

Redefining Adult Education in England:
A Grounded Complexity Analysis of the
Transition from Civil Duty to Economic Imperative
(1903-2023)

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Abstract

This thesis argues that the evolution of adult education's purpose and function in England over the past 120 years has been shaped by a persistent ideological shift from civic and holistic aims towards market-driven imperatives. It focuses on the influence of dominant political and social ideologies on the sector, particularly neoliberalism and New Public Management, in refining the sector's goals and practices. By analysing historical policy documents, including the 1919 Final Report, the 1973 Russell Report, and the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act debates in conjunction with practitioner interviews, the research demonstrates how these key policy moments embedded ideological change within civil and state society, as well as the adult education sector.

Through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document analysis within a Grounded Complexity Analytical Framework, the research investigates the practical and ideological tensions that emerge from the normalisation of performative management in and of adult education. It reveals the dynamic interplay between hegemony and counter-hegemony, illustrating how organisations and practitioners within the sector respond to neoliberal pressures. The findings reveal the evolving professional identities of adult practitioners and their ethical navigation and resistance to performative cultures.

This research offers an original contribution by developing the Grounded Complexity Framework (GCF) to analyse ideological entanglement in adult education. It highlights the importance of utilising such a framework to promote a deeper understanding of the complexity of adult education. It advocates for a nuanced, value-driven, and politically aware dialogue about how the purpose of adult education aligns with the broader needs of society. The implications for practitioners, policy development, and the broader educational landscape are critically assessed, arguing that reclaiming civic purpose is essential to resisting further erosion of democratic and relational aims, to provide insights into creating a more equitable and reflective adult education system.

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Acknowledgements

It all depends on how much you know.

‘Supposing you’d watched the slow accretion of snow over thousands of years as it was compressed and pushed over the deep rock until the glacier calved its icebergs into the sea, and you watched an iceberg drift out through the chilly waters, and you got to know its cargo of happy polar bears and seals as they looked forward to a brave new life in the other hemisphere where they say the ice floes are lined with crunchy penguins, and then *wham!* Tragedy loomed in the shape of thousands of tons of unaccountably floating iron and an exciting soundtrack ...

... you’d want to know the whole story.’

(Pratchett, 2001, Thief of Time, p.7)

‘...After all, enlightenment begins where perplexity ends.’

(Lu-Tze, in Pratchett, 2001, Thief of Time, p. 102)

Terry Pratchett was a giant amongst social commentators and satirists, and to him goes special thanks for creating, through metaphor and wit, the ‘perfect moment’ of clarity amid this thesis’s entangled themes.

There are many other people who made this possible, so many that I cannot name them all. Therefore, I extend my thanks to those who have shared their stories with me, those who have inspired and guided me, and those who have been my lodestone in a sea of perplexity.

Of course, special thanks to Daisy and Rosie for keeping my feet warm every day and to George for his well-timed distractions.

Chapter 1: Civic Values to Market-Driven

1.0 Introduction

In 1919, the Final Report of the Education Committee of the Board of Reconstruction declared adult education ‘a permanent national necessity.’ More than a century later, Further Education Week’s article *The Dismantling of a Sector: Adult Education in Crisis* (Staufenberg, 2022) illustrates the scale of decline. Between these two moments lies a layered, often uneasy shift in how adult education has been governed and understood in England.

The 1919 Report positioned adult education as a civic good, essential for a fairer society, democratic participation, and collective development. For over seventy years, this expansive vision justified a wide range of provision across learner needs and communities. Adult education functioned not just as a public service, but as a site of social justice, empowerment, and relational pedagogy.

By 2023, this vision had undergone a dramatic reconfiguration. A sector once grounded in transformation, helping people break cycles of exclusion and engage critically with society, has become entangled in bureaucratic logics that restrict relational practice and reduce civic purpose to market output. Neoliberal reforms, operationalised through New Public Management, have systematically replaced ethical and inclusive commitments with compliance-driven priorities.

This thesis argues that the civic purpose of adult education, though significantly eroded, remains a site of contestation and possibility. Over the past 120 years, adult education in England has been increasingly governed by economic imperatives that marginalise its earlier civic and inclusive aims. While existing research has illuminated the discursive and structural effects of neoliberalism,

this study extends that analysis by interrogating the historical, systemic, and relational dynamics that underpin such transformation.

The Grounded Complexity Framework (GCF), developed through this research, provides a tool for tracing how these dynamics manifest across macro policy, institutional governance, and practitioner experience. In doing so, the thesis offers an original synthesis of historical analysis, empirical testimony, and theoretical critique—revealing how civic purpose is eroded, rearticulated, and selectively sustained within adult education systems.

1.0.1 Framing Practitioner Praxis and the Grounded Complexity Framework

Over more than two decades in adult education as a teacher, a manager, and as an advocate for adult community learning, I have worked with learners whose educational journeys were interrupted, delayed, or denied: those who left school early, carried caring responsibilities, migrated from countries without formal systems, or returned to learning later in life for career, wellbeing, or connection. These experiences revealed adult education as both a place of genuine opportunity and a space deeply constrained by systemic pressures.

I have witnessed a stark shift: from a sector culture that celebrated learning as empowerment, to one increasingly shaped by compliance, metrics, and managerial priorities. Relational pedagogy and civic mission have been displaced by institutional demands for standardisation and performance. This tension—between inclusive educational values and bureaucratic constraint—has profoundly shaped my understanding of the sector and forms the conceptual and ethical foundation of this thesis.

Professional identity, in this context, is understood as a relational construct—negotiated daily between pedagogical intent, institutional pressures, and the realities of audit culture. It is fragile under regimes of accountability, but also

capable of resistance. Gleeson and Shain (1999) describe identity formation as unfolding in the ‘micropolitics of daily work,’ where compliance and contestation co-exist. Biesta (2006) similarly highlights the need for morally defensible judgment in complex conditions.

These insights inform a core proposition of the thesis: that meaningful educational transformation depends on a praxis of critical reflexivity—ethically informed, politically aware action that enables practitioners to reframe and reconfigure the ideological and material conditions of their work. Drawing on Freire (1972), Brookfield (1995), and Biesta (2015), this thesis understands praxis as a dialectical process in which reflection and action are mutually interdependent. Brookfield presents critical reflection as a political practice that exposes and resists hegemony; Biesta identifies *subjectification*—the formation of autonomous, ethically attuned individuals—as a vital but often neglected educational purpose.

Such praxis is enacted not through abstract resistance, but in everyday decisions: in moments of pedagogical care, curriculum design, assessment choices, or how time and trust are allocated. Practitioners working under pressure can still disrupt dominant narratives. Gramsci (1971, p. 10) described such figures as ‘constructors, organisers, permanent persuaders’, as *organic intellectuals* embedded within institutions but capable of unsettling common sense. Morton (2007) reminds us that resistance is not external to hegemony, but rather it must operate through it. Practitioners are not outside the system; they are both shaped by and shaping it.

This thesis develops the concept of *practising from the edge to describe such acts of contingent agency*, which are improvised at the boundaries of constraint. These ideas are explored in greater depth in Chapter 5.

The Grounded Complexity Framework (GCF) was developed to make sense of this entangled reality. As governance systems became more fragmented and ideologically volatile, I came to realise that no single theory could adequately

explain what I was witnessing. However, Complexity Theory offered a way to understand emergence and non-linearity; Gramscian analysis revealed how ideology operates through subtle, incremental consensus; Pragmatism provided a vocabulary for ethical agency, situated judgement, and responsive action. The GCF is both a theoretical synthesis and a methodological response—a way of thinking about complexity to understand how civic purpose is negotiated across systems, structures, and everyday practices.

1.0.2 Complexity and the Historical Shape of the Sector

This thesis adopts the idea of a ‘grand narrative’ cautiously; not as a totalising account, but as a high-level synthesis that acknowledges contradiction and fragmentation (Lyotard, 1984; Usher & Edwards, 1994). Adult education in England has always been shaped by Complexity through its institutions, learners, and aims. Even at its emergence, the sector encompassed a wide range of objectives, including moral instruction, liberal education, religious and welfare studies, life skills, vocational training, and basic literacy and numeracy. Providers included charities, churches, philanthropic groups, technical colleges, and local authorities. Students came from across the social spectrum, from children as young as 12 to middle-class adults seeking advancement. This generated significant complexity and diversity in delivery and emphasis (Fieldhouse, 1996).

The tensions arising from these early conditions—between public and private aims, inclusion and exclusion, and civic and economic goals—continued to shape the sector throughout the twentieth century. Complexity factors have been both a source of richness and a constraint, enabling broad access while limiting coherence. Understanding this historical texture is essential for tracing how governance, policy, and ideology have interacted to reshape adult education over time. This historical heterogeneity—across purpose, provider, and learner—continues to echo in today’s fragmented and uneven landscape. Understanding

these origins is essential for tracing how Complexity has not only persisted but has been restructured under performative governance.

1.0.3 Neoliberalism and the Reframing of Adult Education Policy

Since the 1970s, neoliberal principles have redefined English education policy, shifting its focus from civic development to economic utility. Ball (2008) demonstrates how reforms reoriented education around competitiveness and performativity, while Wright (2012) identifies how accountability mechanisms and managerialism became embedded in policy and institutional frameworks. These developments have subordinated the civic purpose of adult education to individualised, market-driven priorities.

Tett (2014) argues that neoliberal restructuring displaces commitments to inclusion and the public good, framing educational aims in terms of economic value. Hall and McGinity (2015) demonstrate how institutional effectiveness is now measured through enrolment, retention, pass rates, and other metrics, reducing a previously rich and relational educational experience to quantifiable outputs.

Despite these trends, calls for a renewed civic vision persist. The 2019 Centenary Commission on Adult Education, echoing the ideals of the 1919 Report, asserted that ‘adult education must be understood as an integral part of the democratic fabric of society’ (2019, p. 6). It proposed a model grounded in social justice, citizenship, and collective flourishing. Nevertheless, contemporary policy continues to use the language of lifelong learning while narrowing its purpose to labour market activation. The result, as the Commission warned, is a ‘dangerous deficit in educational opportunity’ (2019, p. 5) that deepens social fragmentation.

This ideological shift underpins the thesis argument: that adult education's civic role has not disappeared, but has been repurposed, constrained, and contested. These policy trajectories form the ideological terrain that this thesis interrogates. What is at stake is not only the purpose of adult education, but its capacity to serve as a space of relational, ethical, and civic possibility. In what follows, I trace how this narrowing of purpose is enacted historically, structurally, and pedagogically—and how educators continue to negotiate, resist, and reimagine those boundaries in practice. The thesis chapters examine how these dynamics manifest historically, structurally, and in the practices of educators working at the intersection of policy and purpose.

1.1 Landscape of Adult Education

The 1903 Education Act is nominally marked as the point when adult education coalesced as a nationally recognised structure in policy literature and funding. For the next 120 years, adult education provided classes for anyone outside of compulsory school age- a moving feast in the early years when this could be as young as 12. Today, this remains somewhat blurred by complicated funding rules, with nuanced differences between 16-19 and 19+ funding. The complexity of the sector is both a strength and a source of challenge. It has been shaped by a wide array of providers and an equally broad spectrum of educational purposes, reflecting its historical adaptability and diversity.

The funding landscape is equally complex. Multiple government funding streams, including central government grants, local authority budgets, subcontracting, charitable organisations, employers, and learners themselves, bring distinct criteria and objectives:

- Government funding encompasses various strands, and complex funding rules accompany it. Two notable examples are the Adult Education Budget, from which £600 million was distributed to providers in 2022 for approximately 1.7 million learners (approximately 3.5% of the UK adult population).

However, during the same period, in adult community education specifically, the budget for the Community Learning line was only £215 million, despite reaching 500,000 learners in 10,000 community venues. (Department for Education (DfE), 2022; HOLEX (Holex), 2023).

- Charitable funding: Although no single figure represents the total charitable funding for adult education in England, it collectively amounts to tens of millions of pounds annually, supporting a wide range of projects aimed at improving access to education.
- Employers tend to seek professional growth for their workforce, often through government jointly funded apprenticeships, for which the apprenticeship levy equates to £2.5 million. This does not account for significant internal CPD or training provision by employers for staff, for which national statistics are difficult to identify.
- Self or personal funding, including current advanced learning loans (£89.1 million in 2022 for 43,600 learners) and, from 2025, the Lifetime Learner Entitlement, which is essentially an extension of student loans from HE into the FE frameworks. Loans can be up to the equivalent of four years of post-18 study.

Looking at it from a Complexity standpoint, as argued by Cilliers (2000), Complexity arises from diverse components and the dynamic, often unpredictable interactions between these elements, which are influenced by external socio-political and economic forces. In this lens, we can see that providers must navigate these competing priorities with considerable flexibility.

In 2014, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS, 2016: Research Paper 296) described the further education and skills sector as ‘highly complex’. At that time, it engaged approximately four million publicly funded learners, of whom around 75% were aged 19 or older, representing nearly 7% of the total UK population. The sector’s total budget exceeded £10 billion, including

£159 million contributed by the European Social Fund (ESF)—a figure of relevance to later discussions concerning the implications of Brexit for sectoral funding and infrastructure.

There are 1,150 publicly funded FE providers in England in 2024, though subcontracting arrangements are likely to mean this is actually a much higher figure. This figure also includes sixth-form colleges and FE colleges that serve 16-18-year-olds as well as adult learners. It includes some 851,500 workplace-based apprenticeships and encompasses a wide range of institutions, from further education colleges and private training organisations to local authority services, charities, and third-sector organisations, all delivering programmes that range from basic literacy and ESOL to vocational qualifications and apprenticeships.

The diversity of provision, alongside the wider sector's historical role in meeting both individual and community needs, remains one of its principal strengths. However, this diversity also presents challenges in an environment increasingly driven by market-oriented policies, where competition for limited resources has led to a narrowing of objectives. There have been few new providers up to 2014. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills notes that many college mergers have taken place, consolidating the sector, as well as several exits from the market by large private training providers (BIS 2016: Research Paper 296, p. 8).

The figures cited in this thesis represent credible snapshots drawn from authoritative sources. However, as Holford (2024b) observes, data on adult education participation and funding are frequently complicated by inconsistent definitions, shifting methodologies, and evolving sectoral classifications. In light of such discrepancies, this thesis uses such data only to illustrate broader patterns and structural shifts. The implication, however, is wider; if data is frequently complex for researchers, it also makes transparent decision-making

more difficult for providers and policymakers reliant on data interpretation, a key component of an NPM policy governance environment.

1.1.2 Governance as a Field of Contestation

It is necessary to examine how governance itself is conceptualised in this thesis. Governance, in this thesis, is treated not as a fixed institutional structure but as a relational and ideologically saturated process. It is the primary mechanism through which adult education is regulated, reframed, and contested over time. While early definitions, such as Rhodes' (1996), present governance as evolving systems of coordination, accountability, and steering, this thesis adopts a more critical and discursive framing. Following Ball (2008), governance is understood as being constituted through shifting policy discourses, institutional cultures, and the negotiations that occur between the state, providers, and professionals.

This conceptualisation allows governance to be read not simply as administration or control, but as a dynamic space where competing educational purposes are articulated, constrained, or enabled. It is through governance that values like inclusion, empowerment, or employability are given institutional form—and through which those same values may be reshaped, marginalised, or contested.

Within the Grounded Complexity Framework, this conception is further refined through Midgley's (2016) four domains of Complexity: Natural, Social, Subjective, and Meta-level. These domains allow governance to be understood across multiple registers:

- As a **regulatory system** (natural domain), codified in policy instruments and performance regimes;
- As a **socially organised field** (social domain), embedded in institutional norms and organisational practice;
- As a site of **personal agency and ethical judgement** (subjective domain), where educators navigate tensions between policy and pedagogy;

- Furthermore, it is an **ideological terrain** (meta-level domain), where values, assumptions, and governing rationalities are struggled over.

