Building sustainable community voices; lifelong learning in Rochdale

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**Abstract** This paper seeks to explore the potential for supporting the presence of ‘community voices’ in a local government-led initiative for lifelong learning (LLL). The initiative in Rochdale (UK) was a partnership between the local authority and a university. The paper seeks to situate the initiative and the lessons learnt in the context of the potential value to all participants in a collaborative approach to lifelong learning. The paper argues that whilst it is not necessary for all participants to have a shared definition of LLL, there are clear and tangible benefits for the partners which suggest that it is the focus on mutual gain that is critical in any shared initiative. The Rochdale-based initiative can offer some key lessons and it reinforces the lesson that long-term place-based work is not straightforward and has to navigate competing interests; securing respect for community voices requires accountability and a genuine commitment from all participants (academics, active citizens and professionals) that change can be achieved.

**Key words** participatory; voice; co-operative; co-production; collaboration; mutuality

Introduction

This paper reflects on the lessons learnt from a number of small but connected projects in Rochdale that aimed to support the skills, capacities and learning of Rochdale citizens. It begins by defining participatory and co-produced research methodologies before considering the value of using these methodologies for the different communities of interest in Rochdale (citizens, professionals, political leaders) and the University involved. The paper draws on the experience of participants in a number of projects (as part of this initiative) that have been published as briefing papers and where the authors have used participatory and co-produced approaches.[[1]](#endnote-1)

From the outset it is important to understand the context to the work being discussed in this paper. In Rochdale key staff working for the local authority had developed the Rochdale Community Champions (RCC), which had preceded the arrival of staff from the University. The RCC had received funding to support the capacity building of those involved so that they could work with local people in different roles (adult literacy, finance, advocacy and general community or one-to-one support). This phase of the initiative was seen as sitting within an adult education framework. The University was asked to support the RCC in three ways: to provide an external higher education commentary and reflection on the work of the RCC and for this to be a joint piece of work; to facilitate reflection and group discussion sessions by the RCC on their experience and to share this with key staff; and to devise and run a short course aimed at developing research and enquiry skills as part of a more explicit focus on developing the skills and expertise of the RCC. The University used the Getting Started Toolkit (ARVAC[[2]](#endnote-2)). Both members of the University staff were members of ARVAC and had seen its use in practice with a refugee and asylum group in London. The staff drew from different but complimentary methodologies informed by their experiences in access and return to learn programmes, adult education and community development (plus youth and community work, social work and public policy). Across both staff teams there was an ability to reflect on their different professional, vocational and educational experiences. Within the citizens group there was a wide range of skills, knowledge and capacities, from teaching to social work to newly developed skills of counselling, mentoring and community advocacy. Both professional groups had their respective organisational and institutional support (Bryer et al., 2019). Arguably these factors – shared and overlapping skills and knowledge, experiences as mediators and facilitators, together with the advocacy and community understanding of place – created the potential for shared values and trust relationships, which are the necessary pre-conditions for effective co-production and participatory approaches.

Participatory and co-produced approaches

Participatory and co-produced research are interconnected, yet separate, methodologies. The differences lie in the focus of each technique. Participatory and co-produced approaches draw on and seek to enact a variety of critical theories including Feminist, Marxist and Critical Race theories, and Critical Disability theories (Bell and Pahl, 2017). Participatory action research (PAR) focusses on empowerment and action as part of the research process (Norton et al., 2001). Co-production focuses on the process of working in partnership to co-create the research (Facer and Pahl, 2017). Both approaches are based on the idea of undertaking research ‘with’ communities, rather than ‘in’ communities (Norton et al., 2001), and both research approaches embody the principle that all people have a right to a voice (Beresford, 2021; Lister and Beresford, 1991). Participatory approaches offer an opportunity to develop this voice, in action and activity, and aim to enact positive change (Goldstraw et al., 2021; Bennett and Roberts, 2004). Participatory approaches, like co-produced approaches, aim to redress power differentials, starting from the stance that people have the right to participate, to create and analyse their own knowledge and to enact agency (Lister, 2020). Participatory and co-produced approaches seek to engage people in the process of building voice and knowledge (Freire, 1974) and empowering action. It is this development of community voices that this paper seeks to explore as a contribution to lifelong learning.

