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## **6. I FELT SAFE TO BE A CHILD, I WANTED TO LEARN**

*Locating Caring Respectful Relationships as Core Components in Enabling Learning Accessibility*

You walked away from here really feeling that you could change the world in so many different ways. 'Cause if you believed in us, we believed in ourselves'.

(Participant in the 3 O'Clock School)

### INTRODUCTION

At its heart's core, this longitudinal study explores the factors affecting learning accessibility for children and adults within a specific context. Learning accessibility is understood as 'the individual's personal circumstances and experiences located within and across contexts which impede or support that person in accessing learning' (Higgins, 2008, p. 11). This study examines the impact on individuals and settings when a school moves beyond its traditional role and embraces an ecological perspective, listens and responds to the identified needs of the community and operates with an open mind and heart. In 1985 a community-led school-based project, Kileely Community Project (KCP), evolved as a grass-roots response to the learning needs of children and adults in low socio-economic status (SES) areas. This chapter describes the context, evolution and impact of this initiative and firmly locates caring respectful relationships as a key component in the development and sustainability of KCP and the mechanism through which learning accessibility was addressed.

The author is a former pupil, teacher, and principal of the school in which this study is situated as well as founder and director of KCP.

### METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES

Research is a political tool, 'be it by default, by design, or by recognition' (Lynch, 2000, p. 73). It is precisely because it is a political tool that it is necessary to consider not only the methodologies employed, but also the philosophy guiding any study. This is particularly pertinent given the experiences of marginalised communities which in the past have frequently had their experiences appropriated

by researchers. Daly decries research shortcomings particularly in relation to understanding women's poverty and cautions that 'research can conceal as well as reveal' (1989, p. 10). And, this is possible because implicit in the research process are issues of power, relationship and representation. Conscious of the political and potentially transformative impact of research studies, Fine and Weis contend that 'researchers can no longer afford to collect information on communities without that information benefiting those communities in their struggles for equity, participation, and representation (1996, p. 271). The centrality, as opposed to neutrality, of the relationships between researchers and participants must be addressed as a key site of power. Researchers need to be vigilant that research relationships do not mirror power relationships in society, which, according to hooks, are 'equated with domination and control over people and things' (1984, p. 84). According to Banks, 'social research has to be an engagement, not an exercise in data collection' (2001, p. 179). O'Neill contends that working class culture is 'neither fully understood nor properly documented' (2000, p. 106). This study, situated within a working class culture, offers an insight into how and why this community responded to the challenge to address its own learning needs. This study asked participants to enter into dialogue, to engage actively with the research process, and to claim and name their world. Indeed, Freire advocates dialogue as a tool of empowerment, and defines dialogue as a 'horizontal relationship between persons' (1974, p. 40).

Narrative understanding and inquiry methodologies (Clandinin & Connelly, 2007; Josselson, 2007; Lyons & Kubler La Boskey, 2002; Stuhlmiller, 2001) embedded within feminist emancipator research principles (Byrne & Lentin, 2000; Lather, 1991) and case study design (Quinn Patton, 2002) were employed in this study. Josselson contends that narrative research 'is inherently a relational endeavour' (2007, p. 537), in which the narrator is 'is identified as having some knowledge [and] expertise' (Stuhlmiller, 2001, p. 67), thereby reversing the traditional research roles in which participants were seen as subservient to the expertise of the researcher. Such is the quality of narrative inquiry practice that Clandinin and Connelly claim that the interview can turn into 'a form of conversation' when intimate participatory relationships exist between the researcher and participants (2000, p. 66). This mode of interaction is described by Ellis and Berger as reflexive dynamic interviewing, where 'the interview is conducted more as a conversation between two equals' (2003, p. 472). Ultimately, narrative methodologies are relational and bring us into a deeply personal realm where according to Clandinin and Connelly the 'researcher's personal, private and professional lives flow across the boundaries into the research site; likewise, though often not with the same intensity, participants' lives flow the other way' (2000, p. 115). Feminist research methodologies attend to issues of researcher subjectivity (Byrne & Lentin, 2000; Clandinin, 1985; Kohler Riessman, 1993), power relationships (Aull Davies, 1999; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Daly, 2000; Reinharz & Chase, 2003; Starhawk, 1987), participation (Lynch, 2000), co-creation of knowledge (Byrne & Lentin, 2000; Oakley, 1981), representation (Field Belenky et al., 1997; Fine et al., 2000; Kohler Reissman, 1993; O'Neill, 2000),

reflexivity (Hertz, 1997; Freire, 1974; Lynch, 2000; Quinn Patton, 2003), epistemology (Fonow & Cook, 1991; Kelly et al., 1994; Palmer, 1983), language (Edmondson, 2000; hooks, 1984; Lynch, 2000) and transformative intent and outcome (Daly, 2000; Deyhle et al., 1992; Fonow & Cook, 2000; Stuhlmiller, 2001).

*Table 1. Interview participants*

Group membership	Interviewees	Focus group
Target group		
Mature Adult learners	13	4
Young adult learners	11	3
SPACE participants	6	4
Former three o'clock school attendees	10	4
Mothers of three o'clock school attendees	7	
Committee members	4	4
Nontarget group		
Tutors	6	
Teachers	6	4
Ancillary staff	6	
Volunteer	1	
Statutory organisation representative	1	

The data set included more than 50 semi-structured interviews (Quinn Patton, 2002) and six focus groups (Fine & Weis, 1996). Research participants included programme participants including mature and young adult learners, SPACE participants,<sup>i</sup> former 3 o'clock school participants,<sup>ii</sup> mothers of children attending the 3 o'clock school and KCP committee members.<sup>iii</sup> The second group of research participants included tutors who worked in KCP, teachers in the host school, ancillary school staff,<sup>iv</sup> volunteers and statutory agency representation.<sup>v</sup> This study was informed by a rich cache of secondary data,

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including visual data in the form of over 600 photographs, and 11 hours of video footage, audio data from 7 hours of radio interview transcripts, and print data including national, regional and local newspaper cuttings, letters, reports and census data spanning 20 years.