Governance is therefore not merely a background context, but a core analytic lens. It shapes how structural change, policy shifts, and professional agency are understood throughout this thesis. Chapters 4 and 5 examine how governance is enacted at different scales—national, institutional, and interpersonal—and how it mediates the evolving relationship between civic values on the one hand and neoliberal imperatives on the other, as well as the impact of this tension on adult education.

1.1.1 Competing Values and Priorities

The governance of adult education in England has long been shaped by competing and historically contingent values. Among these, this thesis foregrounds civil values. These are understood as a contested normative field in which societies negotiate what education is for, whom it serves, and how it should function. Civil values materialise through institutional practices, policy imaginaries, and practitioner agency. They constitute what might be called adult education's normative grammar: the ethical and ideological terms through which governance aims, professional identities, and pedagogical approaches are rendered intelligible and made subject to challenge.

This thesis has delineated the uses of the term 'civil values' to describe the broader ethical and ideological grammars through which adult education is governed and contested. These include justice-oriented, reformist, and civic aims. 'Civic' values are more narrowly used to denote democratic participation, collective agency, and the public purposes of education, which form one strand of this wider value field.

Civil values, as used in this thesis, are not presented as a binary opposition to neoliberalism; instead, they are positioned as a terrain of ideological struggle. Fraser (1997) conceptualises social justice values as concerned with

redistribution and recognition, with an emphasis on broadening participation and amplifying the voices of the marginalised. These aims, however, are frequently absorbed into technocratic logics of ‘measurable inclusion’, which blunt their impact. Crick (2008) and Held (2006) both situate the nested civic traditions of adult education within a broader reformist lineage, where pedagogy is linked to democratic participation and collective agency. Apple (2006) warns, however, that both justice-oriented and reformist visions remain vulnerable to co-option, particularly within performative regimes that instrumentalise their language to legitimise soft managerialism rather than confront its assumptions.

This tension between emancipatory aspiration and managerial absorption is central to the thesis. Biesta’s (2006) tripartite model of educational purpose — qualification, socialisation, and subjectification — illustrates how civil values become entangled in governance. While the first two are readily captured by neoliberal metrics, subjectification, and the cultivation of ethical, autonomous learners resist such reduction and offer a conceptual anchor for civic and relational aims. Carr and Hartnett (1996) deepen this argument by framing education as a contested moral inquiry forged through political and ideological struggle rather than technocratic consensus.

Together, these positions inform the thesis’s treatment of civil values as fragile, historically contingent formations that are recurrently reactivated by practitioners, reshaped by governance systems, and contested across time. Their significance lies not in internal coherence, but in their ability to expose ideological contradictions and sustain a politics of hope amid structural constraints. Across the historical analysis (Chapter 4), empirical investigation (Chapter 5), and theoretical synthesis (Chapter 6), civil values serve as a connective tissue between purpose, practice, and politics, remaining resilient because they are continually reworked through situated acts of educational agency.

These value-tensions are deeply embedded in the policy trajectories and governance shifts that have defined adult education in England. Historically,

adult education served social justice and emancipatory aims. In contrast, contemporary policy has narrowed its remit. Funding mechanisms now focus tightly on efficiency and value for money. Central government influences provision through control of qualifications, performance frameworks, and rate-setting. The dominant alignment with labour market needs has made skills provision the sector's defining currency. However, learners' motivations do not always correspond to these policy imperatives. This has left providers, especially in community-based education, caught in uncomfortable dual accountability: between the threat of funding loss on one side and disengagement from learners on the other.

Additionally, heightened competition among providers has hindered collaboration, particularly for organisations not closely aligned with vocational qualifications. Community provision and charitable and third-sector providers, which often sustain non-vocational and civic provision, are especially vulnerable to marginalisation. In this environment, cooperation is disincentivised, and the visibility of civic education is diminished.

This thesis argues that the sector's continued capacity to offer plural, inclusive, and democratically valuable educational experiences is under pressure. While economic imperatives have not eliminated civil values, they have obscured and fragmented them, leaving providers and practitioners to navigate a landscape where civic purpose is embattled. As the analysis in Chapters 4 and 5 shows, these tensions are more than structural; they are lived, negotiated, and occasionally resisted through everyday practice and organisational strategy. These value tensions are deeply embedded in the policy trajectories and governance shifts that have defined adult education in England.

1.2 The Redefinition of Adult Education's Purpose

These dynamics play out over time in the evolving purposes of adult education, shaped by shifting governance logics and policy formations. Before 1903, adult

education was already a prime tool for charitable and social societies, rooted in 19th and early-20th-century social reform movements that aimed to improve the lot of the working class, believing everyone had the right to personal growth, civil engagement, and as a tool for social cohesion (Fieldhouse, 1996). Thus, adult education has always served purposes far beyond economic outcomes.

Early adult education, which offered a curriculum for personal and collective advancement, counteracted the dehumanising effects of urban and industrial labour conditions, and it did so largely without government involvement. Tuckett (2017) argues that adult education emerged from local initiatives that adapted to local demand, punctuated only by the occasional ‘spasm’ of state intervention. This decentralised origin, as Rogers (2003) contends, produced a highly diverse and responsive environment, enabling adult education to serve a range of social functions across different historical contexts. A belief in the transformative potential of education, extending beyond instrumental outcomes, underpinned these initiatives. As Tawney (1922, p15) powerfully argued at the time:

‘Education is not merely a means of earning a living; it is the indispensable condition for realising the full potential of individuals and communities alike.’

The 1919 Final Report and later the 1944 Butler Education Act embedded this flexible and holistic vision. They solidified a framework that recognised the importance of education to society as well as to the individual. For the rest of the 70 years since its early formation as a sector, this ethos has led adult education to continue offering a wide range of learning opportunities, from vocational training to community-based education, thereby contributing to social cohesion by considering the diverse needs of learners and communities. The classes were run in community buildings, schools, village halls, and technical colleges. They supported a broad array of educational activities, from basic literacy to higher-level studies, reflecting a recognition that comprehensive education benefited society as a whole (Marriott, 2000).

Nevertheless, neoliberalism rose to prominence in the late 20th century, emphasising market efficiency, competition, and individual responsibility. This shift in emphasis has influenced the focus of adult education towards economic utility and employability, as reflected in policy and rhetoric (Ball, 2008). Reforms instituted during the 1980s and 1990s, notably under successive Conservative Governments, epitomised this movement, promoting market-based solutions and purportedly reducing the state's role in public services, including education.

The Further Education and Skills datasets (Department for Education, 2024) indicate a general decrease in funding for non-vocational programs, favouring job-oriented skills training, in a year-on-year trend over the past two decades. The lack of alignment with current funding priorities has resulted in a substantial reduction in the size of liberal and community education programs.

Decentralisation of governance through entities such as the Education and Skills Funding Agency and Mayoral Combined Authorities paradoxically centralises control over the sector via rigid, nationally controlled funding metrics and performance targets (Lynch, 2014). This restructuring in central and regional governments is driven by New Public Management principles, which have led to increased administrative burdens and limited innovation or personalisation in the classroom, with practitioners fearful of poor performance grades if they stray from the approved script.

Participants in this research reported that their ability to exercise professional judgement in the best interests of learners was increasingly constrained. They described how bureaucratic demands, particularly those related to data gathering and evidencing learner progress, had reshaped the nature of their teaching practice and weakened relational pedagogies. These developments reflect a wider policy trend in which curriculum design has narrowed to prioritise economically measurable outcomes, often at the expense of programmes that serve socially marginalised learners. As several participants observed, non-vocational provision, essential for building confidence, foundational skills, and

community connection, has been systematically deprioritised or eliminated, especially over the past five years. This pattern aligns with long-standing critiques of neoliberal education policy, which highlight how cost-efficiency logics displace inclusive and emancipatory aims. As Schuller (2017) and Tuckett (2017) argue, the defunding of provision for non-traditional learners reflects a profound shift in the ethos of adult education, from a transformative civic mission for all to a narrow, instrumental view of adults as tools within an economic system, driven by economic performance indicators.

This prioritisation of economic benefit ignores the wider motivations for adult learners in the first place. While only 30% of students reported that their reason for beginning adult education was for a job, 50% of students stated that their objective was personal development in the 2022 survey (Learning and Work Institute, 2022). The survey reports that, beyond those seeking to gain qualifications, the majority of adults pursue personal growth, social interaction, and improved mental and physical well-being as their primary goals. However, the market-oriented system that prioritises a credentialism rationale simply marginalises these non-vocational aspirations. This reinforces social inequality by limiting state-funded opportunities for wider enrichment and learning.

Meanwhile, individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly those with experience of further or higher education, are more than twice as likely to re-engage in adult learning and feel more able to self-fund their learning. In contrast, those who left school early are less qualified and significantly less likely to return to education. This entrenches patterns of inequality, reinforcing a system where prior advantage reproduces future opportunity while earlier educational exclusion curtails later participation (Learning and Work Institute, 2022).

The entrenched prioritisation of skills reflects a deeper ideological path dependency through which successive neoliberal reforms have systematically embedded economic values within adult education governance (Butler, 2000).

This recursive logic reinforces a narrow utilitarian conception of learning, reducing educational worth to metrics of employability and productivity while sidelining its social, civic, and relational dimensions. As Rizvi and Lingard (2010) argue, such policy formations operate through a ‘discursive foreclosure’ that renders alternative imaginaries, such as education for democratic engagement or personal enrichment and self-actualisation, effectively unspeakable within official discourse.

The consequences are not confined to institutional form: when education is treated solely as a means to economic ends, its role in cultivating critical thought, civic responsibility, and ethical agency is progressively eroded. Disadvantaged adults lose key opportunities to develop the skills and confidence necessary to question dominant narratives, engage in reasoned debate, or participate meaningfully in public life—capacities that are essential not only to democratic institutions but also to everyday civic engagement. This diminishes society’s capacity to sustain pluralism, solidarity, and democratic deliberation, capacities that adult education, in its civic tradition, has long sought to nurture.

These broader educational purposes are grounded in civil values, understood here as contested ethical commitments shaped and reshaped through governance, practice, and struggle. The marginalisation of such values is not total: they persist in the practices and pedagogical judgements of practitioners who, as Chapter 5 explores, continue to ‘practise from the edge’, navigating institutional constraints while sustaining civic and relational intentions.

As Apple (2006) warns, the risk is inertia: a professional culture in which the emancipatory aspirations of adult education are preserved only at the margins. The gap between policy focus and learner need thus opens a strategic challenge as well as an ethical breach, one that implicates the sector’s identity, its professional legitimacy, and its democratic contribution.

1.3 Impact on Practitioners and Learners

The structural redefinition of purpose outlined above is not abstract—it is felt daily by practitioners and learners. The combined pressures of ‘marketisation, managerialism, and measurement’ (Ball, 2003) have reshaped teaching practices, professional identities, and educational relationships. Many organisations are under increasing pressure to deliver economically quantifiable outcomes to justify funding and have curtailed not only provision in the arts, humanities, and community education, but also strictly prescribed syllabi and time allowances in qualification provision. These shifts reflect the active privileging of commercial value and financial efficiency over educational breadth, with significant consequences for both practitioners and learners.

Practitioners in this study described a frustrating erosion of their professional purpose. Many, like myself, entered the sector driven by a commitment to social justice, empowerment, or transformative pedagogy, only to find themselves delivering standardised content under restrictive accountability regimes. The expectation to evidence performance through rigid data metrics has hollowed out the relational and dialogic aspects of teaching, replacing them with a bureaucratised model that treats education as a delivery process rather than a developmental one. As Ball *et al.* (2011) observe, these conditions compromise educators' ethical orientations, leading to demoralisation and the narrowing of educational ambition.

Professional agency, in this context, refers to the autonomy and capacity to act ethically and responsively within (and sometimes against) institutional constraints. Gleeson and Shain (1999) highlight that such agency is negotiated through the micropolitics of daily practice, shaped by policy logic but not reducible to it. This thesis extends their argument by exploring how practitioners engage in situated ethical work, navigating tensions between managerial expectations and learner needs, and reasserting civic and inclusive values even in marginal spaces.

The shift towards performance-based governance has fostered a reductive conception of learning, where success is measured primarily through qualifications, progression rates, and employment outcomes. This instrumental framing not only restricts pedagogical scope; it alters the nature of educational relationships. As Cilliers (1998) argues, when complex systems such as education are subjected to excessive constraint, their adaptive capacity diminishes. Practitioners become enforcers of compliance rather than enablers of growth, limiting the sector's potential to function as a catalyst for personal transformation and social cohesion.

The consequences are also felt acutely by learners. A system designed around standardisation, attendance monitoring, and testable outcomes marginalises other forms of value, such as enjoyment of learning, curiosity, confidence-building, and the formation of social ties. As the Learning and Work Institute Survey (LWI, 2017) found, these wider motivations are central to adult participation, especially among those returning to education after negative or interrupted prior experiences. When learning is framed as a transactional process aimed solely at employment, it risks alienating those who seek reconnection, healing, or enrichment. This is especially damaging for adults who already feel excluded from formal education or who carry long-standing scepticism about its relevance to their lives.

High-quality, community-based provision, particularly that which operates outside rigid qualification structures, offers a counterpoint. Such provision supports social connection, mental well-being, lifelong civic engagement, and cognitive gain (Local Government Association, LGA, 2020). Yet, as Apple (2006) and Hall and McGinity (2015) argue, the economisation of education displaces these broader aims, subordinating democratic and relational values. This erosion of civic purpose is not incidental; it is a structural feature of a system that increasingly aligns education with employability, displacing the possibility of adult education as a vehicle for the public good.

The result is a deepening disjuncture between what the system offers and what learners seek. As Tuckett (2017) and Schuller (2017) warn, this mismatch threatens to exacerbate societal divisions at a time of rising inequality and democratic fragility. The alienation of learners, the deskilling of educators, and the constriction of the curriculum all point to a system in which the emancipatory promise of adult education has been compromised. However, this thesis argues that, despite these pressures, traces of civic purpose endure in practitioner improvisation, learner resilience, and organisational strategies that resist full compliance. It is these sites of residual hope and adaptive practice that Chapters 4 and 5 take up in depth.

1.4 Aims and Research Questions

The thesis aims to understand how policy reforms have reshaped the purpose, values, and organisational structures of adult education, exploring the broader implications for educational practice, policy, and practitioner identity, and integrating historical, structural, and agency-level analysis.

The primary aim is to critically examine the transformation of adult education in England under neoliberal reform, tracing its impact on the sector's civic purpose and professional practice. This aim is articulated through three specific research objectives:

- To analyse the systemic transformation of adult education in England since the late twentieth century, using a Complexity-informed framework to interpret policy shifts, governance logics, and value reorientations.
- To investigate the historical and socio-political conditions that have shaped adult education policy and to assess their influence on contemporary challenges, including the tension between economic imperatives and civic commitments.

- To examine the effects of neoliberal reform on the professional identities, agency, and pedagogical practices of adult education practitioners and to explore how these effects are negotiated in practice.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: How have historical and contemporary socio-political factors and ideologies shaped the policies and purposes of adult education in England, and what tensions emerge from these influences?

- **Rationale:** This question examines the long-term evolution of adult education governance, tracing how shifting political imaginaries have reframed civic aims—such as social justice and democratic participation—and introduced tensions between past and present values.
- **Chapters & Methods:** Addressed in Chapter 4 through historical analysis and policy archaeology using the Grounded Complexity Framework (GCF) and Cross-Theory Dialogue. Key sources include the 1919 Final Report, 1973 Russell Report, and 1992 FEHE policy discourse.

Research Question 2: How has the emergence of New Public Management ideologies transformed the structures, practices, and values within the adult education sector in England?

- **Rationale:** This question examines how NPM logics—marketisation, performativity, and measurement—have reshaped governance and institutional priorities, displacing broader educational purposes with economically driven metrics.
- **Chapters & Methods:** Explored in Chapter 4 via policy discourse analysis and GCF-informed synthesis of institutional reform trajectories.

Research Question 3: How have neoliberal reforms affected the professional identities and agency of adult education practitioners in England, and what changes have occurred in practices as a result?