Co-production is a term used to describe work that is developed collaboratively with communities (Facer and Pahl, 2017). Co-production, like participatory research, aims to re-negotiate the inherently unequal distribution of power and instead seeks to share power with those who collaborate on projects. Each person engaged in the research has a different relationship to the research process (Facer and Pahl (2017)), and in taking a co-produced approach, knowledge is therefore nurtured within the crossing of boundaries between researchers and researched (Rasool, 2018). Co-production, in valuing the variety of knowledge held in a project – practitioner, active citizens, professional and academic – seeks to ‘destabilise academia as a privileged site for the production and dissemination of knowledge’ (Bell and Pahl, 2017: 3).

Both participatory and co-produced research have a role in legitimising knowledge (Lister, 2020) and in shaping what sort of knowledge is given priority. They are therefore helpful approaches when building sustainable community voices for lifelong learning as they recognise the multiplicity of roles that exist within a collaborative project, including the complex sense making required. Participatory and co-produced approaches are valuable as they offer an opportunity to democratise knowledge, and in so doing encourage previously unheard community voices (Campbell et al., 2018). Participatory and co-produced research values the variety of knowledge forms that exist in a community: knowledge by experience, professional knowledge, practitioner knowledge, artistic knowledge and academic knowledge (Facer and Pahl, 2017). Through participatory and co-produced methodologies, forms of embodied knowledge can be rediscovered (Behar, 1996). Emotional and community memories can be points of reflexivity, drawing on the variety of knowledges held in a community, and building lifelong learning offers an opportunity to nurture a ‘multiplicity of voices’ (Rasool, 2018: 121).

Sustainable community voices

Sustainable community voices can be built using co-produced participatory practices. Community voices can be empowered and encouraged, arguably as part of the participatory process of building knowledge in collaboration, as valuing community voices holds and builds equality in itself (Manfredi et al., 2018). For the University, participatory and co-produced approaches offer an opportunity to develop sustainable and engaged community relationships. Academia has been critiqued for its narrow audience (Kagan and Diamond, 2019; Nash, 2004) and participatory and co-produced methodologies offer an opportunity to bring academic reflections to a wider audience, ‘liberating’ academic knowledge (Nash, 2004). The solid commitment to community engagement may reflect positively on a university’s corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies as well as having positive impacts on recruitment (Facer and Pahl, 2017). There are also potential, although contested, benefits for university-based performance measures (Newell, 2005). At the same time these potential benefits may not be appreciated within a higher education institution to the same degree at all levels: those charged with recruitment may not have the same appreciation of the need to develop the CSR profile of a university (Bryer et al., 2019). However, in this particular case, the researchers involved were based in that part of the University which was charged explicitly with narrowing the gap between the academy and the communities (geographic, professional and individual) that the University sought to work with. One of the researchers headed an institute which had as part of its mission the aim to demonstrate the value of working in this way (Bryer et al., 2019). In attempting to work collaboratively the University opened up opportunities to embed strong community partnerships, which over a longer period can develop a culture of reciprocity between the University and community partners.

In this specific case the support of the research institute (with the explicit backing of the Vice Chancellor) resulted in a number of on-campus activities, including the recording of a play (written by members of the citizen group) and the recording of a local folk band (from Rochdale). A member of the Rochdale staff team joined the institute’s advisory board and worked with other members of the University linked to the institute on separate initiatives. A demonstration of how significant the relationship was to the University was that the partnership formed part of its successful bid to become University of the Year in 2014.

**Sustainable community voices: the history and context of co-operative working and co-production**

There is a historic context to why this approach is seen as having significance. The co-operative movement in the UK was founded in Rochdale. Today, Rochdale is a unitary authority, part of Greater Manchester City Region. The city region forms another layer of governance and decision making through the Combined Authority. At the time of writing, these different layers of urban and local governance matter in terms of the provision of public services more generally but also those that support skills and employment initiatives. The RCC and the other locally based initiatives referenced in this paper were part of a series of initiatives aimed at enhancing the visibility and status of ‘community voices’ to advise the local authority and service providers on the ways in which services met local needs. In essence these initiatives sought to bring together separate service professional-led projects on integrated working or place-based working by foregrounding the ways in which local voices could inform service design and conception. Co-production is not without serious challenges. These different initiatives attempted to shape and influence both how citizens engaged as well as service providers.