#### SETTING THE CONTEXT

It is important to understand the social, educational and economic context in which KCP evolved in order to appreciate the challenges presented along with the outcomes achieved within this setting. Consequently, I draw briefly on census data<sup>vi</sup> and personal testimonies from research participants to describe the context. Indeed, this mixed methods approach enabled me to bring to life ‘the static pictures which statistics paint’ (Mc Cafferty, 1993, p. 2) (Phd C-33).

This study is located within a local authority housing area in Limerick city, on the west coast of Ireland. KCP evolved within a five- roomed local elementary school, built in 1941, which operated within the traditional school opening hours of 9.00 am to 2.30 pm. The study timeframe begins in the mid 1980s, a time of severe economic depression. At a national level O’Reardon described the 1980s as ‘an excruciating period of economic history, with negative employment growth, unemployment reaching some 19 per cent, high outward migration, and seemingly insoluble problems in the public finances’ (2001, p. 113). According to Nolan et al. ‘high risks of poverty are associated with being a local authority tenant, between 1987 and 1994 and the level of risk for such households increased significantly’ (1998, p. 97).

Kileely suffered disproportionate levels of unemployment in comparison with adjacent private housing areas and with the city as a whole. For instance, in 1981 Kileely recorded an unemployment level of 12.71%, in 1986 a rate of 16.27%, in 1991 and the rate had increased further to 17.34%, and by 1996 the rate had decreased to 10.48% and by 2002 an unemployment rate had further decreased to 9.47%. While this decrease was welcome Kileely continued to compare negatively with adjacent private housing and the city as a whole. The severe unemployment of the 1980s was graphically recalled by the research participants who spoke of the atmosphere of depression and the bleak prospects for young people. As one adult learner noted ‘*unemployment was unbelievable ... it was a hand to mouth existence*’. Another young adult learner recalled ‘*when my children were young we didn’t have our supper, we had nothing. I used to go down to the classes (KCP) and no one ever put me under pressure to put £1 into the box or cup ...*’<sup>vii</sup>

The link between educational attainment and job opportunities and risk of poverty is clear and according to Kellaghan ‘there is considerable evidence to support the view that students who leave school having taken no public examination or having obtained poor results on a junior cycle examination are poorly placed in the labour force’ (1995, p. 44). Indeed ‘educational achievement (in turn) is widely recognised as a key factor in determining the individual’s labour market prospects (Mc Cafferty, 1999, p. 210). This is very significant as according

to Nolan et al. 'the education system in the absence of counter measures, can reproduce inequalities and poverty. The educational system has a key role to play in providing a route out of poverty' (1998). Early school leaving was a feature of this community, and census data reveals a disturbing profile of formal educational attainment for this area.

The census data offers disturbing evidence of early school leaving for this community. The 1986 census records 53.20% of the population of Kileely aged over 15 years left school at or under 15 years old, the corresponding figure for 1991 census was 55%, for the 1996 census was 44.48% and for 2002 was 40.30%. This figure is disproportionate with the recorded rates for adjacent private housing area and the city as a whole. Educational attainment not only impacts on the life of the person concerned but also on the broader family and the community as a whole. Kellaghan et al. citing Bourdieu and Passeron posit that 'levels of parental education would seem to be particularly relevant to children's school performance since it can be argued that it is the best socio-economic indicator of the cultural capital that a family can provide for children' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977 in Kellaghan et al., 1995, p. 34). Again the research participants were acutely aware of the importance of education and the implications of the lack of educational attainment in their lives. All of the adult learner participants interviewed had left school at an early age, some as young as 12 years old, and as they recalled the circumstances which led to them not completing their formal education, including financial constraints school culture and family responsibilities. They also acknowledged their unmet aspirations as one very active adult learner reminisced '*I regretted it [leaving school early], I would have love to have been a nurse .... I can read, but my spelling .... I swore my children would not do that. I always valued an education. I said my children will not go through what I went through*'. Another mature adult learner poignantly caught the hunger of adult learners who had been early school leavers stating, '*they [adults who left school early] want a bit of knowledge ... they feel they missed out. They really need it in their lives. They didn't get it when they were young. They had no choice but to work or look after parents or whatever*'.

In many ways the school building was a physical manifestation of the challenging social and economic climate of the mid 1980s. It was both physically and demographically deteriorating and during the mid 1980s and early 1990s suffered severe vandalism, as one teacher who recalled her first introduction to the school '*every time we came in on Monday the windows were broken and the place was very run down and shabby .... half of the school wasn't used ... you know damp ... broken windows ... it wasn't much of a place*'.

The social context in which this study is set is also of note. In the mid 1980s there was no tradition of after school programmes for children and young people in the area. There was neither a tradition nor opportunities for adult education. Many women described a typical week in terms of '*doing housework, raising the kids and going to mass at weekends*'. So the growth of KCP offered opportunities to both children and adults to engage in a social learning context within their own communities and beyond. This was not without tensions

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as fundamentally, women, all of whom were mothers, were for the first time leaving their homes to engage in morning and evening adult education programmes. It was a radical change in mindset and lifestyle. The tensions were both intrapersonal and interpersonal.