- **Rationale:** This question investigates the lived experience of policy reform, focusing on how practitioners navigate the constraints of performativity and reassert civic or relational commitments through situated agency.
- **Chapters & Methods:** Developed in Chapter 5 through thematic and discourse analysis of qualitative data (interviews/focus groups), framed by Cross-Theory Dialogue and the GCF.

1.5 The Grounded Complexity Framework

The GCF developed for this thesis integrates Complexity Theory, Pragmatism, and Gramscian analysis into a synthesised framework to investigate the dynamic, non-linear forces shaping adult education in England. Recognising that educational systems are historically situated, socially contested, and adaptively emergent, the GCF provides a flexible and theoretically grounded structure for examining how neoliberal reforms have reconfigured the sector.

This framework employs multiple analytical approaches, including policy context analysis, thematic analysis, discourse analysis, and a bespoke Cross-Theory Dialogue (CTD) method. Together, these tools allow the research to explore macro-level policy changes in the natural domain, meso-level sector practices in the social domain, and micro-level practitioner experiences in the subjective domain within a historically and ideologically entangled context.

A full justification and elaboration of the GCF's conceptual foundations, operational structure, and analytical procedures are provided in Chapters 2 and 3.

1.6 Scope, Limitations, and Research Boundaries

This research examines the evolution of formal adult education in England over the past 120 years, with a particular emphasis on its transformation under the influence of neoliberal policies. In this context, *formal* adult education refers to structured, institutionally delivered provision that is publicly funded, curriculum-led, and subject to external regulation and quality assurance. This includes further education colleges, local authority adult and community learning (ACL) services, and accredited charities and third-sector providers.

The study deliberately excludes *non-formal* and *informal* education. Following established distinctions (Coombs and Ahmed, 1974; OECD, 2010), non-formal education refers to learning that occurs outside the formal system (e.g., community or voluntary society-organised courses operating independently of government funding and control), while informal education denotes spontaneous, experiential, or incidental learning embedded in daily life. In-house workplace training, continuing professional development (CPD), and corporate learning programmes are also excluded, as they operate under private governance arrangements and largely fall outside the scope of public educational accountability.

This delimitation reflects the thesis's analytical focus on publicly accountable governance structures and systemic transformation within England's adult education policy landscape.

The study is intentionally bounded to a national context, facilitating a detailed examination of English policy developments while recognising that global dynamics, such as the international spread of neoliberalism, influence local educational environments. These boundaries enable the GCF to be applied systematically across a coherent and manageable scope.

Given the qualitative and interpretive nature of the GCF, the research prioritises the generation of in-depth, context-sensitive insights rather than generalisable

findings. The limitations and reflexive considerations inherent in these methodological choices are further elaborated in Chapter 3.

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

Holistic Literature Engagement

This thesis does not include a separate literature review chapter. Instead, it adopts an integrated approach, embedding relevant academic literature within each chapter in accordance with the epistemological commitments of Bricolage and the GCF. Rather than isolating literature from its context, the thesis positions conceptual and empirical scholarship alongside historical analysis and theoretical dialogue at the point of relevance, enabling nuanced engagement with educational theory, policy studies, adult education history, and practitioner research within their respective contexts. This decision reflects both the interdisciplinary nature of the GCF and its commitment to recursive, contextual analysis rather than linear exposition. The following summary outlines how literature and academic argument are distributed across the thesis:

Chapter 1 – From Learner to Market-Driven

Introduces the central research problem and outlines the thesis's aims, questions, and conceptual ground. Engages with literature on neoliberalism (Ball, Olssen & Peters), civil and civic values (Fraser, Biesta, Crick), and practitioner identity (Gleeson & Shain). Frames the problem through personal positionality, drawing on critical pedagogy (Freire, Brookfield) and the early conceptual foundations of the GCF.

Chapter 2 – Conceptual Approach and Foundations of the GCF

Develops the theoretical architecture of the GCF by synthesising insights from Complexity Theory (Cilliers, Barad, Byrne), Gramscian analysis (Gramsci, Morton), and Pragmatism (Biesta, Dewey). Introduces core concepts, including emergence, hegemony, historic bloc, ethical agency, and Cross-Theory Dialogue (CTD), as methodological scaffolding for complex interpretation.

Chapter 3 – Research Methodology: The Bricolage

Explains the methodological choices underpinning the thesis, drawing on literature related to qualitative inquiry, bricolage (Kincheloe, Berry), and practitioner-based research. Outlines the use of interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, and details how the GCF informs both design and interpretation. Also addresses reflexivity, ethics, and validity within interpretive paradigms.

Chapter 4 – Governance Trajectory of Adult Education (1903–2017)

Uses historical and policy analysis to trace shifts in the governance of adult education. Engages with policy texts (the 1919 Report, the 1973 Russell Report, and policy arguments from the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act) and literature on neoliberal restructuring, New Public Management (Clarke and Wright), and governance imaginaries. Highlights ideological transitions from civic purpose to economic utility using CTDs to interpret historical Complexity.

Chapter 5 – Practitioner Perspectives and Situated Agency

Analyses qualitative data from practitioners to explore how agency and identity are negotiated under constraint. Applies concepts of ethical agency, micropolitics (Gleeson & Shain), subjectification (Biesta), and counter-hegemonic practice (Gramsci, Morton). Engages with literature on audit culture, performativity, and professional resistance, with the practitioner's voice as the analytic centre.

Chapter 6 – From Jewel to Commodity? Redefining a Sector

This chapter synthesises the thesis's empirical and theoretical insights using the GCF. It includes two Cross-Theory Dialogues: the first interprets practitioner findings through the lens of hegemony, emergence, and agency; the second reflects at a meta-theoretical level on the tensions and synergies within the GCF itself. The chapter concludes with contributions and recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Approach

2.0 Introduction

This chapter introduces the Grounded Complexity Framework (GCF), which reflexively integrates Complexity Theory, Pragmatism, and Gramscian analysis to examine the dynamics of adult education governance. The framework enables historically situated, multi-level analysis of how policy, institutional structures, and practitioner agency interact within complex systems.

Inspired by Barad's (2007) notion of *entanglement*, the Grounded Complexity Framework recognises the co-constitution of conceptual, structural, and agentive factors, which do not pre-exist their relations but emerge through their intra-actions. It draws on Law's (2004) call for social science to treat Complexity as a constitutive condition, echoing the idea that meaning and structure emerge through entangled relations. In this spirit, the GCF itself typifies emergence, defined by Goldstein (1999, p.49) as 'the arising of novel and coherent structures, patterns, and properties during the process of self-organisation in complex systems'- and develops as a commitment to articulating the relational and historically contextual explanation emerging from within this research.

The compatibility of Complexity Theory, Pragmatism, and Gramscian analysis lies in their shared attention to transformation, contingency, and relationality — but each brings a distinct lens to these concerns. Complexity provides an ontology of emergence and system dynamics; Pragmatism foregrounds action, judgment, and situated ethics; and Gramsci offers a powerful framework for analysing ideology, hegemony, and power. The GCF operates not as a static model but as a generative methodological bricolage—emerging through practice to make sense of Complexity, power, and educational agency. At its core is the

reflexive and selective incorporation of specific concepts from these three theoretical traditions.

This synthesis constitutes the thesis's original contribution to knowledge: the Grounded Complexity Framework (GCF) offers a theoretically coherent, empirically responsive model for research to explore the entangled structural, institutional, and subjective forces within academic argument.

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

Initially, this research drew on Complexity Theory to illuminate the unintended consequences of performance-management cultures, such as the “gaming” of qualification metrics. However, Complexity alone did not account for the value judgments that practitioners make on a daily basis. Pragmatism added an emphasis on contingent knowledge and praxis. As the study progressed, Gramsci's theories of hegemony and war of position were integrated to explain how educational systems align social values with economic imperatives. Taken together, these perspectives connect practitioner experience with policy-level forces, producing a holistic framework.

This integration across the three theories is unique at the time of writing; on its own, Complexity Theory has gained recognition as a valid research ontology across various disciplines, including management studies (Ansell & Geyer, 2017; Cairney & Geyer, 2017; Doll, 2008; Sanderson, 2009). However, its application within adult education remains relatively niche and still emergent. While scholars such as Davis and Sumara (2012), Osberg and Biesta (2010), and Bates (2012) have begun exploring its potential, yet comprehensive frameworks are still relatively rare. A few academic sources, such as Mowles (2017), have advanced the integration of Pragmatism and Complexity, for instance, in his three-pillar argument. Other theorists, such as Cilliers (2000) and Morin (2007), also emphasise the shared epistemological focus on contingency, context, and relationality. Biesta (2009, 2010) likewise approaches this intersection, showing

how Deweyan Pragmatism and Complexity Theory both challenge representational epistemologies by foregrounding emergence, situated inquiry and democratic agency in educational settings.

Meanwhile, Gramscian analysis in education, though still less common than Foucauldian readings (e.g., Ball 2003) or Bourdieu-informed studies (e.g., Reay 2017), has nevertheless been advanced by Bates (1975), Mayo (2014), Stevenson (2024), Giroux (2014), Thomas (2009) and others. Gramsci's concepts of hegemony, historic bloc, organic intellectuals, and passive revolution illuminate how dominant ideologies are reproduced and contested through educational policy and institutional practice—a terrain that Complexity Theory and Pragmatism do not explicitly theorise.

To date, no unified analytical framework has combined Complexity Theory, Pragmatism, and Gramscian analysis; the GCF addresses this gap. Mindful of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) warning about 'paradigm wars,' this thesis adopts conceptual pluralism only where ontological and epistemological coherence can be demonstrated. For example, although rooted in a different tradition, Ball's Foucauldian micro-analysis of performativity complements Gramsci's macro-focus on hegemony, since both explain how power secures consent through everyday discipline (Ball 2003). Ball's account, therefore, is coherent with the GCF and is coherent with the emergent, historically contingent dynamics mapped by Complexity Theory and Gramscian analysis.

Illustrative convergence: the Ruth Perry case

The tragic death of headteacher Ruth Perry in 2023 (Guardian, 2023) demonstrates how the integrated GCF lens extends beyond description to explanation.

Complexity Theory traces the event's cascade: staff anxiety, parent mobilisation, press coverage, union pressure, and DfE briefings indicate a dense, adaptive network that quickly re-stabilised around the inspection regime. *Pragmatism* exposes the lived contradiction: leaders must protect pupils yet perform for

auditors; inspectors claim improvement yet trigger shame. These conflicting values underscore why the reforms, such as longer notice periods and revised criteria, were deemed inadequate by many stakeholders in the field. *Gramscian analysis* reframes those ‘fixes’ as passive revolution: small concessions that deflect outrage while leaving the performative accountability logic intact—no shift in datafication, grading, or funding leverage.

Read together, the three strands yield a concrete finding: Ofsted’s post-Perry adjustments represent system self-correction, not transformation. The surface changes smoothed out turbulence, but the underlying historic bloc of marketised accountability, legitimated as common sense, remained firmly in place. That conclusion, unavailable to any single lens, demonstrates the explanatory power of the Grounded Complexity Framework.

2.1.1 Integrating Perspectives: a coherent research framework

- **Ontology.** The study rejects linear, reductionist models, embracing a non-linear view in which knowledge is emergent and situated in the “grey zone” between structure and agency, order and unpredictability (Richardson, Cilliers & Lissack, 2001).
- **Epistemology.** Knowledge is treated as socially constructed and historically contingent, directly challenging New Public Management’s reliance on narrow performance metrics that overlook learner satisfaction and community cohesion.
- **Methodology.** A Bricolage approach assembles concepts and tools *in situ*, maintaining paradigmatic coherence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) while remaining faithful to Complexity.

Individually, each tradition offers a powerful but partial lens. Complexity highlights systemic non-linearity yet lacks an ethical critique; Pragmatism theorises situated agency yet requires an account of ideological power; Gramsci

illuminates hegemony but benefits from a Complexity lens. Entangling all three, the GCF provides an apparatus for examining governance as historically situated, ideologically saturated, ethically contested and dynamically emergent. Governance is approached not as a fixed structure, but as an adaptive process shaped by feedback, emergence, and recursive interaction among institutions, discourses, and agents.

The remainder of this chapter examines the rationale for including each theory in the GCF in greater depth, thereby providing a unified justification for the GCF as a research approach.

2.2 The Development of Complexity as a Research Theory

This section explores the variations within the Complexity Theory family and highlights why it has sometimes been subject to critique as a research approach, particularly outside of the sciences.

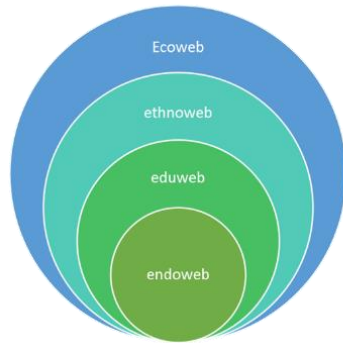
Rather than a unified theory, Complexity is a broad collection of ideas that has diversified across disciplines over the past 50 years. As it has expanded, it has undergone conceptual changes, adapting to fields like management, sociology, policy studies, healthcare, and education. This diversity has increased its sophistication but also its fragmentation.

A common criticism stems from the misconception that all forms of Complexity Theory follow a 'restricted Complexity' path, grounded in a mechanistic worldview that prioritises modelling and prediction (Richardson, Cilliers, & Lissack, 2001). This original application focuses on fixed variables and deterministic outcomes. However, since the 1980s, a more open and irreducible interpretation of Complexity has emerged, applied to dynamic, non-linear systems within the social sciences. This shift is often described as a move from *restricted Complexity*, focused on prediction and control, to *general or open Complexity*, which embraces contingency, emergence, and the relational construction of knowledge (Cilliers, 2000; Morin, 2007).

The evolution toward 'Complexity 3.0' (Davis & Sumara, 2012) reflects a growing interest in non-Cartesian Complexity, which emphasises the contingency of knowledge. This perspective focuses on the unpredictable, emergent behaviours arising from interactions between diverse elements in a system, such as the environment, policies, and stakeholders, including practitioners and learners.

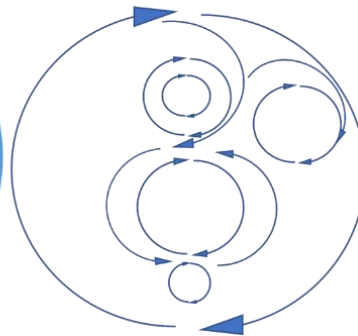
Complexity 1.0

Describing complex phenomena
Recognition of non-reducible (emergent)
The visual metaphor was one of nested systems
Early thinking to 1980 nested systems



Complexity 2.0

Analysis of complex phenomena
Recursivity and Living systems
1980-2000 entangled dynamics



Complexity 3.0

Attempts to trigger emergence phenomena
Complexity study becomes more 'pragmatic' (not Pragmatic) how to study and work in/ with complexity,



Adapted from Davis and Sumara 2012
Complicity V9 (2012) p30-40

Figure 1 Evolution of Complexity Theories from Davis and Sumara (2012)

The type of Complexity Theory applied fundamentally shapes its applicability as an approach. For instance, a systems theory perspective might attempt to predict outcomes in a policy aimed at improving adult literacy rates by controlling variables and potentially through data modelling. In contrast, a non-Cartesian Complexity approach would highlight the emergent and unpredictable outcomes arising from the interactions of multiple actors and conditions, acknowledging that education systems cannot be reduced to fixed outcomes.