Rochdale sits in the North West of England and is an area that experiences multiple levels of deprivation (Purdam, 2017). The co-operative movement began in 1844 and has since spread from Rochdale across the globe (McDonnell and MacKnight, 2012). The seven underpinning principles of the movement are: self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, solidarity and ethical values (Majee and Hoyt, 2011). From this historic background, it is possible to trace the current collaborative co-produced work back to the broad principles agreed in the nineteenth century. The co-operative, co-produced work in Rochdale over the last decade has quite deliberately used participatory approaches and expected that the University would too. Using participatory approaches to work in communities, Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council sought to address power dynamics and develop the voices of active citizens through different techniques, from holding facilitated and jointly recorded conversations to revisiting themes and ideas over time. These approaches where ideas are captured and presented back in a variety of forms (artwork, photographs, collages, reports as well as cartoons and reams of flip chart paper) are not unique in the context of adult learning. The different teams saw them as ways of gathering the ideas of the citizens, reflecting them back, checking and confirming that the professionals had listened but, arguably, the essential objective was the building of trust. Seeking to secure strong trust-based relationships was essential in order to influence how public service reform can be made real, both for users of services and for those who manage and are responsible for the ‘front line’.

Rochdale Community Champions

The Building Sustainable Communities project in Rochdale began with Rochdale Community Champions, who themselves had developed from a peer-led community literacy project (Goldstraw and Diamond, 2019). Rochdale Community Champions are volunteers who live and work in Rochdale and receive training to offer support to members of their community. This support ranges from welfare advice, literacy support and IT skills to language skills. As the Rochdale Community Champions project developed, a partnership emerged with Edge Hill University. At first, the University worked with Rochdale Community Champion volunteers as a critical friend to the project, supporting reflection. As the project developed, the University was invited to deliver a bespoke training programme offering leadership and research training to the volunteers. The training sessions were created with a view to developing peer research skills, which would enable Rochdale Community Champions to connect with the issues experienced within their local areas and develop learning that could then be used to seek to influence local decision makers. Three iterations of the sessions were offered; each iteration developed new directions and linked to the one before it (Goldstraw et al., 2014, 2015).

Integrated working

The learning from these co-produced ways of working permeated into other projects also hosted by the Neighbourhood Teams at Rochdale Borough Council. The Neighbourhood Teams began to think about how citizens could frame the work that they were leading on integrated working. The University was invited into this process of building sustainable community voices, attending the integrated working sessions that sought to combine the shared goals of professionals in the police, fire and ambulance services with local authority support workers, housing advice workers, local voluntary sector organisations, and tenants and residents’ associations. The work here involved a series of group conversations, sometimes structured, sometimes unstructured, that circled around how integrated working might be co-produced and be person-centred. These group conversations sat alongside more in-depth one-to-one conversations with active citizens, led by a place worker, drawing out what integrated working meant for them and how it might be used to inform neighbourhood policy and improve services in the area. The University drew together knowledge from the in-depth one-to-one conversations and co-produced workshops to develop a briefing paper (Goldstraw, 2017). The analysis and knowledge shared within this briefing paper offered a formal place for community voices to be heard, legitimising the knowledge held within the community.

Leaders in GM

The co-produced, reflective and citizen-centred way of working led by Rochdale Borough Council was recognised by Greater Manchester Authority. Rochdale Borough Council’s Place-Based Working Team was invited to join the Leaders in Greater Manchester Project (Goldstraw, 2018). The Leaders in Greater Manchester project was designed to bring leaders across all public sector areas closer together, to share ideas, insights and best practice. The aim of the programme was to develop more joined-up thinking across sectors within Greater Manchester. Each of the locality teams across the unitary authorities of Greater Manchester chose a place-based challenge. Rochdale wanted this process to be framed in co-production and to be centred on citizen voice. The idea of citizens’ hearings was formed.