Finally, this study is set in a school with Delivering Equality of Opportunity (DEIS) status. While this specific label was not in place in the mid 1980s the school would have had designated disadvantaged status. DEIS schools draw their student population from low SES contexts.

#### THE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF KCP

KCP emerged as a grass roots response to local learning needs. I was teaching in the school and in 1985 took a career break and began to explore avenues through which parents might become empowered to support their children's learning. Drawing on both the experiences of teaching and the conviction that parents paid a key role in the educational outcomes for their children, I developed a programme 'Parents and Children Learning Together' and offered parents the opportunity to engage in a series of eight morning classes designed to build their skills to support their children's learning. This initial programme became the foundation of KCP, and as the programme evolved I gained a deep understanding of the needs of parents and the dynamics involved in parents supporting their children's learning, growth and development. As parents sat and talked about the challenges of supporting their children's learning the conversation naturally turned to their own learning needs. They spoke of their hunger to learn and identified a number of areas of skill development including knitting, cookery, and literacy. Voluntary tutors were recruited, and later tutors<sup>viii</sup> were supplied by the City of Limerick Vocational Educational Committee (CLVEC) and so from a humble eight week programme a community programme offering a variety of morning and evening classes for adults evolved.

A local committee of which I am a member was formed and this committee nurtured the growth and development of KCP since 1985. Over that time frame morning and evening adult education classes, an after school programme for children (the 3 o'clock school) a SPACE project (project for young mothers who were neither in education nor employment), a crèche (to facilitate parents to attend classes) and Saturday morning art classes for children were all established in the school building under the umbrella of KCP. Furthermore, KCP ran a variety of social activities which offered opportunities for celebration and fun, these included women's holidays, family trips, day trips, dances and celebrations. Through the mixture of educational opportunities and social events relationships were forged within and across families and age groups, within and between the school and the community.

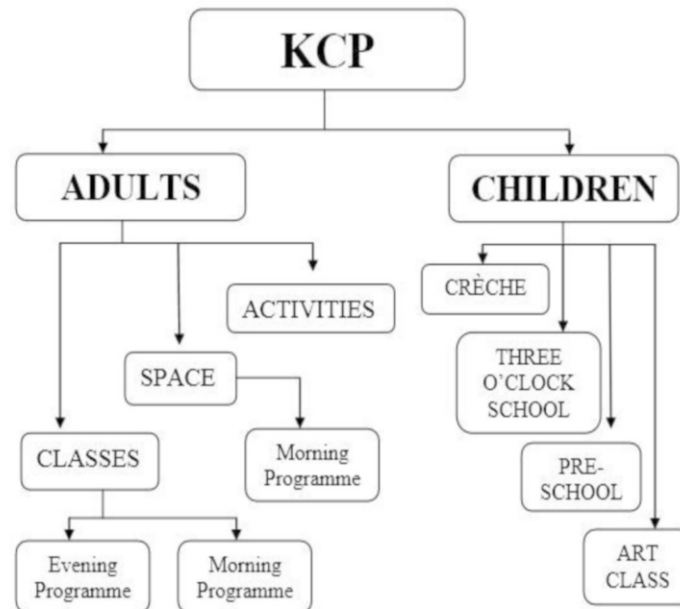


Figure 1. KCP programme activities

#### OUTCOMES

KCP profoundly affected the quality of people’s individual lives and family lives. It radically transformed the way in which the host primary school functioned, and furthermore it impacted on the local community. No baseline data was collected prior to the establishment of KCP, however, participants regularly compared their lives prior to, and subsequent to, their involvement in KCP in an effort to express the impact it had on their lives, and on the individual ecologies of home, school and community. In the following section I profile the impact of KCP on the target individuals who engaged in programmes in KCP, including adult learners, children and SPACE project participants. I make brief reference to the impact on the non-target interviewees which included tutors, teachers, ancillary staff, volunteers and representatives of statutory agency. Finally, in line with FER principles I acknowledge the impact of engagement in KCP and in this research on my own life.

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#### IMPACT ON TARGET INDIVIDUALS

The understanding of the impact of KCP over a 20 year period was informed by the work of the International Institute for Social change, one of their tools, 'Dimensions of Success' enables reflection and understanding of success in terms of relationships, process and results. This tool, renamed the 'Dynamics of Success' was adapted to frame the findings of this study as it enabled an exploration of the factors which contributed to building and maintaining success. The theory is that when these three inter-related elements are in balance sustainable success is achieved. In this context, relationships were understood as the 'quality and nature of relationships that were formed between individuals and between individuals and services, as a consequence of involvement in KCP' (Higgins, 2008, p. 247). Indeed relationships can be conceived as both an outcome of this initiative and part of the process which built a sustainable project. Process was understood in terms of how KCP functioned to identify, deliver, and evaluate services for adults and children and results were understood as short and long term outcomes for individuals, contexts, and services.

#### *Adult Learners: 'The Wheel Turns'*

In this section 'participants' refers to interviewees who participated in adult education programmes within KCP. I interviewed twenty-four mature and young adult learners who had participated in adult learning programmes over a period of years.

Relationships: The vast majority of adult learners were early school leavers who had not been involved in any educational programmes since leaving school. Adult learners developed supportive relationships, as one woman said '*they [adult learners] got on very well .... They are all good to one another and good for one another*' These supportive relationships offered friendship in times of need, nurtured aspiration raising, and built solidarity between adult learners who heretofore were '*neighbours*' and through the process of engagement became '*friends*'. One tutor described the dynamics of a group in which '*the frankness is unreal. There is a sense of confidence in the group*'.

