. The information may be disclosed in response to requests made under the Acts except where statutory exemptions apply.
I understand that all conditions apply to any co-applicants and researchers involved in the study, and that it is my responsibility to ensure that they abide by them.

* Ethics Committee refers to either BBAHSSS, PSYSOC or STEMH

For Supervisors/Director of Studies: I understand my responsibilities as Supervisor/Director of Studies, and will ensure, to the best of my abilities, that the student investigator abides by the University's Policy on Research Ethics at all times.	
For the Student Investigator: I understand my responsibilities to work within a set of safety, ethical and other guidelines as agreed in advance with my Supervisor/Director of Studies and understand that I must comply with the University's regulations and any other applicable code of ethics at all times.	
○ **Signature of Principal Investigator:** **or** ◉ **Supervisor or Director of Studies:**	
Print Name: Dr. PW Doherty	
Date:	**05/06/2014**
Signature of Student Investigator:	
Print Name: K Parekh	
Date:	**05/06/2014**

Appendix 8: Example of transcript coding and thematic analysis

Anna:

WEA- interesting and rewarding environment- informal- encourages self motivation**…**

Yes, I think they are, yes I think they are an interesting organisation in like any organisation

, whereas at a college you have got a lot of learners that really, really didn't want to learn they really sort of disengaged with the whole process so it wasn't thinking about a new career for me,

Tutor comparing WEA with her experience of teaching in college environment.. In college people really didn't want to learn.. They were disengaged. The adult class is very different at the WEA - attracted tutor to teaching and also the sense that it was working in the community.

just really, I thought it would be a more rewarding environment, that you know you have got people that initially I felt would always want to learn and so that really makes it a nice environment -People want to learn- self-motivated- that's what makes it regarding environment.

when I started looking a bit more into their sort of ethos and what have you, about you know learning for all, access for all then that kind of thing attracted me, as well so its kind of slowly grew that that's what I wanted. WEA very accessible- attracted the tutor.

so then you sort of slowly understanding that you have more flexibility than you think, then using that then have been supportive but I think in that way you have to almost seek the support, you have got to be willing to be pro-active and when you do they are fantastic, I mean I have been really lucky that other tutors have been really supportive, Learning Managers really supportive, but I think that is partly because I ask, I can imagine as a tutor you could easily become really insular and feel you don't get any support, it's not that you can't it's maybe that you don't seek it.

WEA -interesting organisation, LM - supportive, colleagues too.

Jim

WEA- works at grassroot level, supporting people in the community, inclusive**.**

about WEA is that it works at grass roots levels and I knew a by bit of history that it was set up to teach people who have missed out education at school level and want to return to learn now, so it's different from others because they would support any sort of educational facility which people are interested in, not just the mainstream stuff but other things as well.

WEA works at grassroot level.

supporting every educational project and supporting people in the community as well.

Supporting people in the community

and they have supported those as well, they wanted to have like **madras** classes, and we wanted to have some **sitar** classes for the ladies and sewing classes as well, so they have supported all those all along.

Provide cultural courses - inclusiveness.

there is flexibility with the WEA.

Noddy – Positive comments about the WEA

what I think the WEA is brilliant at, it's more for individual learners than as a group, I didn't put that into words correctly, but you get what I mean, people are basically treated as

individuals with the WEA, whereas say in a school it's how that cohort does, they have all got to make two sub levels progress each year or why didn't they make two sub levels progress. With the WEA they progress because they have the learning goals, but it isn't and some of them make a terrific amount of progress, but it doesn't have to be …… levels of progress, you have to achieve this mark minimum to do well in this course, your own involvement is how you do well in this course.

Positive comments about the WEA

Ken

. I didn't really know of W.E.A, I am just trying to remember I don't think I actually knew of their existence at all really, which given that I have a bit of a socialist background is a bit odd, I don't quite understand it really, I don't really know how that gap appeared, but I don't think I did know about W.E.A

My experience of the W.E.A has generally been very very good, to me it is education without all the nonsense that has come to dominate education generally, when I say nonsense I am talking about, just ridiculous things like form filling, policies of this and policies of that, all of those things which just tend to dominate the teaching experience in other areas.