Citizens’ hearings

Professionals from the local authority and local anchor institutions were invited to the Council Chamber where they were formally asked a series of questions regarding the two themes. The citizens’ hearings were participatory and the preparation for them represented a deliberate form of co-production. A group of active citizens developed a series of questions centred on two themes: relationships and reigniting the values of the co-operative movement. The questions and discussions that followed were intended to develop and sustain a viable network of community voices of Rochdale citizens in conversation with Leaders in Greater Manchester that could lead to projects within Rochdale. The proceedings were presided over by a local magistrate, which added an element of fairness and power to the proceedings. The structure intentionally disrupted power dynamics and standard hierarchies within the local council. It did this in quite specific ways: the setting was the Council Chamber, which was decorated by the citizens group to balance the architecture and formal decoration of the room; the public officials responding to the questions were strictly managed in terms of time and required to focus on the specific question.

From the citizens’ hearings, work focussed on the two themes of building co-operative action and building hope and trust has continued. Rochdale chose to ‘develop a model of co-operative co-production with the new voluntary sector infrastructure organisation in Rochdale’ (Goldstraw, 2019: 2). This led to commissioning and interviewing for the contract to provide the new Council for Voluntary Services, to be led in collaboration with a group of citizens. All organisations that were interviewed for the contract had to answer questions on how they intended to reflect co-operative values and involve citizens in their work. From the citizens’ hearings relationship training, entitled ‘how to argue better’, was designed and delivered. This training develops communication skills with the aim of reducing family breakdown and domestic violence and abuse within Rochdale. This idea emerged from the citizens’ hearings and has been developed from the notion of how as a community Rochdale can build hope and trust. The co-produced work in Rochdale has been cumulative – developing, building and supporting community voice using a variety of approaches over a long period of time (Goldstraw and Diamond, 2019). This paper draws on briefing papers that have summarised this work in Rochdale and seeks to critically reflect on the body of work in order to develop learning from these ongoing projects.

Key learning from building sustainable community voices in Rochdale

There is value in building sustainable community voices. The co-operative approaches taken here have, through their praxis (Freire, 1974), developed from the long-term place-based relationships that have been nurtured by volunteers, active citizens, professionals and academics over a period of years (Goldstraw et al., 2014, 2015). Building sustainable community voices has not been a short-term, quick-fix activity. It has taken time and long-term accountability to a community. The knowledge has developed, in celebration books and briefing papers (Goldstraw, 2018; Goldstraw et al., 2014, 2015; Goldstraw 2017; Goldstraw and Diamond, 2019), as evidence to make change and was shared with a variety of commissioning groups within the council.

Sustainable community voices: active citizens at the centre

Rochdale Community Champions began volunteering in their community offering positive, solution-focused action, such as IT, literacy and welfare benefit advice. Woven into this was their peer research and community activism that sought to influence the power structures in which their work sits.It is key to the process of co-production within Rochdale that Rochdale Community Champions were the essence of the work, as the quote below illustrates:

When building bridges between services / organisations and residents – we must keep true to promises, be genuine and honest about what we can offer. (Community Member, Briefing Paper, 2018)

In participating in peer-led participatory research approaches, Rochdale Community Champions have delivered and supported their own communities and sought to address some of the policy and practice issues that created the support needs. As active citizens, the Champions were encouraged to speak back to decision makers and actively engage in the founding principles of co-operative action (Majee and Hoyt, 2011). As the quote below illustrates, Rochdale Community Champions felt that this process of developing their own community voices has been empowering:

I felt empowered, listened to, liberated. (Rochdale Community Champion, Celebration Book, 2014)

The Integrated Place-Based Working project was an important development in the process of involving active citizens in its work. The project developed a set of principles for practice that identified the importance of framing co-production in person-centred approaches and reinforced the need for honesty to build trust and an honest conversation around impact. The principles of the co-operative movement – building solidarity and self-help within the local democracy – were developed, linking active citizens into the planning and delivery processes of integrated working in Rochdale. As strong place-based relationships eroded professional boundaries, this revealed a challenge for the project, a vulnerability that had not existed before, as this quote illustrates:

[I am] going to bed at night and hoping that everybody is going to be all right tonight. (Worker, I4P Integrated Working Workshop Notes, Integrated Working Briefing Paper, 2017)

As the co-produced participatory activities in Rochdale evolved, they became more high profile yet retained their core, which was about engaging with the community citizens’ work. Engaging citizens with leaders and commissioners to provide the right services where and how they are needed (not how they may be perceived to be needed) was where the heart of the co-operative, co-produced work sat, as the quote below suggests:

It is a bit more of yourself that you are putting into it. (Worker, I4P Integrated Working Workshop Notes. Integrated Working Briefing Paper, 2017)

Active citizens shared that they felt this work had given voice to people who were previously unheard, by listening to them, adapting and developing confidence. In the formation of a group framed around involving individuals (citizens from the whole community) the work had broken down barriers and built voice, creating an environment that was open and honest but also felt at times vulnerable.

Sustainable community voices: challenging power

The development of voice is not without challenges. Whose voice is heard, equality of participation and equality of opportunity to become involved are challenges (Campbell et al., 2018). Achieving a diverse group that recognised and reflected the diversity of the local population was not always achieved in practice, as this quote illustrates:

Promises, promises, promises … Integrated working is a wonderful way of working and works in communities. With respect I’ve seen it all before … and I’m cheesed off with ‘do-gooders’ trying to help … who pay lip service to great ideas and then ‘bugger off’. (Resident, I4P Integrated Working Workshop Notes. Integrated Working Briefing Paper, 2017)

The question of what is community and what do we mean by community (Sparke, 2008) requires consideration. The discussion about and recognition of the contested version of community, a community of identity or community of geography, required further exploration by the project. The public service reform agenda, despite its co-operative methodology, needs to be mindful that it reflects the complexity of the communities in which it operates (Hoggett, 1997). The opportunity to move beyond place-based community identity to reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of communities of identity within Rochdale was arguably a lost opportunity. Building opportunities to challenge accepted imaginings of community identity and to offer opportunities to develop critical discussion of how this can be achieved is arguably why we combine public and academic knowledge (Campbell et al., 2018).

In Greater Manchester, the possibilities associated with greater devolution and an elected mayor created a potential for power and decision making to happen more locally. In Rochdale Borough the Citizens Hearings Project was developed in order to hold a different conversation between the public sector system and the citizens of the borough. The session was framed in the co-operative principles of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity (McDonell and MacKnight, 2012). This project was important as it raised the profile of the co-produced leadership and decision-making processes in Rochdale, as this quote illustrates:

It’s good to talk. Also to think and listen as we all have such diverse lives and life experiences … Working together, listening, finding shared goals can create a community which understands each other’s needs and finds solutions to improve local towns. (Participant on Reflection Day, Briefing Paper, 2019)

The hearing and the relationships developed by participating in the Leaders in Greater Manchester project placed the collaborative, co-operative and co-produced work within Rochdale at the centre of best practice in the field of public service reform. The reasons why Rochdale could achieve a point of best practice in building the voice of active citizens at the heart of its public service reform agenda, however, sit with the seed sown by Rochdale Community Champions. As the quote below illustrates, developing trust is not easy:

We are taking our time and learning how to do this very difficult thing, remembering trust, relationships and hope at the centre. (Participant on Reflection Day, Briefing Paper, 2019)

Holding the confidence and power, having the working relationships to invite heads of service and volunteers into the same space, where they welcome the uncomfortable conversations that are to follow, require long-term, trusting place-based relationships. Safe spaces need to feel both physically and emotionally safe (Vaughan, 2014). In building trusting safe spaces, the work in Rochdale has offered the opportunity for both ‘bridging’ and ‘bonding’ social capital to be built. Putnam (1995) defined bonding social capital as the social networks and ties that link those in similar circumstances from similar backgrounds. Bridging social capital (Putnam, 1995) refers to links and ties between different social groups. In offering a safe space, the work in Rochdale offers the opportunity for bridging social capital to build networks outside of the active citizens’ existing social ties. In using reflexive approaches to participatory research, participatory activities, workshops and informal reflections, the active citizens within Rochdale were arguably encouraged to need to move beyond safe social spaces to transformative spaces (Vaughan, 2014). Vaughan (2014) suggests that this can be achieved through the development of critical thinking. By engaging in a variety of co-produced activities, from Community Champions volunteering to integrated working pilots to citizens’ hearings, the active citizens of Rochdale were arguably ‘personalising and humanising their stories’ (Vaughan, 2014: 189) within the Leaders in Greater Manchester project.