The relationships between adults and tutors was identified as a core component which contributed to the success of the programme. The participants described this relationship as warm, respectful and affirming. They said that the nature of these relationships built resilience, confidence and skills. The following extract from one of the adult learner focus groups captures the nature of this relationship, '*they are not like tutors, they are our friends*'. One of the ancillary staff described the ethos and atmosphere of the adult education classes as a place where there was '*no hierarchy*', and everyone was '*on the same level*'.

The nature of relationships between adults and teachers also emerged as an important component of generating a successful project. Many of the adults who participated in adult learning had negative school experiences as children and some had even negative experiences engaging with schools as parents. They often used



comparisons in order to describe their experiences of engaging with KCP and the host school. One adult learner drawing on her experiences of other schools stated, *'there is no warmth in the other schools. It's just you drop your kids in, and that's it. There's no talking to teachers, no nothing, you know. You have to make an appointment. Whereas when you are dropping your children in here, if you have a problem you just say 'can I talk to you for a minute?'*

Some adult learners were not parents of children attending the host school were also loud in their praise for the teachers. They felt teachers made them welcome, and took an interest in the programmes they were undertaking. Teachers and adult learners shared a communal space<sup>ix</sup> as the staff room also functioned as the adult education room.

Another dimension to adult relationships was their interaction with children in the host school. Adults met children in the school corridors and greeted the children and acknowledged their achievements when a child might be sent from their classroom to the kitchen to show their parent their work.

Results: Adult learners identified academic achievements, skill development, improved health, enhanced lifestyle, a sense of solidarity, choosing to undertake learning to meet their own needs, and a greater identity with the community as tangible results emanating from engaging in KCP. While all the time acknowledging the importance of academic achievements, of *'trying to educate themselves a bit more'*. Research participants believed that to focus on this alone would be to do a disservice to an holistic and realistic vision for learning. Adult learners spoke of the pride and satisfaction they got from learning specific skills such as cookery, sewing, hairdressing, literacy, personal health as well as computer and musical skills.

Adult learners shared stories of their hunger to learn and the joy of being able to bring newly acquired skills and confirmed aspirations back into their own homes. They also spoke movingly of the transformative outcomes the impact of finding and claiming their voices. They believed that KCP offered a warm, friendly, non-threatening leaning environment where their confidence was fostered, their resilience built and close supportive networks nurtured. This was movingly captured by one adult learner who said that being involved with KCP was *'like a comfort blanket'* around her.

Process: This study sought to understand the process by which non-traditional learners chose to get involved in KCP and to stay engaged over long period of time. The opportunity to engage in learning for this cohort was counter-cultural. The reason they came and stayed had a lot to do with *'learning, laughing and drinking tea'*. Engagement met learning, social and psychological needs. The leaning was important but the friendships and solidarity was the 'glue' that kept the project alive and relevant.

Engagement in KCP offered opportunities for learning, leadership,<sup>x</sup> and the opportunity to contribute to the community. The pedagogy respected prior learning, was interactive, and needs-led. Local leaders emerged through this process and they recruited participants, promoted attendance and built a sense of pride and belonging. In the process of sharing a physical learning space, hope and

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dreams were shared, affirmed and realised. One of the important ways in which KCP built solidarity and pride was through the celebration of achievements. We did this by honouring our adult learners at annual social events

*Children: A Safe Place to Be a Child*

In this section ‘participants’ refers to the ten interviewees who were former 3 o’clock school attendees. The impact on children who engaged in the after school programme was no less profound than that of adult learners. Again the outcomes are discussed under relationships, results and process. The findings on the impact of the 3 o’clock school on participants were triangulated through interviews with their parents, tutors and teachers.

Relationships: These young adults had attended the after school programme three to four days per week for a number of years. Many of the children attended in family groups. Over the timespan during which these participants were involved there had been four tutors in all working in the after school programme but only two at any one time.

Many of the children attending the 3o’clock school in the early years of KCP with siblings and cousins. The participants believed that the time they spent in the 3 o’clock school strengthened their family bonds, helped them to get along together, built resilience, promoted educational attainment and provided them with common experiences. The bonds they developed culminated in a sense of security. They described the 3 o’clock school as a sanctuary, or a safe haven where they could ‘*be themselves*’. They graphically described the ‘*family-like atmosphere ... you could feel very comfortable*’. One participant reflected on the impact it had on her stating that she ‘*felt safe to be a child*’. The participants spoke of their relationships with their tutors with warmth and appreciation. The bond between participants and tutors was precious to them. They said that the tutors were ‘*like parents*’, stating that ‘*it wasn’t just like and adult and kid thing, or an educational thing. It was more like a family thing*’.

In this caring environment tutors supported children, listened to them, laughed with them, taught them, and had high aspirations for them. The child-tutor relationship was deemed the most important aspect of the 3 o’clock school experience by many of the participants interviewed. While the homework support and nutrition were named as important aspects, the love and care children experienced surmounted all other aspects. The 3 o’clock school focus group aptly described the quality of relationships between children and tutors as, ‘*the key which opened the door to learning*’:

- Voice 1: *that was the key* [nature of relationship]
- Voice 2: *That opened the door to learning*
- Voice 1: *Cos even if you had the good dinners. I’m not being smart like Ann. Even though you had the good dinners, and you had the homework, but if there was no communication, or no trust, it would be a waste of time, to be honest with you.*

Results: the results for participants in the 3 o'clock school were numerous, and included academic improvements, improved school attendance, improved behaviour, development of a sense of belonging, development of self-esteem and confidence, resilience and formation of positive relationships and positive life choices. For some involvement in the 3 o'clock school offered a place of social and psychological safety. One former participant graphically described her experience as follows:

I remember me as young. We wouldn't have so much and you were inclined to get bullied at school for it you know ... whereas you might not have the best skirt on or the best pair of shoes. Whereas you were targeted for it. But when you came to the 3 o'clock no one judged anyone. You know that's the kind of feeling, and I always said it, It changed my life.