Value of education at WEA - education without all the nonsense

Appendix 9: Sample of Full interview Transcript with some initial coding

Interviewer: **Kailash Parekh**

Interviewee: **Anna**

Date: **09.01.2015**

Kailash: I have got Anna here who teaches in Bolton, it's an accredited course in Functional English.

Kailash: Hello Anna.

Anna: Hi

Kailash: Thank you for coming along, thank you for taking part in this research, what I will do is just a very informal semi structured kind of questions that I will be asking. Firstly can you tell us a little bit about yourself, about your teaching experience and why you have chosen to come and teach for WEA.

Anna: Well I am a new teacher, so I qualified last June, I studied at Bolton University for two years part-time, prior to that I worked for twenty years in the health service, towards the end of working there I was doing a training courses and things, which had led me into thinking more about teaching and teaching literacy had always been something that I thought about, so I finally, I knew redundancy was on the cards so I sort of made the leap of training, whilst I could, whilst I was still working and then changing career to being a tutor and in terms of the training that I did. So it was a PGDE with a Masters element on it that they do now and like I say, I thought about literacy, I hadn't really looked into it to be honest, so I was a bit naïve thinking it will nice teaching old ladies to read or something like that, but when I contacted the University it was then the fact that you could do literacy and ESOL combined and I had never thought of ESOL before so that was great that I could then do that and then you have got two areas and I do both now so that is really good, so that was the qualification I got. Then whilst I was on the course I did my placements for both years at Stockport College doing adult literacy functional skills, obviously they still refer to it as

adult literacy more, but it was functional skills with adults and some with younger learners so they were mainly 16-19 year olds and also ESOL was 16-19 year olds. On my course there were a few people that worked for the WEA, so that is where I found out about the WEA and their experiences of being a tutor and that sort of started to attract me to the WEA. Mainly, again, I think it was the idea of learning for learning's sake, that I know as an adult myself in my 40's the idea of learning a new skill and having to do exam is really scary and really off putting for me, so it was a sense that there was an organisation that you work for, for one that did offer learning without it having to be exam focussed and exam based, though I know that things change quite quickly and the functional skills obviously was more exam based, but as organisation I liked that idea, whereas the colleges all seem to be focussed on you have to take an exam and that's what is about. Also for the WEA what I liked was that it was adults, so I always wanted adults, just really I thought it would be a more rewarding environment, that you know you have got people that initially I felt would always want to learn and so that really makes it a nice environment. Obviously now you realise that some people are sent along that perhaps don't really want to learn you know but then you deal with that in a different way, whereas at a college you have got a lot of learners that really, really didn't want to learn they really sort of disengaged with the whole process so it wasn't thinking about a new career for me, it's awful it's kind of easy way out for me you think teaching teenagers was probably the one group I hadn't wanted to teach and that's what I was teaching, so the adult class was really different so again the WEA attracted me in that way and then also the sense that it was working in the community, so you were working in different environments' so you were going to the learners you would get all sorts of different experiences, so that was sort of before I really knew much about the WEA in a way and then when I started looking a bit more into their sort of ethos and what have you, about you know learning for all, access for all then that kind of thing attracted me, as well so it kind of slowly grew that that's what I wanted. Also I am in a lucky position that the finances aren't the lead thing for me working there, my partner he works full-time you know, so I was kind of in a luxurious position of that it wasn't driven by oh I have got to earn a certain amount of money, because obviously the WEA feels a little bit precarious in terms in that your salary can vary quite a bit, but luckily I haven't go to worry about so.

Kailash: You touched on the values of the WEA, one of the things that they believe in is equality, justice, and education for all you said. One of the things is democratic learning now what do you understand by that.