It should be noted, however, that challenging power is a contested notion, and one must question, whose power are you challenging? Power exists in communities at all levels and the intersectionality of challenging power must be recognised (Crenshaw, 1991). Indeed, the notion of ‘safe space’ requires clarification: safe for whom and from what (Stoudt, 2007)? Recognising that safe spaces are not necessarily safe for all links to the point made earlier around contested notions of community. Agreed notions of community and safety cannot be assumed, and understandings must be negotiated in collaboration with active citizens, as this quote illustrates:

… public service is not ‘top down’ ‘doing’ things to faceless service users but needs to be genuinely collaborative, respectful and consultative. (Participant on Reflection Day, Briefing Paper, 2019)

The reflection described in the quote above on power was important. What the co-operative, co-produced citizens’ voice work has achieved in Rochdale is to take power as something to be negotiated. Power is a resource; groups cannot be ‘empowered’ without power being taken or shared by others. In working and delivering change in communities over a long period of time, trust is built, relationships can be developed, and a landscape can be created where it is possible to share power in decision making. Rochdale has developed this landscape by establishing respect and authority through Rochdale Community Champions and then developing the projects that have emerged, building on learning and reflection from that foundation. Rochdale’s approach to co-production has demonstrated that working together, listening and finding shared goals can create a community that understands each other’s needs and finds solutions to improve local towns. Sharing power is neither a simple nor easy notion; communities are not places of consensus, and power differentials exist within community groups as much as they do within local government (Rasool, 2018).

Sustainable community voices for lifelong learning; mentoring and informal learning opportunities

The ideals of locating community education and adult learning in a community setting, led by the community for the community, are rooted in the ethos of the Rochdale Community Champions project (McCombs, 2010). Rochdale Community Champions focus on the specific learning needs of the adults with whom they work, and in so doing build opportunities for lifelong learning in a variety of community settings across Rochdale. Community Champions offer group learning sessions, such as job clubs, supporting adults who are unemployed with CV building, and computer skills. Community Champions also offer one-to-one support in areas such as adult literacy, which uses a mentoring model.

Learning as a partnership; mentoring

Common definitions of mentoring include the use of language alluding to teaching, provision of advice and some form of sponsorship (Allen et al., 2004; Bernstein et al., 2000; Brinko, 1993; Carrol and Goldberg, 1989; Huston and Weaver, 2007; Long and McGinnis, 1985; Morselli et al., 2006; Oglenski, 2002). There is a significant body of evidence to support the notion that the presence of an ‘other’ providing advice, guidance, support and some degree of practical and experiential teaching accelerates the progression of a ‘mentee’ (a protégé, or learner) towards their goals, and deepens or raises the level of achievement or potential for achievement (Long and McGinnis, 1985). It would seem, therefore, that a natural windfall of a mentoring relationship is the achievement of some form of learning outcome, regardless of how negative the learned skill or behaviour may be.

A key feature of successful models of mentoring is that the relationship is optional, and sought by both parties (Bernstein et al., 2000: 73–86; Huston and Weaver, 2007 15; Morselli, 2006: 17–23). Often the mentor is driven by their own experiences and a desire to transfer their positive experiences to others (Onchwari and Keengwe, 2008: 22). It is important that a framework of support for this type of activity is included in order for it to be successful within an institutional context (Huston and Weaver, 2008: 17). The need for resources illustrates that this type of programme in a community setting cannot be considered to be a cost- or resource-free option. The contribution of the mentor is typically of high value, and (due to its personalised nature) of high quality, which is a considerable return on the investment of an institutional framework and support network. In settings such as Rochdale, where the mentoring role would seek primarily to enhance or deliver learning and skills outcomes, studies investigating approaches that are effective for the hardest to reach within communities advocate the adoption of eclectic and multidisciplinary approaches to engagement and support (Bird and Akerman, 2005).