A teacher who worked in the host school during the initial stage of the development of KCP believed that the 3 o'clock school had a positive impact on children in terms of behaviour, learning motivation and capacity to interact with peers and teacher, she stated that,

The children displayed more interest in [school] work and on the whole were more willing pupils than they might have been otherwise. In many cases their behaviour in class, previously disruptive, became amiable and op operative with both teachers and other pupils. In my classroom, I saw much improvement in general attitude, towards myself and the school at large.

Participants believed that the academic support they received in the 3 o'clock school impacted on the quality of their school lives, in that they went to school with their homework done and increased confidence in their abilities. As one participant noted:

It [participation in the 3 o'clock school] had an effect on education. Cos we started to like it [school work] then. Cos you don't like it when you don't know how to do it. But, when you know how to do it, it becomes fun.

Process: Participants described how a 'place of safety' was created through open communication, a shared ethos around behaviour expectations and open and warm communication. A place where they enjoyed being children and a place where resilience was nurtured. The processes involved in the after school programme are best captured in the words of a former participant who highlighted the importance of communication and trust:

With the tutors there was always an understanding. There ... That's very important, and communication. It was very important that they would be able to talk to you. And you would be able to talk to them. And if there is no communication, there is nothing you know. I think ye [tutors] were happy, and we were happy. Cos ye brought out the best in us, and maybe we brought out the best in ye.

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*SPACE Participants*

The SPACE participants were a group of young women who were mothers who were living in their family homes and were neither in education nor employment. The SPACE facilitator was a member of KCP committee, a local woman, outraged because she observed a 'waste' of young women's lives. Their educational opportunities had ceased on becoming mothers and she strongly believed that KCP needed to develop specific opportunities to meet their needs. So we cleared out a classroom, found a small amount of funding to buy a sofa and comfortable chairs and set up a 'sitting room' within the school building. The facilitator created a safe nurturing space for conversations to take place, and invited guest speakers on topics of interest. She made contact with organisations in the city to provide support and guidance to these young women. KCP set up a crèche to provide childcare. SPACE provided young women who were mothers with a forum to share their experiences, hopes, aspirations, and frustrations with life. It provided a confidential context in which young women made friends, developed self-confidence, built resilience and focused on their own needs and aspirations:

It was good to get me out of myself. Cos you do tend I think with me, tend to be surrounded with your own family. And tend to want to stay there. Cos it's safe, do you know that kind of a way. That [SPACE] started me off, bringing me out, doing other things. I found, for me anyway, it was great. I did anyway. I found it was brilliant.

Relationships: The nature of relationships between the young women involved in the SPACE project and their relationship with the facilitator was key to the success of this initiative. There was absolute confidentiality within the SPACE group.

Through engagement with SPACE the young women developed a deep bond, as one participant noted, '*we shared views with one another, and if any of us had problems, we spoke about them, and everyone tried to help ... We got on grand*'. They met on Wednesday mornings, in their own room in the school, and in an atmosphere of caring, sharing, and confidentiality. They discussed their life situations, identified their needs, and began to realise they were entitled to have dreams for themselves, and their children. They supported each other, listened to each other, and were delighted with any achievements within the group. In the following extract one of the participants captures the ethos and solidarity which prevailed in the group:

It was great. There was no rivalry, no jealousy, you know. Say if one girl said, say I bought him [her son] a pair of shoes and they were 20 pounds at the time, no one no one would get jealous. They would say 'Good on you', that, 'You saved up the money'. Cos money was tight at the time you know. You only got a certain amount on your book [social welfare payment]. And if you had a place of your own it was very hard to even pay out £20 for a pair of shoes for the child, and no one would begrudge em. That we were all friendly and we wouldn't be backstabbers, you know we wouldn't ... I wouldn't go

along and read [gossip] one girl, cos she got the shoes, and she wouldn't read me, cos I hadn't the money you know. We all supported each other now.

SPACE provided young women with the opportunity to share their opinions, and offer support to each other. They shared a common experience, which formed the foundation for the development of friendships and solidarity. As one young woman said:

Once I came here, I made new friends. Cos they knew what it was like too. Cos they were on their own'. Do you know when the other parents are your own age, you are able to understand them more. And mainly all in the same boat as one another ... Most of us were unmarried mothers at the time, all around the one age.

Another young woman described SPACE as a safe place in which she could express her emotions. In SPACE, she was free to cry, in a context in which she would get support:

It was brilliant. We done so much there. And we would go over there Ann, if one of us was having a bad day, or a bad week, we could talk. We all got our turn. Our space to talk, you know what I mean. If I wanted to have a good cry, what I wouldn't do at home, upsetting the mother and father, I could do it over there with the girls. If I had something I wanted to know about, the girls would tell me like. We could laugh and cry together. It was absolutely brilliant now.

Many of the young women felt their 'lives were over', when they became mothers. They saw a lifetime of childrearing ahead, with little personal freedom. Some of them had been in post-primary school when they became pregnant, and had subsequently dropped out of school.<sup>x1</sup> The SPACE project afforded them the opportunity to discuss their aspirations and to dream, to envisage further learning, and work opportunities:

What I wanted to do all my life was to work with people or animals. That was my life-long dream. And I'd be saying 'I can't, I've left school, I have a child'. And they [the other SPACE participants] would be saying, 'Of course you can, of course you can, why can't you'? They gave me the confidence, do you know what I mean. Definitely I'll never regret the day coming over.