Anna: Well to be honest the word democratic learning when you mentioned it, meant initially nothing, I thought I have just done all this training and I don't think we ever referred to democratic learning in a formal way, so I think for me what do you really mean by that, or maybe how do I display that in a classroom and I guess for me everybody in a classroom is about that everybody is equal for one, all the learners all equal whether they know more or less than each other, they all bring their own strengths, they all bring their own characters. In my functional skills class that you mentioned, one of the classes that you mentioned I do, I think I remember saying I think it is about the second week in and I said we had about twenty teachers in the room and they all looked a bit aghast and you can all teach each other, I can't teach you everything so again, I think it is that sense of having learners learn from each other, so that I feel that is hopefully kind of a democratic way of teaching and the other thing is being responsive to them, so if they are saying well we want to learn a certain thing, seeing how much you can actually cater for that, or we what to sort of focus in on something, or we want to go over something again, so you know it's sort of responding to them and different courses that I have got probably work differently, in that I have got some non-accredited courses where it is just called a conversation class at a certain level an ESOL class and their now they completely shape the entire scheme of work, where they have been saying this is really what they want to do.

Kailash: Is that what they said, the learners.

Anna: Well that is what they have done, well they might tell you that now because they might not want you to forget, but certainly I had been told that it was a conversation about Life in the UK, so I was thinking that because I also do a citizenship class it was very much like that, but quite quickly it came across that no they didn't want to know about the legal system or understanding British history, they wanted practical advice about living in the UK, for example most of them are parents with kids at school and they don't go to parents evening, although it is all Chinese learners in that class, they are very, very driven, very driven for their children to succeed so it seemed unusual that they wouldn't go to parents evenings because they all really care, but they said we don't understand the teachers and the teachers don't understand us, will that kind of led to ok do you actually want a session where we just talk about parents evening, practice a parents evening and yes they did and from that, it led onto more and more we just want to know how to contact the bank, they came up with a series of things that I have based next eleven weeks so that in way it is quite flexible, whereas in another class a functional skills class there are things that they have got to do, so whether they want to learn how to write a letter or not, obviously there are boundaries that I have got to work with, but at the moment I have got some learners that have already done a speaking and listening module previously and quite a lot haven't so for the learners that have I am fortunate that I have a volunteer in the class and I have asked them well what do you want to do for the next couple of weeks or so I have got to concentrate on this one group what do you want to do, so I have tailored the work that they do based on the work that they have told me they want to focus on. So again hopefully that's a democratic way of organising a class like I say I don't whether it fits under the democratic learning kind of heading.

Kailash: How do you assess whether learning is taking place, how as a teacher there how do you know.

Appendix 10: Short Extract of Coding Framework and Thematic Analysis

Themes and sub-themes	Coded text
Democratic learning & participation: **Student voice** **Empowerment** **Student Choice**	*"I mean to me democracy means in the classroom if my students come to me and say what you have been doing in the last two weeks doesn't interest us, I don't like the way you are doing it, will you do something else next week, I will say yes, we will do something else next week".* [Ken] "*...I don't think anyone in the room has any hesitation to contributing, saying what they want, I mean that's partly the aim of it, you know, it works. I suspect WEA sees itself as democratic and using the education as making society more democratic or something like that*." [Jim] "I think that the learning that we do is very democratic because we invite the students to become members of the WEA and they get the chance to vote for how it's run, it's democratic because we arrange the times of the classes to suit the learners, so we will negotiate" [Lynne] "We set them [goals] together, I set them with either the student's carer or the student themselves, so sometimes it might just be joining in and getting involved in what we are doing, just being an extra on the stage and other times it's taking a speaking role or a more central role, in what we are trying to perform.... so, everybody has a say, they have got the confidence to sort of say to us, we had an idea this is what we think, can we do it, yes let's do it". [Noddy] "We do negotiate as well the learning outcomes so if we turn up with a scheme of work and the students are clearly wanting to go down a slightly different route we can say well we will look at that or next term we will put that in, when we get towards the end of a short course we ask students for their opinion and we can take their interests into account in planning the next term". [Lynne]