Learning as a partnership; access and opportunity for learning

The lifelong learning led by Rochdale Community Champions is deliberately brought to the learners by members of their own community, in settings that learners are familiar with and feel comfortable in. Most Community Champions do not have formal teaching qualifications; they do, however, have extensive training offered by the Rochdale Community Champions team and are consequently skilled in reacting to and developing the learning needs of their community. There has also been personal learning for Rochdale Community Champions as the volunteering has built their confidence and self-belief (McCombs, 2010). Indeed,

… there are many, many others who would not recognise themselves as belonging … but who have or could have a major influence on our learning … The common characteristic is that they are in a position to guide people towards learning opportunities at a time when the potential learner is at something of a transition point – in other words, just when they may be most open to the idea of learning. (Schuller and Watson, 2009: 189)

Access to learning and the opportunity to apply it have been identified as elements of equal life chances and human and social capital (Dugdale and Clarke, 2008; Schuller, 2004; Schuller and Watson, 2009).

A body of evidence exists to demonstrate that an informal route towards achieving goals is effective in engaging more reticent parents into ‘family learning’ activity, promotes progress into more formal learning and strongly correlates with the attainment of skills for the whole family (Hannon, 1995; Mackay and Cowling, 2004;). Such evidence in a family setting is presented by Mackenzie (2009) in her book *Family Learning*, which identifies a concept of education as partnership, a dialogue with three equal components: the educator, the parent and the child. This concept is based on Freire’s attitudinal shift towards education (Freire, 1974), breaking the traditional notion of the teacher as the possessor of expertise and knowledge. Makenzie (2009) advocates that such dialogue requires ‘humility and hope’, hope being defined as a belief that change is possible.

Models of engagement which bring in partners from amongst the community and shift the power balance towards the learner may address barriers that appear to prevent participation and restrict achievement (Mackenzie, 2009). In his chapter ‘Mainstreaming Family Learning’, Michael Fullan identifies forces for educational change which illustrate that change can involve everyone; it needs to be welcomed from the ‘top down’ and driven from ‘the bottom up’, and have a strong connection with the wider environment (Fullan, 1993).

Learning as a partnership; recognising the wisdom in the room

In the context of Rochdale Borough, Community Champions have been providing informal learning opportunities to people in the borough since around 2009. Whether the effectiveness of their work can be framed as education can be a tricky subject for debate, and it is worked through by Community Champion Andy Knox in his research report *The Effects of Literacy Champions on People’s Lives* (2014: 12–22):

So what is it that made literacy champions work for … people? There are a number of elements that come into play. Firstly there is the commitment champions give to people both in time and in sorting out resources that suit their learners’ needs. Then there is the approach champions use. They encourage people to work at their own pace, without pressure, usually with humour. Learners are not made to feel foolish or stupid but rather as equals and that champions can learn from their clients. Literacy champions do not work to a curriculum or an agenda set from on high as is the case for teachers and informal educators … Champions are not responsible for learners learning, learners are responsible for their own learning. (Knox, 2014: 21)

As the co-operative work in Rochdale has developed alongside Rochdale Community Champions, active citizens within Rochdale have continued their commitment to lifelong learning, motivated to pursue lifelong learning goals, as the quote below illustrates:

There is a lot of wisdom in the room – so much experience and a willingness to shape and listen to one another. Hope remains! (Participant on Reflection Day, Briefing Paper 2019)

The opportunity to reflect is central to the work of co-production (Dean, 2017). Taking time to pause, reflect and evaluate is vital in order to ensure that the work of Rochdale Borough Council continues with its passion to co-produce decision making with citizens and that it develops its best practice, as the quote below illustrates:

It’s important to have hope in the power of people coming together. (Rochdale Participant, Briefing Paper, 2019)

Participants felt that engaging in co-produced public service reform created a better place to live and work and volunteer co-operatively. Active citizens shared that in order to get services that are right and that support people, it was important that they were shaped together by service leaders and citizens. This gave citizens and local authority professionals the opportunity to contribute and shape what is needed at the right time and in the right way. It was felt that it is important for people ‘with a voice’ to speak up and instigate change on behalf of people who may not be able to do so. This enables social justice for all and better access to services. And in the context of the global pandemic this is a necessary but not sufficient aspiration.