SPACE participants simply loved the facilitator and she loved them. She saw them as young talented women who had babies. While the facilitator was an adult learner and member of KCP the trust that was built between the facilitator and the SPACE participants and between the SPACE participants themselves was never compromised. They went into that room which they described as a '*safe place*' and were free to discuss their concerns and to dream their dreams and in this process nurture their aspirations.

The facilitator gained their trust, confidence, and respect. This is how one of the former participants described her:

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I think we felt even though she was an older person, we could confide in her. Definitely you could like. And even when she would pass out [from the adult classes] with the women of her own age, we would always get a big salute off her. And we would always salute her. And do you know, it was great that she was involved with our group, as well as being with her own crowd, She was still with us. And I think she felt close to us as well.

#### *Non-target Individuals*

Space does not allow a comprehensive discussion on the impact of KCP on tutors, teachers, ancillary staff and volunteers. However it would be remiss not to acknowledge the profound impact on these individuals. Teachers working within the host school acknowledged the positive relationships they developed with adult learners and tutors as a result of the location of KCP within the school building. This respectful adult to adult relationship was characterised by on-going communication, relating on a first name basis, teacher's genuine interest in parental learning, an understanding of the child in the context of family and a commitment to making learning accessible for children and adults. Teachers spoke of the joy of working in a multi-service school, and again contrasted it to the traditional model, where schools open between nine and three. In the traditional context there is minimal parental involvement, and consequently very different types of relationships between the adults in the child's life.

The ancillary staff are very complimentary of the ethos of the school and the role teachers play in building that inclusive ethos. The following excerpt from a member of ancillary staff highlights the ethos, and the extent to which teachers are proactive in creating a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere:

Its so friendly, its brilliant. People walk in, the parents walk in, no matter who they meet they are all greeted, and again it's all first name terms. Its great, it doesn't matter whether the child is going to the crèche or to first class all the parents are greeted the same way, and friendly. And if they are going to see anybody along the way, along the hall a teacher or whatever, they will come out and straight away the teacher will know the person by first name. You know it is brilliant it is.

Ancillary staff were also conscious of the multi-service nature of the school. They worked in the crèche and pre-school as well as in the classrooms They visited the kitchen to collect equipment when adult classes were going on and knew the adult learners by name, felt they were friendly and might often have a chat with them. They enjoyed the interaction with adult learners, teaching staff, and children. Ancillary staff were also very aware of different aspects of the project, and of the value to the adult learners.

City of Limerick Vocational Educational Committee (CLVEC) supported KCP by supplying tutors for the classes, and facilitating grant applications. I interviewed a key member of CLVEC who was very familiar with the evolution and nature of KCP. According to this interviewee, KCP represented an innovative approach to

building educational capital and providing accessible learning opportunities to people who had not benefited fairly from the education system. This research participant acknowledged the impact her interaction with KCP had on her own life and on her skill development:

I'll say one thing about KCP. It was very much part of my own education. I had come from a rural background, and I would have known very little about an inner city way of life. It would have been a culture that I wouldn't have been at all familiar with, so I said that I learned a lot about people ... especially as I was being paid to provide a service. And I really think that part of my own learning was to get to know and understand local communities, particularly ones I would not be familiar with that were not part of my own earlier experience. And I think it is essential you know to ... It is important to keep learners to the fore. So for people like me you have to be open to learning open to seeing the learner as a ... creating a system for learners really.

#### *Researcher*

I came to this study site with a previous history of engagement. As I captured the lived experiences of participants I was all the time conscious not only of the impact of KCP on myself and but also conscious of the impact of doing this research on myself. The importance of declared subjectivity is well established. Lieblich in conversation with Clandinin and Murphy contends that 'what we require of our interviewees is something that we should be able to look at in ourselves as well' (Clandinin & Murphy, 2007, p. 643). Fine and Wise believe that we have 'responsibility to talk about our own identities, why we interrogate what we do, what we choose not to report on, on whom we train our scholarly gaze, who is protected and *not* protected as we do our work' (1996, p. 263). Indeed, the 'bracketing in' of the researcher has implications within the broader epistemological debate concerning the generation and validation of knowledge. According to Aull Davies researcher reflective practice, once seen as 'an undesirable effect to be minimised', is now welcomed 'as an opportunity to liberate the field from a positivist commitment to value free scientism' (1999, p. 178). Furthermore, the feminist and post modernists 'emphasised the socially situated nature of knowledge and hence the importance of specifying the knower' (ibid., 178).

Qualitative research demands we feel deeply and according to hooks 'to feel deeply we cannot avoid pain' (1997, p. xxiii). The challenge is not to just to feel the emotions but to acknowledge, understand them and consequently work from an informed perspective. This is not easily done as 'emotional labor is often ignored or devalued across a range of arenas, as it is seen as women's work' (Harris & Huntington, 2001, p. 131). Deegan repudiates the 'benign unidimensional portraits' painted by some qualitative researchers, and advocates reflexive practice which interrogates the 'multiplicity of researcher roles' which might be encountered in

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fieldwork (1995, p. 350). Fine and Deegan problematise the relationship between the researcher's attributes and the research process. They contend that 'attributes such as humility, empathy, maturity, energy, determination and creativity are not ends in themselves, but a means through which rapport can be established, data gathered, and theory generated' (1996, p. 445). Deegan's call for a 'self portrait of the researcher, warts and all' (1995, p. 350), poses a challenge to qualitative researchers, to extend beyond personal reflection and to make oneself known to the reader, echoing Grumet's call to have 'courage to reveal our work' (1988, p. 93). Our work is ultimately reflective of who we are. While this honesty may place the researcher in a 'vulnerable' position, Clandinin repudiates the antithesis where the researcher may 'stay silent, or present a kind of perfect, idealised, inquiring moralising self' (2000, p. 62).