	"it was like what do you want to cover and then well they were saying, well, we want to cover this and that and I obviously knew more and I picked up on skills that they needed to cover and then I did change the scheme of work to fit more around the things that they did need to focus on ESOL Entry 1 classes" [Anna, Tutor] But these courses [accredited] are very much like where you can have a learner-led class, they can decide what they want to do and they can be actually instrumental in interpreting it as well. [Jim] I think I remember saying, I think it is about the second week in, and I said we had about twenty teachers in the room and they all looked a bit aghast and you can all teach each other, I can't teach you everything so again, I think it is that sense of having learners learn from each other, so that I feel that is hopefully kind of a democratic way of teaching [Anna] "I try to start every session with an icebreaker that's fun, but with the PETALS students because they are teachers, or they are going to be teachers then I ask for a volunteer to do an icebreaker, that's democratic isn't it, I ask for a student, for a volunteer and I will hand them a book with samples of icebreakers in but you can do the icebreaker next week it only needs to be ten minutes but make it fun"… [Lynne] Well as I understand it [democratic learning], it's to give a role to the learners to actually take charge of their own learning [Jim] *so it's about finding out what students like to do, we did things like making masks out of papier-mâché well he liked that, he liked the gooeyness, some of them were very creative, but they all made something they could take away to hang on their wall, but I think with that it was working and giving them the choice of*

	media to work with, so some were painting, some were sticking material on them and they could choose from a lot of materials and they could choose what they used, that was quite fun. [Lynne] Yes, they do, but it does not happen very often, but I have had cases where people have said for example the other week one of the learners said when people bring their scripts in, can we limit it to 15 minutes each… and I said yes that's fine and I could tell everyone else was agreeing because everyone was nodding their heads you know [Ken] I think I am lucky with the class that I have got that I have a lot of flexibility and if they don't like it you will found out they will let you know quite quickly, but we have also got to make sure that some people don't dominate, which we tend to find can happen, that you have different personalities in your groups, some are more forceful than others, some are leaders and some are followers, you have got to make sure that the followers also have a chance to put across their point of view, so we talk to our students an awful lot [Noddy]
	"so I am much more in those classes the person that's teaching them, I mean I know that they think that for one, they have not got the vocabulary in English to really tell me what they do want to learn you know by the very nature that it is an Entry 1 class and think there are some people who don't like to make a decision, so I think if I say I would like you to do this or that, they are like oh you are the teacher, you tell me that's your job you know" [Anna] I would like to think that we were doing democratic learning, we like everybody to have an input and a say in how we develop our productions, obviously somebody's got to direct and steer it, but that isn't really the ethos of the way we work [Noddy]

Limits of democratic learning	"I think they still want to be led but, their reactions are different culturally but I think in terms of having that assurance, yes I will lead them to the right place and yes they can take an exam at the end, I think they still do put the trust in you as the teacher and it's interesting because I have a volunteer in that class and although obviously he is far more experience than me, he will mark work, they still want me to mark it" [Anna] It's a difficult one because, teaching adults you want people to like you, you want to be approachable and friendly, but you have got to have a bit of authority as well, where there is a bit of respect, so people come on time and value the lesson, so you have got to be professional and I think you have got to have a professional boundary, [Lynne] "Definitely, definitely because these courses are for fairly high-level learners, I do think when you have mentioned again thinking about democracy in the classroom, I do some ESOL Entry 1 classes so again they are not accredited but again the expectation is they will take exams, which is much less democratic I would suggest" [Anna] But I think the W.E.A want it both ways, I think that is the problem and I have this conversation with others and say democratic learning like you have just said, but they also say that spell out absolutely in big clear bold letters what it is exactly you are going to cover, so make your mind up what do you want to do, you can't have it both ways [Ken] "Assessment in that way, all the work that they do, that they hand in I will mark, I mean again in terms of functional skills, there are certain skills that you are looking for, from the exams and guidance for exams, you know certain things that you are looking for so that you can mark against that…so I am assessing it against sort of the criteria for that so that is City and Guilds and then feed that back to the learners". [Anna]

	So it's very good, so there is flexibility with the WEA, because the other courses which I teach are accredited so we are teaching to a set syllabus so we have to cover everything and there are exams at the end. [Jim]