Castellini has maintained an especially useful online diagram illustrating the evolution of Complexity theories for the past 10 years (Castellini, 2009). It

demonstrates both the evolution of the approaches to Complexity and the linkages between them, and can be accessed here:

https://www.art-sciencefactory.com/complexity-map_feb09.html

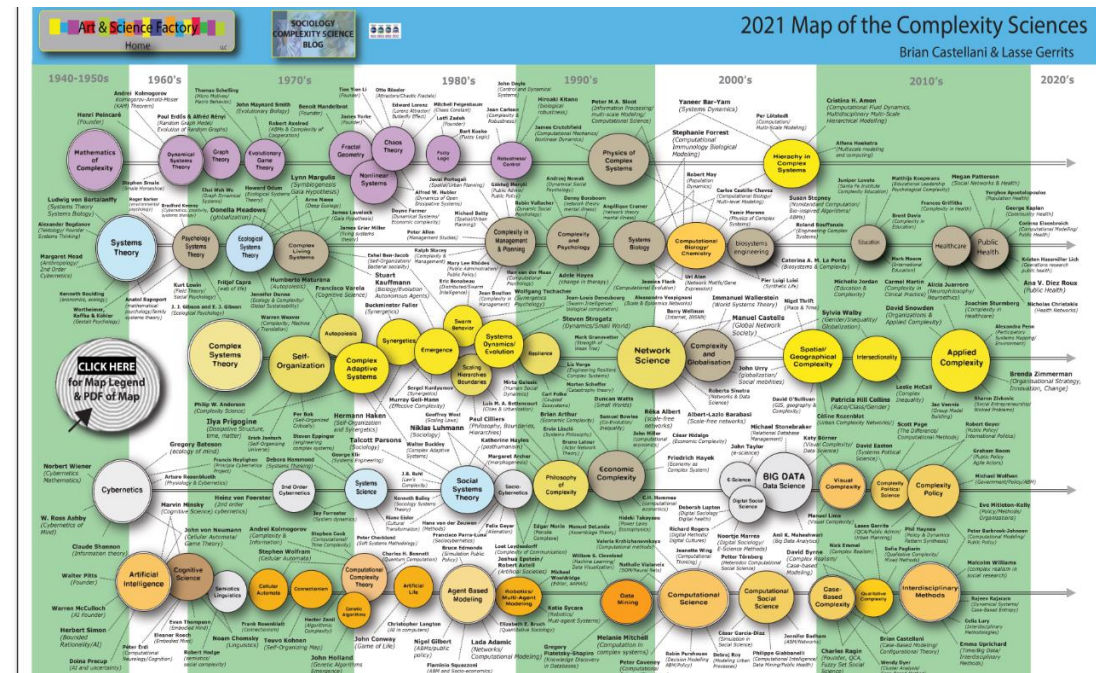


Figure 2: Thumbnail of HTML Map of Complexity by (Castellini, 2009)

Due to its size and interactive design, it is best accessed online for optimal viewing.

Another academic, focused on Complexity Theory, Alhadeff-Jones (2008), offers a nuanced historical account of the development of Complexity sciences, while Heylighen, Cilliers, and Gershenson (2006) provide a critical assessment of the theory's philosophical underpinnings. These discussions are essential in justifying the alignment of Complexity Theory with Pragmatism in this thesis.

The proliferation of Complexity families across disciplines suggests that the field has not yet converged into clearly defined traditions. Instead, Complexity Theory remains a pluralistic and evolving framework, applied in diverse ways depending on the context and objectives of the research. This pluralism reflects broader

trends in the epistemology of contemporary research. Gibbons *et al.* (1994) describe the shift toward what they term 'Mode 2 knowledge production,' characterised by trans-disciplinarity, reflexivity, and contextual responsiveness. Their analysis supports the GCF's integration of multiple knowledge systems and its commitment to applying theory within the lived, uncertain conditions of educational governance.

2.3 Critiques of Complexity

Complexity Theory as a research stance has attracted three primary strands of critique. First, internal debates within Complexity communities challenge the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin its use in research. Second, external critics, often unfamiliar with the diversity of Complexity traditions, tend to conflate it with mechanistic or overly technical interpretations. Third, both internal and external perspectives highlight that inconsistent or contradictory application of Complexity concepts can result in conceptual incoherence. Each of these critiques is explored in the sections that follow.

The first critique of Complexity comes from within, with Complexity Communities challenging ontological and epistemological assumptions between different families of Complexity and how they have applied Complexity concepts in research. Cilliers aptly describes Complexity as a 'house divided' (2010, p. 40). These divisions reflect fundamentally different beliefs about the nature of Complexity. Richardson, Cilliers, and Lissack (2001) describe Complexity as a 'grey science for the stuff in between' (p. 7), highlighting its resistance to sharp distinctions and its insistence on conceptual ambiguity, partiality, and relational indeterminacy.

This perspective supports the GCF's adoption of a Complexity-informed ontology that neither abandons coherence nor enforces artificial closure. Advocates of 'organised' or 'closed Complexity' argue that complex phenomena can be understood through precise tools, such as mathematical equations and

computational models drawn from physics, representing a restricted view of Complexity. In contrast, proponents of an open Complexity approach reject reductionist, mechanistic science, instead favouring metaphorical, nuanced approaches typical of the social sciences (Boulton *et al.* 2015; Mittleton-Kelly, 2003). For example, research on a new pedagogical approach, perhaps utilising new technology, can be examined through restricted systems theory, which may predict outcomes based on computer models and predefined variables. Conversely, an open Complexity approach would explore how the interactions between practitioners, learners, and technology result in unexpected reorientations in teaching practices and learning outcomes. The difference lies in predicting versus illuminating Complexity.

Alhadeff-Jones (2008) categorises these differences along a spectrum of 'levels of closure attributed to the definition of Complexity.' On the one hand, Complexity is tied to identifiable components and is reduced to hyper-complication; on the other hand, it remains open-ended. He also highlights the nature of representation, ranging from technical correspondence to more abstract metaphors. In Figure 3 (on the next page), I have represented these distinctions in a two-dimensional model with 'reductive-non-reductive' on one axis and 'technical metaphor' on the other.

This thesis primarily operates within the open technical domain, although at times, it is necessary to address some areas from a more metaphoric stance. Morrison (2006) argues that these approaches bring rigour to Complexity analysis, enabling researchers to identify micro-level mechanisms and predict emergent behaviours. This can reveal nuanced insights that might otherwise be overlooked. The use of Complexity as a metaphor, as Cilliers (2001) notes, serves as a powerful tool for exploring the dynamic relationships and emergent properties that characterise complex phenomena, particularly when trying to form an understanding of complex phenomena. By fostering intuitive understanding, metaphoric approaches can illuminate aspects of systems that are difficult to quantify.

Criticism of Complexity Traditions

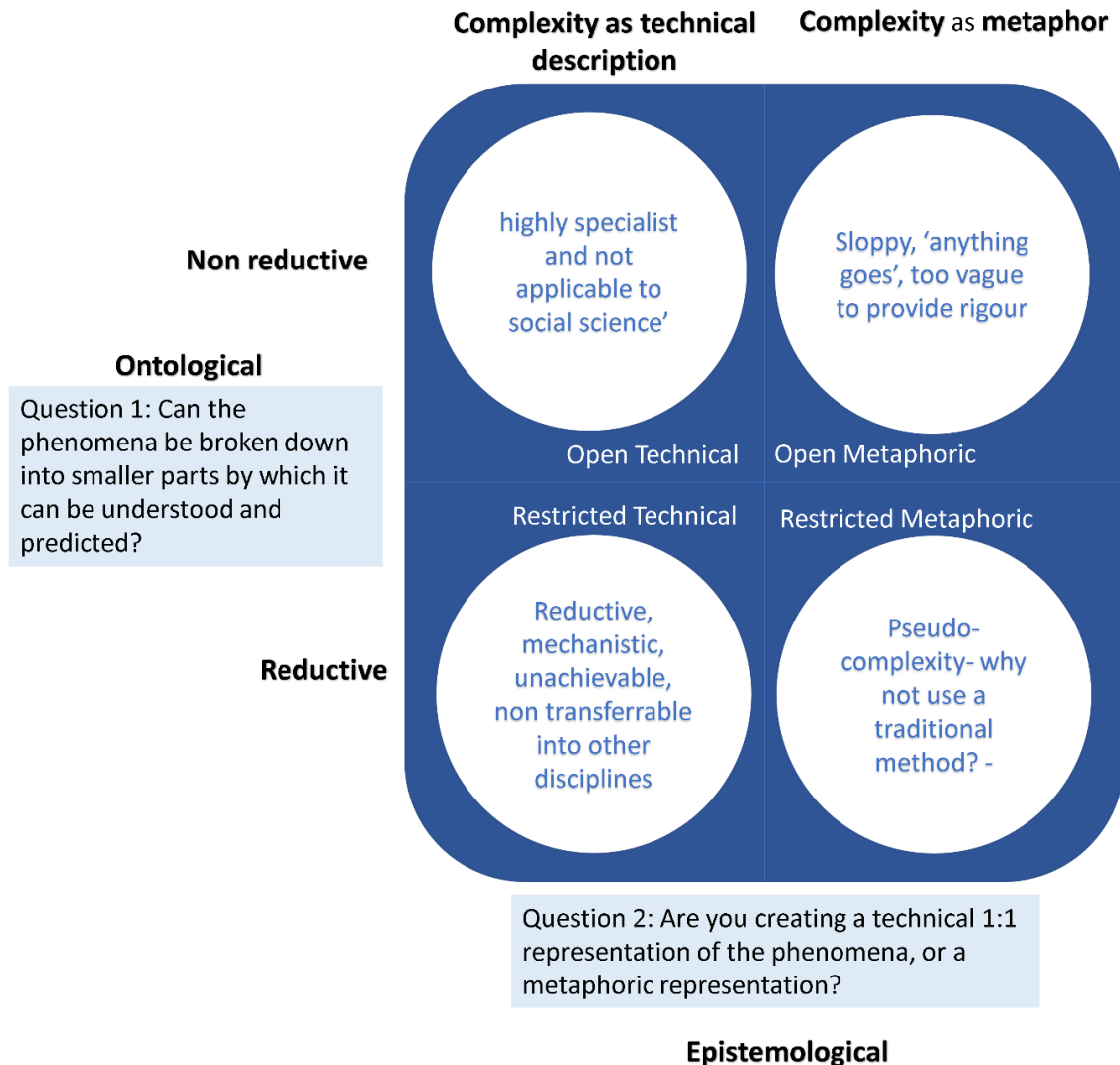


Figure 3: Synthesised Model of Criticisms of Complexity

By combining the precision and rigour of technical models with the holistic, interpretative potential of metaphoric approaches, the thesis achieves a balanced methodology. The GCF developed here responds to these critiques by selectively integrating the strengths of both technical and metaphorical approaches while remaining critically alert to their limitations.

2.3.1 Critiquing Complexity Terminology

The second argument is that the range of Complexity families has led to varied definitions of salient terms across disciplines, resulting in criticism, particularly from those unfamiliar with the scope of Complexity. Critics often cite inconsistent application of concepts, resulting in methodological confusion or accusations of mysticism (Castellani, 2009). While diversity in Complexity studies fosters varied applications, it also risks diluting foundational principles (Hodgson, 2001).

For instance, consider the concept of **emergence** and its differing usages:

- **Predictability vs. Novelty:** Systems theory often focuses on predictable patterns, while philosophy highlights novel, irreducible properties.
- **Deterministic vs. Constructed Views:** Computational models view emergence from a constructivist angle, while the social sciences focus on human agency and interaction.
- **Interdisciplinary Focus:** Emergence is framed differently in biological, social, or computational contexts.

These different interpretations demonstrate how the understanding of concepts like emergence is modified based on the specific discipline's framework.

Precision and transparency are thus critical to maintaining research integrity and avoiding reductionism. Later sections clarify the specific terminology used in this thesis to ensure coherence and consistency, preserving both theoretical and methodological integrity.

2.3.2 Critiquing Complexity Ontological Assumptions

The third critique, like the first and particularly from technical Complexity theorists, centres on the irreducibility of complex systems. These theorists argue that any attempt to model or describe a complex system inevitably results in

misleading or incomplete representations, as complex systems resist definitive boundaries and cannot be fully encapsulated. This critique highlights the difficulty of defining or bounding systems without falsely implying a fixed or rigid structure. Scholars like Mowles (2017) caution against terms like 'system' because of their potential to impose an artificial sense of boundary on phenomena that are inherently open, fluid, and interconnected.

This critique poses a challenge for social research, particularly when studying complex social phenomena such as adult education. However, this thesis argues that by accepting the contingency of knowledge, which means that any understanding of Complexity is necessarily partial, researchers can develop contingent models that are analytically useful, even if they do not fully encapsulate the system's Complexity. The goal is to provide pragmatic tools that enable the examination of complex dynamics without compromising their intricacy.

In this approach, concepts like system, domain, and level function as conceptual metaphors rather than rigid descriptors. These metaphors do not simplify Complexity but offer transitional tools (Mittleton-Kelly, 2003) that facilitate shared understanding and productive discourse. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue, metaphors are essential for meaning making and allow for the construction of contingent knowledge. By embracing the fluidity and historicity of complex systems, this research uses these metaphors to engage with the multi-layered nature of social systems without imposing artificial boundaries.

2.3.3 Critiquing Systems and Domains as Metaphors

The term 'system', often problematic in Complexity research due to its connotations of rigid boundaries, is treated metaphorically in this research. Systems are understood as collections of interrelated factors, possessing depth and historicity at the same time as not being confined by strict boundaries. They

are seen as nested and dynamic, allowing for interaction across multiple levels without implying closure or rigidity.

Similarly, the term 'domain' is used metaphorically to describe a focus or lens within the broader system rather than a boundary. A domain refers to a sphere of activity or knowledge that narrows the scope of analysis while remaining aware of the interconnectedness of the entire system. By employing Midgley's domains (2016), this thesis maintains a balance between structured analysis and the adaptive nature of complex systems, allowing for focused inquiry while preserving the broader context.

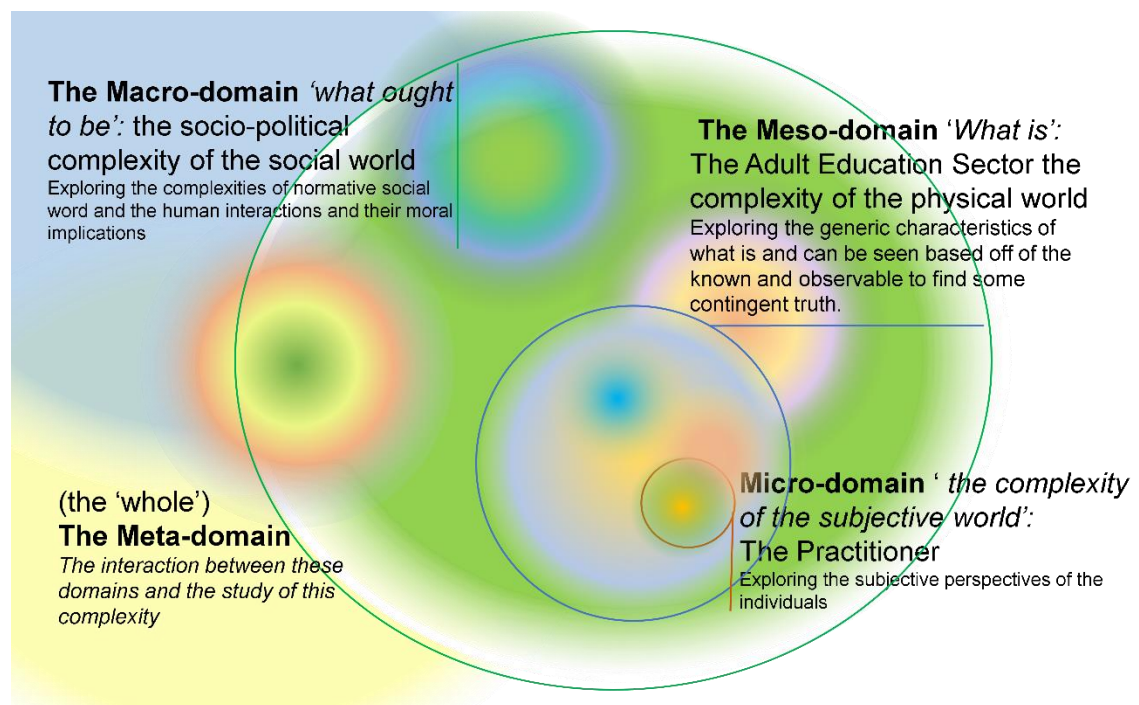


Figure 4: Domains of Complexity after Midgley (2016)

By applying Midgley's domains, this thesis offers a structured yet flexible approach to understanding adult education as part of multiple interdependent ecosystems. These ecosystems are shaped by socio-cultural, economic, and political contexts, interacting at various levels and in different domains of Complexity. The use of Midgley's domains ensures that the analysis can consider the interplay between different levels of emergence and feedback

loops, where decisions at the socio-political domain influence organisational practices, which in turn feed back into the broader societal context and practitioners and their micro-environments.