As qualitative researchers 'we are in the parade we presume to study' (Clandinin, 2000, p. 81). Indeed, 'narrative practice lies at the heart of self-construction' (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000, p. 104).

My life has been nourished by my involvement with KCP, by my involvement in both the school and community, and by the process of researching this study. In Rager's words 'it was a life-changing experience'. (2005, p. 24)

As I interviewed participants and came to a very deep understanding of the transformative impact of KCP on their lives, I was challenged to reflect on the impact of KCP on my life and the impact of undertaking this study. I can honestly say that the impact was transformative, as I engaged in conversations the participants reflected questions back to me and asked me directly what impact working in the 3 o'clock school or working with adults had on me I was called to answer their questions. I told them that working with them had enriched my life, taught me about education, and that my relationships with them were very precious.

#### WHY KCP WORKED

There are a number of reasons why KCP sustained and was successful for over two decades. KCP met identified needs, embraced and built effective leadership practices (Dominelli, 1995; Field Belenky, 1997; Stall & Stoecker, 1998; Witt Garland, 1998), engendered hope (De los Reyes & Gozema, 2002; Fine & Weis, 1996; Freire, 1992; Greene, 1995; hooks, 2003) and built and acknowledged aspirations and employed effective pedagogical practices. The development and nurturance of respectful relationships was integral to all of the above.

Freire's contention that 'our relationships with learners demand that we respect them and demand equally that we be aware of the concrete conditions of their world, the conditions that shape them' (2005, p. 102) resonates strongly with this study where relationships was found to be a key component in contributing to the success of KCP. This was manifested in pedagogical and relational ethos of KCP



through the creation of an inclusive learning environment in which according to one participant learners '*were all treated the same .... I did not feel intimidated*'. One of tutors also captured this phenomenon stating '*the adult learners realised they could give each other a lot and that they each had something to give*'. KCP worked because attended to building and nurturing quality of relationships which in turn infused the processes through which it operated and the results it achieved. Commitment to building quality relationships was manifested at committee level as well as at a programme level. KCP worked because it met the identified needs of the target group.

Understanding the nature and impact of relationships in the learning context is critical to fostering learning accessibility. This field of research is influenced by a number of theoretical discourses including attachment, selfdetermination, feminist, developmental and multicultural models (Cornelius-White, 2007; Hughes, 2012). Attachment theory has played a key role in the development of this field of inquiry. According to Cornelius-White, 'attachment theories (e.g. Bowlby, 1969; Stern, 1977) are influential on teacher student relationship research and originate from perspectives on mother-child relationships. Attachment research emphasizes the long-lasting and personality-forming nature of relationships. Secure and reciprocal attachments are important for students to engage in their relationships with teachers, peers, and subject matter and develop healthy self-concepts and senses of well-being' (2007, p. 115).

Hughes (2012) acknowledges the substantial body of research which has taken place in the area of teacher-student relationships over the previous two decades. She offers a lens through which to decipher this body of research by differentiating first and second generation research, with first mode focusing 'on documenting the effect of student-teacher relationships on children's behavioural and academic adjustment' (2012, p. 319). The second generation she posits is concerned with increasing 'our understanding of the development of these relationships, and the processes responsible for their effects, as well as to evaluate theoretically-informed interventions designed to enhance teacher-student interactions' (ibid., p. 319).

First generation research linked a number of outcomes to positive teacher-student relationships. These included prevention of early school drop out, positive school engagement, social functioning, behaviour, academic achievement and the growth of resilience. Bergeron et al. in their study designed to test the impact of teacher-student relationships and achievement motivation on predicting dropout intention equally for low and high socio-economic status students found that 'a negative relationship with teachers remains the strongest predictor of high intentions to dropout for most students' (2011, p. 277). Furthermore, Davis and Dupper attest to the 'growing evidence that interpersonal relationships are an important factor in student's choice to remain in school or drop out' (2004, p. 183). Drawing in a variety of sources (Gadsden, Smith, & Jordan, 1996; Metz, 1983; Willie, 2000) they conclude that 'poor relations with school officials and teachers can contribute to early school leaving' (ibid., p. 183).

In a meta-analysis Roorda et al. acknowledge the ‘increase in research on the importance of affective teacher-student relationships (TSRs) for students’ school adjustment’ (2011, p. 493). They find that the quality of TSRs has been shown significantly associated with students’ social functioning (e.g., Ladd, Birchm, & Buhs, 1999), behaviour problems (e.g., Graziano, Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2007), engagement in learning activities (e.g., Skiller, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990), and academic achievement (e.g., Waliente, Lemery-Chalfant, Swanson, & Reiser, 2008) (*ibid.*, p. 493).

Johnson (2008) drawing on the work of Hatzistergos (2007) and Newman (2002) acknowledges the substantial improvements in children’s physical health in industrialised countries. Newman (2002), however highlights the increase ‘in psycho-social disorders of children [which] has taken place in most developed countries over the past half century (2002, p. 6), and advocates that the ‘promotion of resilience’ as an effective mechanism to support children and young people. Johnson defines resilience as ‘both a *process* and *outcome* of coping in response to risk, adversity, or threats to wellbeing. It involves the interplay between internal strengths of the individual and external supporting factors in the individual’s social environment’ (2008, p. 386). Johnson, (2008) drawing on Luthar and Zelazo (2003) and Dryden, Johnson and Howard (1998), highlights the importance of student-teacher relationships in promoting resilience. Newman, highlights the importance of resilience stating that ‘the promotion of resilience may be an important strategy in attempting to reverse this trend, through placing more emphasis on factors that promote well-being, and not just on the identification and elimination of risk’ (Rayner & Montague, 2000).