Conclusion; lifelong learning as a sustainable community voice

The co-produced citizens’ work in Rochdale can be framed as a series of actions taken to reposition people within decision making. The quote below illustrates that there was a real sense of achievement, that citizens and local authority leaders have joined together to share individual and collective community aspirations. The co-operative work in Rochdale moved the local authority into a place where it could recognise that public service should be genuinely collaborative, respectful and consultative. Participants shared the importance of conversation, of holding conversations where thinking and listening were valued, as this quote illustrates:

It brings meaning to the things I do. It’s experiencing being co-operative. The more we do, the more I want to do. (Participant on Reflection Day, Briefing Paper, 2019)

The work in Rochdale is ongoing, place-based and framed in strong working relationships that have developed over a long timeframe. Their relative strength has been tested since March 2020 with Covid-19. An illustration of the extent to which the relationships established are still working is that there have been a series of online conversations and plans made. These next steps moving out of the pandemic have received funding to ensure that the citizen voices are drawn on in this next phase.

The lifelong learning activities have been integral to the development of citizen voice within Rochdale Borough Council and the wider Greater Manchester Combined Authority. For local authorities seeking to model this approach, the long-term presence of community voices within local government has helped shape policy and ensure citizen voice within both local and combined authority policy development (Plant and Ravenhall, 2019). For a vice chancellor who seeks to model this approach within their university, the approach develops the universities’ commitment as a civic university, offers an opportunity to build a reputation for social responsibility, and an opportunity to build impact case studies for research excellence frameworks and nationally recognised university awards. It is important to recognise the duty of care held in building sustainable community voices and to take steps to protect the emotional and physical health of those involved in participatory and co-produced research. A university holds a status and power within the community. In developing participatory and co-produced research, a university validates its commitment to the community and adds an academic status to community-led research. This status can be useful for community groups in order to legitimise community knowledge and to influence public service reform and other public policy agendas.

Taking an ethical approach to research involves the safeguarding of voice (Campbell et al., 2018). It is important to recognise that communities are not places of consensus. In seeking to democratise knowledge to share power, the co-operative work in Rochdale could be challenged by critics as a form of subverting existing democratic systems of voice (Ryan, 2012). The community are not elected, local government officials are, and local government is mandated by the electorate. Indeed, in this sense building sustainable community voices for lifelong learning can be contested. Participatory and co-produced methodologies need to represent the contested nature of the conversations they hold.

Building sustainable community voices includes a responsibility to recognise and reflect on how power is negotiated, to negotiate conflicted conversations and to recognise and empower all voices within those conversations. Respect needs to be established. It takes time and requires trust. There is a need for a strong foundation of respect and reciprocity to challenge power effectively and at all levels. The co-operative work in Rochdale has been successful in linking to wider public service reform agendas. This has given the project traction across wider policy and public sector audiences. This capacity to communicate the work of the co-operative active citizens into the language of public service reform has been key to connecting the projects into the wider regional policy debate.

In conclusion, therefore, in terms of building sustainable community voices for lifelong learning, the co-operative, co-produced work in Rochdale can offer some key reflections and reinforces the fact that long-term place-based work is not easy; building voice requires accountability, commitment and a genuine belief from all participants, academics, active citizens and professionals that change can be achieved.

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1. The primary sources for this paper are drawn from a series of collaboratively authored briefing papers and reports arising from work undertaken by the Institute in Rochdale between 2013–2020. This paper is adapted from briefing papers which appear in the Edge Hill University Institute for Public Policy and Professional Practice Publication archive. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. [www.arvac.org.uk](http://www.arvac.org.uk) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)