2.4 Ontological Commitments of the GCF

The foundational orientation of the Grounded Complexity Framework (GCF) is shaped by principles drawn from critical Complexity Theory, particularly its epistemological stance on partial knowledge, contingent outcomes, and interpretive responsibility. Rather than seeking determinate causal explanations for governance reform, the GCF adopts a relational and historically situated perspective, recognising that educational systems evolve through layered practices, ideological formations, and emergent actions that defy full prediction or control.

Cilliers (1998, 2010) argues that complex systems are fundamentally irreducible: no model can fully capture the dynamics it seeks to represent. Any attempt to intervene in such systems, whether scientific, policy-based, or educational, is necessarily partial and ethically situated (Human & Cilliers, 2013). This shift moves Complexity Theory away from instrumentalist aspirations and towards a more reflexive stance that foregrounds uncertainty, ethical consequence, and the limits of control. However, while such a stance enables interpretive humility, it does not provide a normative framework for interpretation. Even in its critical variants, Complexity Theory remains largely descriptive. For this reason, the GCF supplements it with Pragmatism and Gramscian analysis to engage explicitly with ethical judgement, agency, and ideological struggle, dimensions that Complexity Theory alone cannot adequately theorise.

This distinction is evident in contrasting applications. Mitleton-Kelly (2003) draws on Complexity to promote organisational innovation, but her emphasis on 'enabling infrastructures' risks reframing Complexity as a controllable asset

within managerial systems. Cilliers (1998), by contrast, affirms the unpredictability of systemic outcomes and insists on the ethical necessity of acknowledging uncertainty. This thesis aligns with that position, treating adult education governance not as a system to be designed, but as a historically situated field of contested meanings, emergent agency, and ideological sedimentation.

From this epistemological grounding, the GCF integrates several operational principles from Complexity Theory to inform its analytical approach. These include **holism**, **emergence**, **non-linearity**, and **historicity**:

- **Holism and Interconnectedness:** Cilliers (1998) argues that complex systems must be understood relationally, where meaning arises not from isolated units but from interdependence. In adult education, this implies that practitioner actions are intelligible only within the institutional, cultural, and policy environments in which they are embedded.
- **Emergence and Non-Linearity:** Boulton *et al.* (2015) emphasise that complex systems generate unpredictable outcomes through interactions among system elements. In educational contexts, small adaptations, such as shifts in practice or pedagogic judgement, can lead to disproportionate changes in learner outcomes or institutional direction.
- **Historicity and Path Dependence:** These authors also emphasise that complex systems are shaped by their historical trajectories. Present configurations are path-dependent: earlier conditions constrain or enable current possibilities. This insight is critical for understanding how educational reforms sediment, resist disruption, and condition the scope of practitioner agency.

These commitments serve not merely as background assumptions but as the architectural scaffolding of the GCF. They are explicitly addressed in the analytical chapters, particularly in the Meta-Level and Cross-Theory Dialogue

sections. There, they enable interpretation of governance as a historically layered system in which change emerges through constrained improvisation, recursive dynamics, and ideologically charged contestation.

2.4.1 Operational Complexity Concepts in the GCF

The following concepts translate the ontological foundations of the Grounded Complexity Framework (GCF) into practical tools for analysis and application. They recur across the thesis, where they support interpretations of governance dynamics, ideological trajectories, and practitioner agency. Their articulation here is deliberately concise but sufficient to frame their subsequent application.

2.4.1.1 Emergence: Epistemological Irreducibility and the Politics of Governance

Emergence refers to the production of novel, coherent patterns that arise through dynamic interaction, which are irreducible to the properties of their individual components. Cilliers (1998) positions emergence as central to Complexity Theory, emphasising the relational interactions from which irreducible system properties emerge. Goldstein (1999, p. 49) defines emergence as “the arising of novel and coherent structures, patterns, and properties” during processes of self-organisation. Prigogine and Stengers’ (1984) account of dissipative structures highlights how order may arise under far-from-equilibrium conditions, challenging linear models that assume entropy as the default outcome.

Collectively, these formulations underpin the GCF’s epistemological stance: emergence signals the limitations of prediction, the fallibility of policy intentions, and the interpretive modesty required in studying complex systems. It implies that educational governance cannot be fully planned, controlled, or evaluated through linear models or mechanistic assumptions. This view aligns the GCF with the more critical and reflexive variants of Complexity Theory, which foreground uncertainty and resist instrumentalist aspirations.

At the same time, the concept of emergence is subject to divergent interpretations. Boulton et al. (2015) stress its radical contingency, arguing that emergent phenomena often defy normative expectations. In contrast, Mitleton-Kelly (2003) outlines how organisational leaders can create enabling conditions for emergence, such as fostering diversity and interdependence. This instrumental reading has gained traction in education, where Complexity language is often invoked while pursuing narrowly defined policy goals. Initiatives such as lifelong learning often employ the rhetoric of adaptation and innovation; however, their modern usage in the 21st century remains closely tied to economic rationality and managerial priorities.

These distinctions matter because the GCF explicitly departs from managerial appropriations of emergence. Unlike policy narratives that instrumentalise the concept to engineer desired outcomes, the GCF treats emergence as a site of ethical uncertainty and ideological friction. Educational change is understood as an interactive process among values, structures, and practices—producing consequences that may support, distort, or contest normative objectives. Emergence, in this framing, is not a neutral descriptor of system behaviour, but a critical lens through which to examine how governance adapts, stabilises, or transforms through recursive pressures and ideological contestation. It highlights the indeterminacy of reform processes and the necessity of reflexive interpretation when evaluating the consequences of policy and practice.

2.4.1.2 Path Dependence: Constraint, Inertia, and Structural Saturation

Path dependence captures how earlier decisions and institutional architectures condition the trajectory of future developments. In complexity-informed accounts, Boulton *et al.* (2015) argue that change is canalised through historical pathways, such that present possibilities are structured by past configurations. Byrne and Callaghan (2014) link this dynamic to the political economy of social systems, suggesting that governance norms often become naturalised through repetition and reinforcement. Within educational governance, dominant frames such as

accountability, performativity, and employability often appear inevitable, even when alternative models are available in principle.

For the GCF, path dependence is a diagnostic tool that traces how adult education systems become saturated with inherited logics. It helps explain why normative shifts often fail to take hold despite policy claims to innovation. Importantly, the concept clarifies that agency does not disappear under path-dependent conditions; instead, it becomes bounded and historically situated. Practitioners navigating performance regimes or ideologically narrow mandates do so within sedimented systems. Recognising these constraints allows the thesis to examine how agency can be exercised in ways that are historically aware, contextually adaptive, and ethically attuned, even when structural conditions limit the scope of transformation.

2.4.1.3 Self-Organisation: Normative Ambiguity and Systemic Adaptation

Self-organisation describes a system's capacity to generate ordered behaviour through decentralised, recursive interactions. Cilliers (1998) outlines this as a central feature of complex systems, where coherence is not imposed from above but arises from local relational dynamics. Mitleton-Kelly (2003) argues that certain conditions, such as internal diversity, connectivity, and openness to feedback, can enhance a system's capacity for adaptive self-organisation. These insights have been influential in organisational theory and education reform, often supporting claims that distributed structures foster innovation.

However, critics caution that self-organisation is not inherently emancipatory. Morin (2008) emphasises its ambivalence, noting that systems may evolve toward openness and novelty, but may also consolidate dominant patterns or reproduce hierarchical structures. Byrne and Callaghan (2014) similarly argue that self-organisation can reinforce existing inequalities if the broader environment remains ideologically saturated.

Within the GCF, self-organisation is treated as a contingent dynamic whose outcomes are shaped by broader institutional and discursive forces. Practitioner-led adaptations, such as relational pedagogy, curriculum experimentation, or localised norm-challenging, may represent self-organising responses to systemic pressure. However, these responses are themselves shaped by performance imperatives, funding mechanisms, and professional norms. The concept is therefore used to analyse how adaptive behaviours both arise from and contribute to the reproduction or reconfiguration of governance systems. Self-organisation serves not as a proxy for resistance, but as a site through which constraint, agency, and ideological saturation intersect.

2.4.1.4 Distributed Agency and Relational Dynamics: Beyond the Sovereign Actor

A central contribution of Complexity Theory is its displacement of the individual as the primary locus of agency. Boulton *et al.* (2015) argue that agency arises through patterned interactions across time, space, and institutional form. Byrne and Callaghan (2014) show how structural arrangements and embedded histories mediate action. Morin (2008) frames agency as dialogic, emergent, and relational, produced through recursive feedback within the system.

The GCF builds on these insights to frame practitioner agency not as individual initiative but as a distributed process shaped by engagement with colleagues, policy frameworks, learners, and institutional cultures. Agency is enacted through interaction, not abstraction. Acts of curriculum negotiation, relational pedagogy, or selective compliance do not originate in isolated choice but emerge from embedded conditions of possibility.

This framework enables a reading of practitioner behaviour that foregrounds ethical navigation rather than autonomous resistance. Concepts such as bounded agency, ethical improvisation, and relational professionalism express this understanding. They describe not freedom from constraint, but reflexive

engagement with the tensions and contradictions of the system. Notably, the GCF also recognises that while Complexity Theory describes how agency operates, it does not fully account for the normative conditions under which certain forms of agency are legitimised or delegitimised. This gap is addressed through integration with Pragmatist ethics and Gramscian analysis in later sections of the framework.

2.4.1.5 Complexity Reduction: Political Simplification and the Production of Educational Order

In policy systems, Complexity is frequently treated not as a condition to be understood but as a problem to be managed. Biesta (2010) and Osberg and Biesta (2010) argue that governance processes engage in complexity reduction by translating uncertain, relational, and contested phenomena into measurable outcomes, discrete targets, and legible categories. These acts of reduction are selective and structured by value judgments. Cilliers (2010) emphasises that no representation of a complex system is neutral; all simplifications carry ethical and political consequences.

Within the GCF, complexity reduction is interpreted as a strategy for producing administrative control at the expense of relational and contextual values. In adult education, this is visible in mechanisms such as target-setting, linear progression frameworks, and standardised funding criteria. These tools frame what counts as success, often marginalising forms of learning that are dialogic, processual, or community-oriented. At the same time, they shape professional behaviour by rewarding compliance and penalising improvisation.

The GCF also uses this concept to interpret resistance as the reintroduction of complexity into spaces dominated by simplification. Pedagogical improvisation, informal peer support, or narrative assessment practices may be read as attempts to restore ethical and relational dimensions that standardised governance displaces. Complexity reduction is thus both a condition and a

contested terrain, where values, assumptions, and institutional norms are rendered visible and subject to critique.

2.4.1.6 Tipping Points and Non-Linear Change: Discontinuity and Strategic Opportunity

Tipping points mark critical thresholds in system behaviour, where small perturbations can trigger large, and often irreversible, shifts. Prigogine and Stenger (1984) introduced this idea in relation to thermodynamic processes, where instability near equilibrium can catalyse dramatic reordering. Complexity theorists such as Mitleton-Kelly (2003), Byrne and Callaghan (2014), and Boulton *et al.* (2015) have extended this insight to social systems, emphasising the potential for non-linear change.

Such moments are not inherently transformative in a normative sense. As Morin (2008) argues, tipping points may lead to progressive reorganisation or reactionary retrenchment. They signal instability, not direction. Within the GCF, tipping points are used to interpret how specific conjunctures, such as policy crises, institutional transitions, or ideological ruptures, can open spaces for relational agency to acquire new significance. These are moments where prior sedimentation becomes unsettled, allowing practitioners or communities to exert influence that might otherwise be constrained.

This does not imply that tipping points guarantee transformation. Rather, they highlight the relational and strategic nature of action within complex systems. Practitioners may find that subtle interventions, narrative shifts, relational reorganisations, or pedagogical changes have disproportionate effects when the system is near a point of instability. The GCF treats these episodes not as evidence of control, but as opportunities to interpret how situated ethical action may contribute to larger-scale reorientation. Tipping points operate in tension with attractor states, which exert gravitational pull back toward dominant norms;

together, they illuminate how systems oscillate between instability and re-stabilisation.

2.4.1.7. Attractor States: Systemic Stability and Ideological Pull

In Complexity Theory, attractor states are not fixed endpoints but zones of patterned behaviour that emerge through feedback loops, interdependence, and recursive interaction. Boulton, Allen, and Bowman (2015) describe attractors as ‘regions of possibility’ that exert a gravitational pull, guiding a system’s trajectory into recognisable and often self-reinforcing forms. In the social domain, these may take the form of dominant ideologies, institutional routines, or policy framings that persist despite surface-level change.

Edgar Morin (2008) introduces a compatible concept, ‘homeorhesis’, which describes the tendency of living systems to return not to equilibrium, but to a developmental trajectory. This captures how complex systems preserve their patterned movement even amid instability, allowing for adaptation without complete transformation. Homeorhesis adds to the GCF definition by clarifying that attractor states function not only as centres of pull but as directional channels that frame what kinds of change are legible or permissible. This supports the GCF’s concern with how ideological consolidation shapes the boundaries of institutional agency and professional possibility.

Within the GCF, attractor states are interpreted ideologically and discursively. Policy constructs such as ‘employability’, ‘resilience’, ‘value for money’, ‘lifelong learning’, ‘equality of opportunity’, and ‘social mobility’ function as attractors within adult education governance. These terms often carry normative or emancipatory associations, yet their recurring deployment within economised policy frameworks enables them to stabilise dominant assumptions about individual responsibility, productivity, and merit. Such attractors draw diverse reforms into alignment with prevailing ideologies, even when rhetorical shifts suggest contestation. They consolidate normative order without the need for directive control, enabling systemic stability through recursive reproduction.

Crucially, attractor states exist in dynamic tension with tipping points, moments of discontinuity where systems may be pushed beyond existing configurations. While tipping points signal potential rupture or transformation, attractor states explain why systems often return to familiar patterns. Together, these concepts support the GCF's analysis of ideological consolidation and constraint. In Section 4.10.5, the persistence of neoliberal vocabularies is interpreted through the attractor metaphor, clarifying how governance remains path-dependent even when crisis or critique generates instability.

2.5 Locating Ethics in Complexity: Toward a Pragmatist Integration

While Complexity Theory offers powerful tools for modelling dynamic behaviours, feedback loops, and emergent outcomes, it provides limited guidance for evaluating these outcomes in normative or political terms. Cilliers (1998) foregrounds the irreducibility and unpredictability of complex systems but explicitly avoids prescribing ethical commitments. Yet educational governance is inherently value-laden. Policies and institutional practices reflect strategic and ideological choices about what counts as legitimate knowledge, acceptable conduct, and desirable outcomes.

To address the limitations of Complexity Theory in engaging with normative and ethical questions, the GCF incorporates Pragmatism not merely as a supplement, but as a core epistemological commitment. Pragmatism offers a framework for understanding how values are enacted through situated judgement, how agents navigate ethical tensions, and how ideological formations are reinforced or resisted in everyday practice. Cherryholmes (1992, 1999) characterises Pragmatism as grounded in radical fallibilism—a rejection of fixed truths in favour of contingent, context-sensitive inquiry. Biesta (2009a, 2009b) reinforces this stance, framing ethical reasoning as a balancing of qualification, socialisation, and subjectification within specific institutional and political

contexts. Dewey (1916) further extends this into relational ethics, where decisions are evaluated not by abstract norms but by their lived consequences. Together, these thinkers reject moral universalism and affirm the value of historically grounded, reflexive, and context-responsive ethical action.