There is a strong consensus on the broad benefits of positive teacher-student relationships. The second generation research according to Hughes, excavates the factors that contribute to that positive alliance. Toste posits that ‘the environments in which children live and learn have a significant impact on their development’ (2012), and contends that ‘the classroom should be an environment that fosters strong and positive *working relationships*’ (*ibid.*, p. 21). Drawing on the field of psychology, Toste conceptualises this ‘working relationship’ as a ‘working alliance’ thereby term used when, ‘referring to the quality of the relationship between therapist and client’ (*ibid.*, p. 22). Indeed she notes that ‘the quality of alliance has consistently been found to be one of the best predictors of positive outcomes for clients participating in therapy’ (*ibid.*, p. 22). She concludes confirming the importance of teacher-student relationships, stating that ‘warmth, trust, and bond that define an emotional connection, a positive working relationship also include a sense of collaboration and partnership shared between the teacher and the student’ (*ibid.*, p. 23).

Jones and Deutsch observed ‘relational strategies that staff employ within an urban youth organization, and the ways in which those strategies contribute to a positive developmental climate’ (2010, p. 1381). They found ‘three specific relational strategies that staff used to develop relationships with youth’ namely active inclusion, and attention to proximal relational ties. They concluded that ‘these strategies contribute to an overall supportive culture, suggesting a relational

pedagogy in this after-school setting' (ibid., p. 1381). They contend that 'the club-as-home model, in which youth develop and emotional attachment to an organization driven primarily by psychosocial aspects of the place, points to how relationships can contribute to an overarching socioemotional experience for youth' (ibid., p. 1383). Ultimately, drawing on the work Bottrell, (2009), Brunie, (2009) and Lin (2001), they posit that the relationships developed by youth may 'serve as important sources of social capital for youth' (ibid., p. 1383).

Liew et al. (2001) highlight the key role of teacher-student relationships in influencing learning. They note that 'although the characteristics that students bring into the classroom may influence their learning, characteristics of the learning environment may also directly or indirectly influence students' achievement. An aspect of the learning environment that has received considerable attention is the quality of teacher-student relationships' (2010, p. 51). Drawing on a substantial body of literature (Goodenow, 1993; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Palermo, Hanish, Martin, Fabes, & Reiser, 2007; Reddy, Rhodes, & Mulhall, 2003), they posit that 'teacher-student relationships consisting of a high level of warmth and low level of conflict has been associated with students' positive academic beliefs, motivation, and performance' (ibid., p. 52).

The ethos of care resonates with Greene's 'perspectives framework' in which she contends that we choose to either see big or to see small (1995). In 'seeing small' we distance ourselves from people, 'we choose to see from a detached viewpoint, to watch behaviors from the perspective of a system, to be concerned with trends and tendencies rather than the intentionality and concreteness of everyday life' (1995, p. 10). In 'seeing big' we choose to resist 'viewing other human beings as mere objects or chess pieces and view them in their integrity and particularity instead' (ibid, p. 10). Indeed, in choosing to 'see big' we see life from the other's point of view and understand them within the context of their life circumstances. In 'seeing big', we come into 'close contact with details and with particularities that cannot be reduced to statistics or even to the measurable' (ibid, p. 10). We see the kaleidoscope of life in all its richness, messiness, joy and colour.

The findings in the literature review strongly resonate with the study findings. Respectful relationships manifested through warmth, care, listening and investment created safe nurturing environments in which learning was made accessible. The model was school-based, incremental, intergenerational, ecological, multi-service, needs-led and respected power sharing. This model was guided by a set of reflective tools that enabled a three-fold investigation in to how we act, how we think and how we feel.

#### NOTES

<sup>i</sup> SPACE was an initiative within KCP which offered young women who were mothers and were not in education or employment opportunities to build their skills, identify their needs and find ways to meet those needs.

<sup>ii</sup> 3 o'clock school is an after school programme.

<sup>iii</sup> KCP committee comprised six local women along with the author.

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- iv Ancillary school staff comprised Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), Workers on a Community Employment Scheme and caretakers.
- v Statutory organisation representation, comprised a member of City of Limerick Vocational Educational Committee, the organisation which supplied tutors for the adult classes and the after school programmes.
- vi The Kileely estate is located in the Kileely A Small Area Population Statistics (SAPS) area. While Kileely comprises 368 houses the ward itself is larger and includes additional housing units ( 1981 total was 494, 1986 total was 465, 1991 total was 453, 1996 total was 499 and 2002 total was 535) the additional housing comprised a mixture of local authority housing and a small number of private households.
- vii There was a nominal fee for attending adult education classes. The cup for collecting this fee was placed to the side and no records were kept of payment so that payment would never inhibit attendance.
- viii In order to differentiate between the staff in the school and in KCP, I refer to school staff as teachers and KCP staff as tutors
- ix This communal space was called ‘the kitchen’ and functioned as the staff room, adult education room and one of the rooms used by the 3 o’clock school. It was a converted cloakroom which initially had old school desks on which parent attending adult education classes sat.
- x A group of local women along with the author formed a committee to manage KCP.
- xi Some schools had asked the girls to leave on becoming pregnant, believing they would be bad examples to other young girls, if allowed to stay and complete their education.

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