This orientation enables the GCF to interrogate how educational policy is not only shaped by systemic emergence but also driven by ideological decisions. For instance, while the National Curriculum (Department for Education (DfE), 2014) was introduced under the banner of inclusion, it simultaneously centralised control over content and reinforced dominant knowledge hierarchies (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2005). Pragmatism frames such policies not as neutral responses to objective problems, but as constructed artefacts shaped by discursive power. Bacchi's (2009) 'What's the Problem Represented to Be?' approach reinforces this view, exposing how policy frames embed normative assumptions. Likewise, the post-war acceptance of Burt's discredited theory of fixed intelligence, ultimately discredited through sustained universal critique (Hearnshaw, 1979, cited in Harvey, 2005), illustrates how dominant values are naturalised, yet remain contestable.

By enriching the GCF's analytical lens, Pragmatism reframes educational outcomes as ethically and ideologically situated decisions, opening space for contestation, reflexivity, and more relational and democratic futures.

2.6 Pragmatism in the Complexity Framework

As outlined in the previous section, Pragmatism addresses what Complexity Theory under-theorises: how actors make ethical judgements under systemic uncertainty. Within the GCF, it functions not as an add-on but as a core epistemological commitment.

From this position, the GCF integrates Pragmatist concepts such as reflexivity, strategic action, and ethical adaptation to frame governance agency as provisional and contested. Rather than prescribing rules or ideal types,

Pragmatism in the GCF functions as a critical interpretive lens, attending to how actors navigate systemic complexity through situated and value-laden judgements.

This orientation is particularly meaningful in education. Bernstein (1983) argues that Pragmatism transcends the binary between objectivism and relativism, enabling ethical reflection without moral absolutism. In systems characterised by emergent properties and non-linear feedback, Pragmatism provides a method for interrogating how both internal dynamics and external ideological pressures influence agents' values and actions.

For example, educational reforms such as the National Curriculum or shifts in funding policy are not merely technical adaptations to system needs; they are political acts that reflect and reproduce ideological commitments. Pragmatism draws attention to how such decisions constrain or enable educational possibilities. As Thompson (2007) notes, educational agency unfolds within the structural inequalities of post-welfare capitalism. The GCF, informed by Pragmatism, interprets this agency as a negotiated response to inherited constraints and competing values.

Ideological dynamics are central here. Zmigrod (2020) and Van Dijk (2006) show that ideologies influence both individual cognition and collective behaviour, shaping how values are internalised or resisted. The GCF draws on Pragmatism to understand how such values evolve through the interaction of:

- **Agentive attributes:** shaped by personal histories, experiences, and ideologies (Zmigrod, 2020).
- **Path dependencies:** historical constraints and trajectories that structure present action (Pierson, 2000).
- **Systemic interests:** collective logics that emerge from and reinforce institutional norms (James, 1907).

Through this framing, the GCF foregrounds not only how actors behave but also how they judge, justify, and contest the systems in which they operate.

Cherryholmes (1992) and Bernstein (1983) both emphasise that such decisions are shaped by hegemonic structures as well as individual deliberation. This interpretive double vision is crucial, as it ensures that governance and practice are viewed not merely as emergent phenomena, but as ethically and politically situated.

A productive tension emerges between strands of Pragmatist thought. Biesta (2015) advocates for democratic responsibility in ethical decision-making, whereas Cherryholmes (1999) cautions against premature closure and emphasises the contingency of values. Seemingly contrary arguments are rationalised in the GCF to sustain space for judgment without presuming finality, allowing the framework to uphold both moral urgency and epistemic humility.

In this sense, Pragmatism strengthens Complexity Theory by addressing what it leaves under-theorised: the values, ethics, and power relations that shape how systems are navigated and reconfigured. Together, they equip the GCF to interpret adult education governance not only as a dynamic system but as a contested, relational, and ideologically saturated field of ethical action.

2.6.1 Case Study: Pragmatic Adaptation and Knowledge

'I have to adapt my approach based on the needs of my learners. It is not about sticking rigidly to the criteria but about responding to what's happening in the classroom, especially if I notice someone struggling.'

(Jane', FE practitioner, interview, 2018)

Jane, a practitioner in a government-funded vocational training programme, works within a policy environment that prioritises high pass rates and employment outcomes, measured against funding-linked performance metrics. Confronted with learners experiencing personal and structural challenges, she recognises that standardised approaches often fail to meet their needs. Rather

than strictly complying with formal criteria, Jane prioritises long-term learner development, even when this places her at odds with institutional expectations.

Her actions reflect Pragmatist ethics: she enacts context-sensitive judgment grounded in practical experience, ethical responsiveness, and relational professionalism. Through ongoing dialogue with colleagues and managers, she advocates for curriculum flexibility and inclusive assessment strategies, using reflexive inquiry to justify adaptations that foreground meaningful learning over compliance.

Jane's decision-making exemplifies the intersection of Pragmatism and Complexity Theory within the GCF. She operates within a dynamic system shaped by government mandates, accountability frameworks, and diverse learner needs. Her responses are not isolated acts but feedback-rich interactions that influence and are influenced by institutional conditions. By challenging dominant expectations and modelling alternative practices, her interventions contribute to non-linear change: small adjustments at the classroom level may generate broader pedagogical shifts or policy reconsideration.

However, such adaptations remain contingent. Jane's refusal to treat learners as data points may provoke resistance or disciplinary oversight, exposing the fragility of ethical agency under performative governance. Complexity Theory underscores this tension: adaptive responses can trigger either reinforcing constraints or unexpected openings, depending on the relational dynamics at play.

Jane's use of dialogue and reflexivity further anchors her practice within grounded complexity. In discussing tensions with colleagues, she surfaces contested norms and creates space for collective sense-making. These informal exchanges function as micro-sites of system learning, potentially seeding broader cultural or structural shifts. Complexity Theory enables a reading of these interactions not simply as pedagogical conversations, but as mechanisms for resilience and ethical recalibration.

Her stance ultimately expresses a wider ideological commitment: education as a civic good rather than a commodity. While Complexity Theory cannot endorse this position normatively, it provides the analytical means to trace how her choices alter system behaviour. Pragmatism, by contrast, frames those choices as ethically charged acts of value assertion, situated within broader patterns of constraint, improvisation, and resistance.

2.6.2 Pragmatic Concepts in the GCF

Combining Complexity Theory and Pragmatism offers a robust analytical framework for understanding how individual actions, guided by ethical considerations, interact with and potentially transform complex educational systems. The following concepts have been integrated into the GCF as operational tools that recur throughout the thesis, particularly in relation to practitioner narratives, institutional adaptation, and normative governance.

2.6.2.1 Contingent Knowledge

In Pragmatist philosophy, knowledge is not conceived as the apprehension of universal truths but as the provisional result of human inquiry shaped by historical and social context. Peirce (1905) described knowledge as ‘a method of settling opinion,’ emphasising its fallibility and iterative character. James (1907) extended this experimental orientation by arguing that ideas gain their credibility through practical consequences in lived experience. Dewey (1938) later synthesised these perspectives into a transactional theory of inquiry, treating knowledge as emerging through action, reflection, and problem-solving. This epistemological model aligns with the GCF’s emphasis on provisionality, context, and relational responsiveness.

Biesta (2009b) strengthens this position by insisting that knowledge is always produced within discursive and institutional frameworks. What counts as knowledge, he argues, is shaped by historically embedded power relations and is never epistemically neutral. This account distances Pragmatism from both

positivist objectivism and naïve constructivism, casting knowledge as a political and cultural artefact rather than a mirror of external reality. Learning, accordingly, becomes a situated process shaped by normative and institutional constraints.

Cherryholmes (1992) introduces a further critical edge, arguing that knowledge is not only contingent but politically saturated. What becomes accepted as truth is often bound up with exclusions, interests, and legitimising discourses. For the GCF, this insight justifies treating dominant policy narratives, such as 'evidence-based' funding or 'best practice' pedagogies, as historically contingent and ideologically situated. Throughout the thesis, practitioner accounts and shifting discourses are employed to demonstrate how alternative knowledge claims emerge under conditions of contestation and instability.

2.6.2.2 Pragmatic Adaptation

Pragmatic adaptation refers to the continual recalibration of beliefs, strategies, and practices in response to the outcomes of experience. James (1907) characterises this principle as central to inquiry: beliefs must guide effective action and remain open to revision. In this view, knowledge and action are inherently provisional, shaped by the consequences they produce in practice.

Dewey (1938) advances this by defining adaptation not as passive conformity but as a transactional process. Individuals and communities reshape themselves and their environments through reflective action. This framing affirms the creative and ethical dimensions of agency, situating adaptation within a broader process of inquiry and transformation.

Cherryholmes (1992) adds a critical inflexion, arguing that adaptation also requires interrogation of the ideological and normative boundaries within which it occurs. Adjustment, in this view, entails both practical responsiveness and critical engagement with the systems that define what is valued, rewarded, or considered necessary. Adaptation, therefore, carries both tactical and political weight.

Morgan (2014) reinforces this dual perspective by highlighting the importance of openness to surprise in complex systems. He argues that rigid adherence to predetermined models undermines the capacity to act intelligently in uncertain environments. Instead, adaptation should be reflective and generative, maintaining awareness of the limits of control.

Within the GCF, Pragmatic adaptation serves as a key analytic for interpreting practitioner agency. It resists the dichotomy between compliance and resistance, foregrounding instead the situated and iterative ways in which professionals adjust to shifting governance demands. Localised pedagogical resistance, reframed identities, and improvised practices are treated as examples of negotiated adaptation, shaped by constraint but responsive to ethical and political aspiration.

2.6.2.3 Ethical Decision-Making

Pragmatist ethics prioritises contextual judgement, experimental action, and critical reflection over fixed moral rules or abstract principles. Dewey (1916) argues that ethical decisions should be evaluated in light of their lived consequences and the interests they engage. Ethics, in this tradition, is not a codified system but a dynamic inquiry into what is valuable and possible within specific circumstances.

Rorty (1982) extends this view by stressing that ethical deliberation always occurs within historically contingent vocabularies. He associates moral responsibility with the fostering of solidarity and inclusivity in situated communities. Ethical norms, from this perspective, are negotiated rather than imposed, and must remain responsive to experience and context.

Biesta (2009a) offers a pedagogical reading of this position, insisting that ethical decisions in education should attend to qualification, socialisation, and subjectification in equal measure. He warns against instrumental approaches

that prioritise measurable outcomes while neglecting the emergence of individuals as ethically engaged agents.

Cherryholmes (1992) adds that ethical decision-making must be attentive to questions of power and exclusion. He contends that reflection must address whose interests are advanced, which voices are silenced, and how normative structures sustain inequity. This politicisation of ethics aligns Pragmatism with critical traditions while maintaining its orientation toward experimentalism and practical inquiry.

In the GCF, ethical decision-making provides a frame for interpreting how practitioners navigate ideologically saturated environments. Curriculum choices, institutional negotiations, and relational strategies are treated not as neutral acts but as ethically charged responses to complex conditions. These are cast as fallible, reflexive, and context-specific judgements through which professionals sustain values under systemic constraint.

2.6.2.4 Strategic Action

In Pragmatism, strategic action is understood as a process of responsive engagement rather than the execution of a fixed plan. Dewey (1916) defines strategy as experimental and relational, requiring continual re-evaluation of goals in light of unfolding outcomes. Strategy, in this framing, is not about control but about interpretive agility and moral attentiveness.

Bernstein (1983) expands this view by linking strategic action to communicative and ethical practice. He warns that when detached from democratic deliberation, Pragmatism risks becoming an instrument of managerialism. This risk is particularly evident in performance-driven educational systems, where strategy often becomes technocratic and depoliticised.

Biesta (2009b) similarly cautions against what he calls the 'learnification' of education, the reduction of teaching and learning to delivery mechanisms that

are abstracted from their ethical and civic purposes. Strategic action, he argues, must remain anchored in reflection about what is educationally worthwhile, not just how goals are achieved.

Morgan (2014) connects these arguments to Complexity-aware planning, proposing that effective strategy in complex systems involves a balance between short-term responsiveness and long-term ethical reflection. Strategic actors must avoid rigid templates and instead develop attentiveness to context, feedback, and relational consequences.

Within the GCF, strategic action is used to analyse how practitioners and policymakers engage with governance systems. It supports a reading of agency that accounts for institutional constraint and ethical positioning. Localised innovations, selective compliance, and relational leadership are understood not as the execution of policy, but as situated acts of negotiation and foresight. Strategic action thus becomes a method for interpreting how ethical agency is practised under systemic pressure.

2.6.2.5 Dialogue and Reflexivity

Dialogue and reflexivity are central to Pragmatist epistemology and ethics. Dewey (1916) places dialogue at the heart of democratic life, treating it as the medium through which ideas are tested, meanings negotiated, and problems addressed collectively. Dialogue is not merely an exchange but a process of co-construction that anchors learning in mutual recognition and shared inquiry.

Rorty (1982) reframes dialogue as a solidaristic practice through which communities sustain inclusive vocabularies and challenge exclusion. He rejects the pursuit of objectivity and posits truth as what is constructed to function within particular discursive communities. This view underscores the cultural and historical specificity of meaning-making.

Biesta (2009b) introduces a critical dimension, noting that dialogue is shaped by power. Who speaks, who is heard, and whose experiences are validated are not neutral questions. In governance contexts, dialogic spaces are often constrained by institutional logics that marginalise dissent or narrow the scope of professional voice. For adult education, this includes the performative pressures that structure staff interaction, feedback cultures, and curricular negotiations.

Reflexivity, in this context, is the internal correlate of dialogue. Dewey treats it as a form of intelligent self-regulation, an ongoing inquiry into the implications of one's actions. Schön (1983) develops this as a socially embedded capacity: practitioners reflect not in isolation but in conversation with institutional norms, peer communities, and the lived conditions of practice. Schön's influential distinction between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action illustrates how adaptation unfolds both in real time and retrospectively.

In the GCF, dialogue and reflexivity are crucial for understanding practitioner identity, judgment, and agency. These capacities underpin the thesis's analysis of resistance, relational professionalism, and the reintroduction of civic values into narrowed governance fields. While often informal, such engagements accumulate significance as sites of learning, ethical recalibration, and ideological tension.

2.6.2.6 Critical Ethical Praxis

Critical Ethical Praxis builds directly from the Pragmatist emphasis on context-sensitive judgement, dialogic reflection, and ethically grounded action, yet sharpens the focus on the practices through which educators resist, adapt to, and reconfigure dominant governance logics. Dewey's (1916) conception of democratic intelligence, the capacity for reflective, participatory problem-solving, provides a foundational account of praxis as situated ethical engagement. For Dewey, praxis involves neither abstract moral deliberation nor ideological rigidity, but an experimental orientation towards resolving real-world dilemmas in ways that promote democratic and relational values.

Biesta's (2009a) contributions further radicalise this view by insisting that the means of resistance must be as ethically robust as the ends. Educational agency, he argues, must be enacted in ways that sustain subjectification, the emergence of learners and practitioners as autonomous, socially connected subjects, even when institutional frameworks prioritise qualification and socialisation. This insistence on ethical coherence positions critical ethical praxis not merely as negation but as an affirmative reimagining of what education can be. Bernstein (1983) underscores the structural dimension of this argument, noting that the imperative to resist arises from the recognition that domination and exclusion are not accidental features of modern institutions but are embedded within their normative and operational logics. Critical ethical praxis is thus not episodic; it is a sustained and recursive practice of interrogating both external constraints and internal complicities. It represents a moral and political stance that links ethical agency with collective transformation, even under adverse conditions.

Within the Grounded Complexity Framework, critical ethical praxis serves as a key analytic for interpreting practitioner narratives, policy responses, and organisational shifts. It highlights the ways in which educators act not merely as bearers of policy but as co-constructors of meaning within systems that are contested, unstable, and ideologically saturated. Rather than framing resistance as heroic defiance, the GCF recognises it as a process of iterative engagement: upholding civic and relational values through the subtle, everyday recalibrations of pedagogical practice, institutional navigation, and relational solidarity.

This praxis does not reject adaptation; rather, it insists that adaptation must be ethically interrogated. In this sense, it is tightly interwoven with practising from the edge. While the latter describes the positionality of practitioners negotiating constraints, critical ethical praxis articulates the normative and strategic commitments that guide such negotiation. It is through this praxis that counter-hegemonic possibilities take form: not through rupture, but through cumulative

and reflective reorientations that contest the epistemological, ethical, and political closures of dominant governance.

Finally, Pragmatist fallibilism (Peirce, 1905) remains vital in this context. Critical ethical praxis is neither triumphalist nor utopian. It acknowledges that ethical and political commitments are always provisional and must be continually revised in light of new experiences, insights, and systemic conditions. In this respect, it affirms the relational, dynamic, and contingent nature of ethical action within complex systems, sustaining the GCF's commitment to democratic transformation under constraint.

2.6.2.7 Practising from the Edge

Where *critical ethical praxis* foregrounds normative intentionality defined as the principled effort to reshape educational systems in alignment with democratic and ethical ideals, *practising from the edge* highlights positionality and navigation under constraint. It captures how practitioners operate at the margins of dominant governance regimes, where space for ethical and relational action is limited but not extinguished. This concept speaks not to resistance as rupture, but to the small, continuous recalibrations through which professionals maintain civic purpose and moral coherence within contested institutions.

The idea synthesises key insights from Dewey (1916), Brookfield (1995), Freire (1970), and Giroux (2014), each of whom emphasises the moral and intellectual labour involved in teaching under structural pressure. Brookfield's work on critical reflection situates educators as embedded actors who toggle between compliance and resistance, often simultaneously. He describes a mode of action in which teachers uphold inclusive and dialogic values while adapting their work to fit shifting policy imperatives. Dewey's emphasis on practical intelligence, such as thought-in-action, underscores this adaptability as ethically charged rather than merely tactical.

Freire's (1970) concept of critical consciousness infuses edge practice with a transformative imaginary. Practitioners who "read the world" as ideologically saturated and yet still teach toward liberation embody a dual awareness: they see both the weight of systemic constraint and the possibility of ethical interruption. For Giroux (2014), such ethical work is never guaranteed. He warns of the "attrition of critical hope" as neoliberalism compresses the discursive and emotional space necessary for pedagogical freedom.

Within the GCF, practising from the edge is not a heroic narrative. It is a practice of survival, improvisation, and small-scale disruption. Examples appear throughout the thesis: an educator who reconfigures assessment rubrics to preserve learner dignity, a department head who reframes a policy mandate in terms of local community needs, a tutor who deliberately misinterprets learning objectives to reintroduce dialogic engagement. These acts are not marginal but structurally revealing. They show how ethical agency persists in the crevices of the system.

This 'edge-work' is inherently fragile. As Biesta (2009a) and Sanderson (2009) note, counter-hegemonic practices risk being co-opted or disqualified if not critically reflexive. Practising from the edge demands humility as much as resolve. It is not a stable position but a shifting foothold from which educators *tilt the frame* of institutional logic without breaking it. Within the GCF, this form of practice serves as a lens for understanding how relational values, civic commitments, and ethical improvisation persist—quietly yet meaningfully—within systems designed to suppress them.

2.6.2.8 Summary and Bridge to Gramscian Analysis

The Pragmatist concepts outlined here: contingent knowledge, Pragmatic adaptation, ethical decision-making, strategic action, dialogue, reflexivity, critical praxis, and edge practice, serve as interpretive tools throughout the thesis. They complement the descriptive strengths of Complexity Theory by offering a

normative account of how actors think, judge, adapt, and resist within systems shaped by power, ideology, and uncertainty.

These concepts are not always explicitly named in the analytical chapters, but their presence is evident in the interpretive vocabulary applied to practitioner narratives and policy dynamics. Strategic action appears in institutional navigation; reflexivity is evident in testimony; edge practice informs relational professionalism. Together, these concepts enable the GCF to foreground value-driven agency and ideological struggle as core components of systemic transformation.

They also form a conceptual bridge to the Gramscian analysis that follows. Where Complexity Theory describes system dynamics, and Pragmatism interprets ethical agency, Gramscian theory interrogates the conditions under which these dynamics become hegemonic or contested. In this way, the GCF maintains coherence while integrating multiple theoretical commitments in service of a democratic, relational account of educational governance.

2.7 Rearticulating Values and Power: Gramsci

The inclusion of Gramscian theory within the GCF responds to a conceptual deficit left unresolved by Complexity Theory and Pragmatism alone: namely, the need for a critical account of how dominant values are naturalised, institutionalised, and rendered politically legitimate. Gramsci's theory of hegemony addresses this gap by analysing how cultural, moral, and political leadership is secured not only through coercion but through consent, formed and reformed within the institutions and affective grammars of civil society. This framework enables the GCF to examine how education contributes to both the reproduction and disruption of dominant social orders.

Adult education governance, from this vantage point, is interpreted not simply as a site of institutional policy but as a terrain of ideological struggle. Drawing on Filippini's (2017) concept of ideological sedimentation, the GCF treats shifts in

educational discourse and practice as attempts to rework the moral economy of civil values. In this context, civic ideals such as empowerment or inclusion may be rearticulated to support market logics, appearing progressive while functioning to consolidate dominant blocs. Educational institutions, in turn, operate as contradictory sites: embedded in wider hegemonic structures yet capable of cultivating alternative values through the everyday actions of practitioners. The GCF's integration of Gramsci thus adds a critical dimension to the analysis of educational governance: values are not merely plural or negotiated, as Complexity and Pragmatism may suggest, but politically saturated, historically embedded, and contested through struggles over meaning and legitimacy.

Mayo's (2008) work on radical adult education underscores this point by showing how pedagogical forms may reproduce or resist hegemony, depending on whether they emerge from above as a managerial imposition or from below through collective praxis. The GCF builds on this by interpreting such resistance not as an external force but as immanent to governance structures, unfolding through what Gramsci termed a 'war of position': a strategic, incremental reworking of norms and alliances within civil society. Educational institutions, curricula, and practitioner practices are thus situated within overlapping terrains of accommodation, resistance, and transformation.

2.7.1 Reinterpreting the Jane Case through GCF

The earlier account of Jane, an FE practitioner navigating the metrics-driven logic of a vocational programme, is now re-examined through the Gramscian lens embedded in the GCF. Initially framed through Pragmatist categories of ethical adaptation and reflective practice, Jane's actions take on additional significance when interpreted as ideologically situated labour. Her response to learner needs, adjusting assessments, engaging in dialogue with colleagues, and advocating for curricular flexibility constitutes a contestation of the normative

terms under which educational legitimacy is defined, rather than only pedagogical improvisation.

Jane's explicit awareness of '...the statistics to show progression, to show them moving on, skills achieved, blah blah blah...' captures the naturalisation of performance metrics as common sense: an instance of hegemonic discourse operating through affective saturation and institutional scripting. Her discontent is evident through her embodied, practical dissatisfaction with what the system requires her to do. Initially engaging in what Pragmatism would describe as situated problem-solving, her practices over time evolve into something recognisably Gramscian: a process of critical reflection that renders visible the ideological dimensions of governance and her own positionality within it.

In this shift from adaptation to reflexive critique, Jane begins to exhibit the attributes of an organic intellectual. Her actions move beyond responsive adjustment to prefigurative transformation: introducing civic and relational values into institutional settings governed by economised imperatives. These interventions are embedded within the context of the integral state, where civil and political society operate in a dialectical relationship. Her sustained engagement with colleagues and managers, aimed at reorienting institutional culture, exemplifies the long-haul strategy of a war of position. The goal is not immediate reversal. Instead, it is the gradual cultivation of a distinct moral and intellectual order.

Such positioning is not without consequence. The resistance she embodies is necessarily precarious, subject to co-option, containment, or disciplinary sanction. Nevertheless, this very precarity is central to the GCF's use of Gramsci: ideological transformation is not enacted through rupture but through the recursive, situated labour of contesting and re-signifying the terms under which educational practices are judged. As Chapter 5 will demonstrate, such efforts are neither isolated nor spontaneous. They form part of a broader pattern

of embedded struggle, where counter-hegemonic orientations persist at the edges of governance even as they remain exposed to its pressures.

2.7.2 Gramscian Concepts Used in the GCF

2.7.2.1 Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony

In Gramsci's position, hegemony refers to the political, cultural, and moral leadership through which a dominant group secures the consent of subordinate groups, not solely through coercion but by embedding its worldview as 'common sense' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12). This worldview is not imposed by formal decree or enforced through overt coercion; instead, it is cultivated through civil institutions, habitual practices, and moral vocabularies that confer legitimacy upon prevailing norms. Gramsci's insight that 'every relationship of hegemony is necessarily an educational relationship' (1971, p. 350) underscores the pedagogical function of hegemony as a process of cultural formation and social reproduction. Education becomes a key terrain in which ideological norms are disseminated, internalised, and potentially reconfigured.

Mayo (2008, 2014) develops this perspective by positioning education as central to the maintenance and renewal of hegemonic order. He argues that cultural and pedagogical labour, within institutions such as schools, churches, media, and community organisations, functions to embed dominant ideologies as moral imperatives. Within the Grounded Complexity Framework (GCF), this offers a means of analysing how adult education governance reproduces economised logics, including performance metrics, employability discourses, and managerial accountability, as apparently pragmatic and depoliticised necessities. As explored later in Chapter 4, such framings contribute to the consolidation of neoliberal 'common sense' by obscuring their ideological character.

Filippini (2017) extends this analysis by introducing the concept of *ideological saturation*. Hegemony, he argues, does not operate only through cognitive assent but also through the management of emotional attachments to specific

ideals of success, responsibility, and aspiration. This perspective helps to explain how reform narratives centred on ‘resilience’ or ‘lifelong learning’ gain traction by aligning with personal identity and self-worth, even as they advance neoliberal policy objectives. The GCF draws on this affective register to interpret how governance mechanisms influence both institutional arrangements and pedagogical subjectivities, particularly where civic or democratic values are reframed in economic terms.

Within this framework, counter-hegemony denotes the ongoing cultural and educational labour of unsettling established common sense and fostering alternative moral, intellectual, and political configurations. It is not reducible to oppositional acts but involves the cultivation of new modes of thought and practice. As Gramsci observes, ‘every revolution has been preceded by an intense labour of criticism, by the diffusion of culture and the spread of ideas’ (1971, p. 324). Mayo (2008, 2014) interprets this process as inherently pedagogical, involving critical consciousness, dialogic engagement, and collective learning as the groundwork for ideological realignment.

Yet, as Filippini (2017) and Donoghue (2018) caution, counter-hegemonic efforts are rarely unambiguous. They may emerge within dominant institutions, carry residual ideological content, or reproduce structural features they aim to displace. Accordingly, the GCF does not position such interventions as wholesale alternatives but instead as situated practices that work to reorient governance logics from within. Chapter 5 illustrates how practitioners exercise this form of agency through curricular negotiation and ethical judgement, and what the thesis terms ‘practising from the edge’, where small shifts in interpretation and implementation may recalibrate the ideological texture of professional practice.

This account aligns with Gramsci’s resistance to simplistic oppositions. Hegemony and counter-hegemony are not fixed positions but mutually shaping processes, negotiated through discourse, pedagogy, and institutional practice.

Their recursive interaction forms a key conceptual underpinning of the GCF's approach to ideological Complexity in adult education governance.

2.7.2.2 Historic Bloc and Cultural Hegemony

Gramsci's concept of the historic bloc refers to the alignment of material forces, institutions, and cultural norms into a durable formation that stabilises a particular hegemonic order. This bloc integrates economic, political, and ideological dimensions in a configuration that gives coherence to dominance. Gramsci argues that the ensemble of superstructures reflects the social relations of production in all their complexity and contradiction (1971, p. 366). Rather than locating power in a single institution, the historic bloc captures how systemic coherence arises from the interlocking of multiple forces.

Peter Mayo (2008) highlights the pedagogical function of this bloc, arguing that its endurance depends on the ability of institutions, particularly in education, to embed dominant norms in everyday practice. Filippini (2017) adds that the historic bloc is not static. It must be continually reproduced through cultural and ideological labour and is subject to disruption when alignments weaken or normative coherence breaks down. If we view the historic bloc in social terms, Femia (1987) argues, such blocs are not the product of structural alignment alone, but emerge from a continuous negotiation between material interests and cultural leadership. The bloc's stability depends on its capacity to absorb potential contradictions and naturalise its assumptions within both institutional routines and everyday discourse.

The GCF employs this framework to analyse how adult education governance in England has evolved across different historical periods, shaped by enduring convergences of economic rationality, managerial practices, and cultural legitimacy. Policy shifts are not treated as episodic responses to changing needs but as features of bloc consolidation. For example, the vocational emphasis of the 1980s or the civic orientation of the 1919 Report each reflects distinct historic blocs that fused institutional purpose with broader ideological projects.

Cultural hegemony is the dimension through which this bloc secures consent. Gramsci distinguished it from simple ideological persuasion, describing it as a process of intellectual and moral leadership that permeates daily life (1971, p. 57). Hegemony is sustained not by overt coercion but through emotional identification, normative common sense, and lived routines.

This insight has been developed by Hall (1980) and Williams (1977), who argue that hegemony operates through ‘structures of feeling’, cultural patterns that normalise particular visions of self, society, and possibility. These affective formations shape how education is imagined, not just in its content, but also in its moral vocabulary. Concepts such as ‘employability’ or ‘lifelong learning’ carry affective and normative weight, reinforcing particular aspirations while sidelining civic or collectivist aims.

Filippini (2017) further deepens this analysis by introducing ‘affective economies,’ in which institutions not only distribute meaning but manage desire. In adult education, narratives invoking hope, resilience, or shame help stabilise compliance. Within the GCF, these affective and moral dimensions are not seen as peripheral but as central to how governance embeds and sustains hegemonic norms.

Together, historic bloc and cultural hegemony allow the GCF to analyse educational governance as a relational formation. These configurations are durable enough to organise institutional life, yet susceptible to contestation. This framework provides a means of tracing how dominant values are institutionalised over time, while identifying points at which counter-hegemonic energies may unsettle or reconfigure them.

2.7.2.3 Civil Society and State Society

Gramsci’s theory of the integral state foregrounds the interrelation between civil society and political society. Civil society encompasses institutions such as culture, education, and voluntary associations, while political society comprises

law, administration, and the coercive apparatus. Gramsci argues that hegemony is primarily exercised within civil society, where dominant groups secure consent through moral and cultural leadership (1971, p. 12). Together, civil and political society form a unified field of governance.

Mayo (2008) emphasises the originality of this formulation. Unlike classical Marxism, which prioritised state power, Gramsci identifies civil society as the space where legitimacy is generated and sustained. In adult education, this includes not only formal governance but also the normative frameworks, professional identities, and cultural expectations shaped through institutions such as colleges, learning centres, and third-sector providers.

For the GCF, this understanding is essential. Governance is not imposed from outside but enacted through internalised practices, discourses, and subjectivities. Drawing on Simon (1991), the GCF positions adult education as both a site of ideological reproduction and a space of potential contestation. Here, learners and practitioners encounter values, such as responsibility, employability, and merit, which may be affirmed, challenged, or reinterpreted through everyday practice.

Filippini (2017) insists that civil society is a terrain of struggle. It may support hegemonic consolidation but can also foster critical agency. Adult education institutions may disseminate dominant norms through compliance regimes and standardisation, but they may equally open spaces for dialogue, reflection, and ethical resistance. This dual potential makes civil society both politically significant and analytically complex.

Bates (1975) and Morton (2007) caution against romanticising civil society as inherently emancipatory. Morton, in particular, argues that civil and state society are mutually reinforcing: the former ensures that coercive power appears legitimate, while the latter stabilises the normative order. Within the GCF, this argument helps avoid overestimating the transformative capacity of policy

initiatives that appear benign but embed disciplinary functions, such as inspection regimes or learner voice frameworks.

The integral state also enables the GCF to locate resistance not outside the system but within it. Acts of reflective practice, relational pedagogy, or curriculum negotiation are treated as politically situated. When civic values are pursued within performative structures, they operate as elements of a war of position within civil society. Recognising the entanglement of state and civil domains allows the GCF to frame governance as an ongoing negotiation, rather than a binary of domination and resistance.

2.7.2.4 War of Position and War of Manoeuvre

Gramsci's concept of the war of position reimagines revolutionary strategy for advanced capitalist societies. However, in contrast to contexts where state structures are dominant and civil society is weak, the concept of war of position describes the slow, cumulative process of ideological transformation within a dense civil society. Gramsci famously described Western civil society as '*a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks*' (1971, p. 238), suggesting that social change must be built gradually through cultural, institutional, and moral reconfiguration.

Thomas (2009) characterises this as constructive labour. The war of position does not await crisis but actively cultivates new institutions, alliances, and normative frameworks. It is a strategic engagement with the everyday, requiring pedagogical leadership, discursive innovation, and long-term commitment. Mayo (2014) situates adult education within this struggle, viewing it as a key site for nurturing critical consciousness and alternative values. The GCF builds on this by examining how pedagogical strategies can generate slow-moving change, not by confronting policy head-on, but by inflecting professional norms and civic commitments within existing structures.

Filippini (2017) warns that civil society is also the site where hegemony is renewed. Counter-hegemonic initiatives may be appropriated; their language and intent folded into dominant narratives. In adult education, concepts such as empowerment or learner-centredness may originate in resistance but become subsumed within managerial frameworks. The GCF recognises this risk and treats counter-hegemonic agency as provisional and reflexive. Within the GCF, the war of position is used to interpret how practitioners engage in embedded forms of transformation. These include the subtle reframing of accountability, ethically motivated curricular adaptations, and the cultivation of alternative professional identities. Such actions incrementally reshape the normative and affective landscape of governance through sustained engagement.

The war of manoeuvre refers to rapid, decisive interventions against state power. Gramsci saw this as feasible in contexts within an underdeveloped civil society, such as Tsarist Russia, where revolution could proceed through direct assault. *'In the East, the State was everything; civil society was primordial,'* he observed (1971, p. 238). In the West, however, the density of civil society renders this strategy largely ineffective.

Donoghue (2018) and Filippini (2017) reinforce this diagnosis. Contemporary governance disperses power across metrics, networks, and culture, neutralising confrontational strategies. Without prior ideological groundwork, such manoeuvres rarely produce lasting transformation.

Within the Grounded Complexity Framework, the war of manoeuvre holds conceptual significance precisely through its absence. The thesis identifies no historical moment in which English adult education underwent systemic dislocation or abrupt structural transformation. Practitioner action unfolds instead through situated, ethical engagement consistent with the logic of a war of position. Retaining the concept helps clarify this distinction and foregrounds the strategic nature of gradualist, relational change.

2.7.2.5 Passive Revolution

Passive revolution is one of the most conceptually complex and politically unsettling ideas in Gramsci's work. It describes a process by which dominant groups incorporate elements of social critique or popular demands, not to enable transformation, but to neutralise pressure for deeper change. Rather than openly resisting reform, ruling blocs initiate controlled, top-down adaptations that absorb the language or appearance of progress while reasserting systemic continuity. In Gramsci's terms, passive revolution entails a 'revolution without revolutionaries', a managed reconfiguration that preserves power while muting its contestation.

Mayo (1999, 2008) identifies this process as central to understanding adult education policy in neoliberal contexts. He shows how initiatives that appear progressive, such as flexibility, learner-centredness, or widening participation, are often repurposed to support market imperatives. These reforms appropriate the vocabulary of critical pedagogy but evacuate its political content, turning emancipatory aspirations into managerial targets. The GCF uses this argument to interrogate how civil values are rhetorically preserved yet operationally subordinated to performance, metrics, and employability.

Ball (2003, 2012) provides a complementary analysis in his account of policy enactment and the 'terrors of performativity.' He examines how educational reforms utilise the language of empowerment while incorporating technocratic and instrumental logics that undermine practitioner agency. From this perspective, passive revolution operates not only at the discursive level, but also through the mechanisms of policy delivery, restructuring the material conditions of educational work while maintaining the appearance of responsiveness and inclusion.

Giroux (2014), writing in the North American context, extends this critique. He argues that neoliberalism co-opts the very ideas once associated with critical education, including democratic dialogue and personal empowerment, reframing them in individualised and depoliticised terms. Although Giroux's analysis is

grounded in a different national context, the structural parallels, particularly in how personalisation, choice, and flexibility are mobilised to constrain rather than expand agency, render his argument salient. His conception of the ‘transformative intellectual’ draws directly on Gramsci’s organic intellectual, positioning educators as both participants in and potential resisters to passive revolution.

Morton (2007) offers a further provocation. He argues that passive revolution is not an anomaly but a routine feature of governance under late capitalism. Far from being transitional or exceptional, it is a dominant strategy for absorbing dissent, aligning emergent critiques with the reproduction of hegemonic structures. Filippini (2017) deepens this by analysing the affective dimensions of passive revolution. He shows how it generates accommodation, fatigue, or partial satisfaction among subordinate groups, weakening the appetite for structural change. Reforms that gesture towards emancipation thus function affectively to stabilise the very order they nominally question.

Within the GCF, passive revolution is central to interpreting policy shifts that appear to respond to critique yet deepen the logic of neoliberalism. Initiatives such as Skills for Life (DES, 2001) and the Leitch Review (2006), as well as adult learning accounts of ‘empowerment,’ are not dismissed as inauthentic but are critically examined for how they embed counter-hegemonic language within hegemonic goals. The framework is particularly attentive to how critical pedagogical ideals, voice, autonomy, and inclusion are refashioned to serve accountability metrics or labour market agendas.

This concept also acts as a warning against uncritical celebration of adaptive agency. While practitioners practising from the edge often succeed in reintroducing civic or relational values into policy implementation, these acts can be co-opted into a broader passive revolutionary dynamic. Giroux’s caution that critical pedagogy may become an instrument of hegemony underscores the risk: values survive their appropriation only through reflexive, explicitly political

engagement. For the GCF, then, passive revolution is not merely a structural or discursive process; it is a relational and contingent phenomenon that must be analysed through the ethical tensions, compromises, and critical consciousness of those enacting policy on the ground.

2.7.2.6 Organic and Traditional Intellectuals

In Gramsci's political theory, intellectuals play a foundational role in articulating and maintaining hegemony. They are not limited to scholars or cultural elites but include all those who contribute to shaping social meaning, values, and practices. His distinction between organic and traditional intellectuals is relational rather than categorical, defined by the alignment of their work with specific social and historical formations. Intellectuals serve to interpret experience, mediate values, and coordinate collective action, whether in support of the existing order or its transformation.

Organic intellectuals emerge from particular social groups and maintain a functional relationship with their interests and lived conditions. Gramsci describes organic intellectuals as those whom a social class creates alongside itself and elaborates in the course of its development, highlighting their role in shaping the class's cultural and moral framework necessary for political leadership (Gramsci, 1971, p. 5). Their task is both educational and strategic: to translate collective experience into frameworks capable of mobilising alliances and securing legitimacy. This involves not just critique, but the active formation of new social imaginaries.

Mayo (2014) highlights the pedagogical nature of this role, arguing that organic intellectuals work within civil society to cultivate counter-hegemonic consciousness. Their interventions are often long-term and prefigurative, oriented towards values that challenge dominant common sense. Filippini (2017) notes that they facilitate the conversion of ideology from passive acceptance into active contestation, transforming 'common sense' into 'good sense' through critical engagement and rearticulation.

Donoghue (2018) cautions against romanticising this figure. Organic intellectuals are not inherently radical; their critical potential depends on their commitment to contesting hegemonic norms. In professional settings such as adult education, individuals may act as organic intellectuals while still operating within frameworks shaped by managerialism or technocracy. This Complexity is acknowledged within the GCF, which interprets practitioner activity as ideologically situated, sometimes advancing incremental reform, sometimes reinforcing structural constraints.

Traditional intellectuals, by contrast, are typically associated with long-established institutions, such as universities, religious bodies, or cultural authorities, and tend to present their work as independent of class or ideology. Gramsci suggests that their claim to neutrality is historically constructed; they often function to reinforce the prevailing order by embedding its assumptions within discourses of rationality, culture, or expertise (1971, p. 300). Morton (2007) expands this critique, arguing that traditional intellectuals lend stability to the historic bloc by making its values appear universal and disinterested.

Gramsci nonetheless allows that traditional intellectuals may be rearticulated into counter-hegemonic projects. Alignment is not fixed; it depends on political and historical context. Donoghue (2018) reinforces this by pointing to the contingent positioning of intellectuals within crises of legitimacy, where even institutional actors may become agents of transformation. The potential for realignment is latent within the institutional structure of civil society itself.

The GCF interprets these categories not as occupational types but as ideological and strategic positions. Educators, policymakers, and administrators may occupy either role depending on how their actions contribute to reproducing or reconfiguring the hegemonic order. Chapter 5, for example, conceptualises certain practitioners as organic intellectuals, not due to their formal role, but because they enact reflexive, relational, and ethically grounded practices that

challenge dominant framings. These practitioners contribute to the sedimentation of alternative civic values and the long-term repositioning of educational purpose.

At the same time, the GCF remains alert to how traditional intellectuals shape governance discourse. Reports such as the 1919 Final Report and the 1973 Russell Report are examined as examples of traditional intellectual labour, articulating moral leadership while embedding assumptions about merit, institutional form, and economic necessity. Their authority operates through the appearance of neutrality yet contributes to the reproduction of hegemonic norms.

Within the GCF, the significance of both organic and traditional intellectuals lies in their role in mediating between value, experience, and power. These roles are not static but dynamically constituted through alignment, practice, and institutional context. By tracing their work, the framework can map the ideological terrain of adult education governance as a space shaped by interpretive labour, political commitment, and the ongoing contestation of meaning.

2.7.2.7 Gramscian Concepts Summary

The Gramscian concepts elaborated in this section enhance the GCF's capacity to critically examine the ideological and structural dynamics of adult education governance. By foregrounding hegemony, bloc formation, cultural legitimacy, and the contested role of intellectuals, these concepts allow the framework to interpret policy and practice not merely as responses to systemic Complexity but as sites of ideological struggle. They also support the thesis's commitment to understanding practitioner agency as relational and potentially counter-hegemonic, shaped by historically contingent alignments within civil and state society. These conceptual tools recur across the empirical chapters, where their interpretive utility lies not only in diagnosing the reproduction of dominant norms but in tracing how civic and ethical alternatives emerge through situated resistance, value conflict, and pedagogical praxis.

2.8 The GCF as Critical Theoretical Dialogue

Having established the key concepts which are being synthesised into the GCF, we can better visualise entanglement as a core principle in understanding the multidimensional nature of complex social phenomena. Entanglement refers to the deliberate intertwining of various theoretical perspectives to fully capture the complexities and contradictions inherent in social systems. This perspective is supported by Karen Barad's (2007) notion of entanglement, which posits that entities are co-constituted through their intra-actions (where relations through which entities emerge, rather than pre-existing and then interacting). Through the GCF, entanglement is achieved by interweaving ideas from Gramscian theory, Complexity Theory, and Pragmatism to offer a nuanced, layered analysis of the multifaceted forces shaping educational environments.

This contrasts with more traditional, linear methods that rely on a single theoretical lens and can often produce oversimplified or reductive analyses. The GCF thus embraces entanglement, aligning well with Bricolage, which integrates multiple perspectives and methodologies to achieve a more holistic and nuanced understanding of phenomena. Kincheloe and Berry (2004) argue that Bricolage in theory, method, and analysis opens up spaces for more multidimensional inquiry by challenging conventional knowledge boundaries. Such an approach enables the deconstruction of dominant ideologies, the exposure of hidden power structures, and the development of a more reflexive and complex analysis that accounts for contingency, interconnection, and emergent dynamics within social and educational systems.

In this framework, entanglement is not just theoretical; it is applied in practice by placing different select theoretical concepts in metaphoric dialogue with one another. Where 'entanglement' refers to the ontological interdependence of concepts, 'dialogue' describes their interpretive juxtaposition in analysis. For example, in examining the influence of neoliberalism on adult education, the framework draws on concepts such as hegemony as well as non-linear dynamics

stemming from Complexity Theory. This integration enables a more nuanced understanding of how power is maintained, through both overt policies and more subtle, emergent and above all *complex* dynamics. By placing these concepts in dialogue, the framework reveals how both stability and change coexist within educational systems. The interaction between these different theoretical lenses offers deeper insights into the interrelated forces shaping the sector, moving beyond reductive analyses and highlighting how education is shaped by both ideological dominance and the potential for resistance.

2.8.1 Sympathetic and Dissonant Cross-Theory Dialogues

We develop this further through Cross-Theory Dialogues (CTD) as an analytical tool. By examining the relationships between different concepts in tension with each other, we engage in a deeper, relational exploration of the nuances in theoretical constructs from various traditions. The goal is to illuminate the relationships between factors within complex social systems. The pairing of theoretical concepts is also not random or subject-related. It is deliberately drawn from different theoretical backgrounds to explicitly deepen the analysis of the phenomena being explored. In their selection, we pay attention to whether they are sympathetic or dissonant in relation to each other. These classifications help reveal when theoretical integration reinforces insight versus when it disrupts or reframes assumptions.

Sympathetic Cross-Theory Dialogues involve pairing theoretical concepts that naturally align and reinforce one another. In contrast, dissonant dialogues pair concepts that exist in tension or conflict, offering a lens through which to examine friction within social systems. These dialogues are particularly insightful for identifying contradictions where change may be possible.

A more specific example of a dissonant dialogue might pair hegemony, which focuses on control and dominance, with the concept of emergence from Complexity Theory, which emphasises spontaneous and organic change. The

inherent tension between the top-down control inherent in hegemony and the bottom-up unpredictability of emergent phenomena creates a productive dialogue that can help illuminate the conflicting forces within educational systems. This dialogue demonstrates how power and resistance interact dynamically, revealing opportunities for transformative change amidst systemic constraints.

The entangled nature of the GCF means that sympathetic and dissonant dialogues are often interconnected. A single analysis may move fluidly between these dialogues, reflecting the reality that social phenomena are rarely entirely coherent or entirely in conflict. This fluid interplay allows the framework to capture the multifaceted nature of social systems, illuminating how stability and change coexist and interact.

2.8.1.1 Example Dissonant Dialogue: Common Sense, Praxis, and Emergence

Gramsci's concept of common sense refers to the uncritical, everyday assumptions that reinforce hegemonic norms. In contrast, praxis involves reflective and intentional action to disrupt those assumptions and cultivate critical awareness. Yet the logic of emergent Complexity, which emphasises the decentralised and unpredictable nature of change within social systems, sits in tension with this transformative intent.

This dissonance is visible in attempts to introduce critical pedagogy within institutional environments shaped by technocratic and performative norms. Practitioners interviewed for this thesis described how efforts to embed democratic practices in curriculum design were quickly assimilated into managerial frameworks. Despite their commitment to praxis, the institutional context, saturated with audit culture and linear metrics, reproduces dominant assumptions through everyday routines. Here, the emancipatory aspirations of critical education were absorbed by the very system they sought to transform,

illustrating how emergent systemic tendencies can blunt or redirect intentional efforts.

This dialogue between praxis and emergence reveals an important insight: while deliberate efforts to transform hegemonic common sense are necessary, they occur within adaptive systems that produce unexpected outcomes. Emergent dynamics may complement, undermine, or reconfigure these efforts in unanticipated ways. Rather than assuming a direct causal link between critique and transformation, the dissonant dialogue underscores the iterative, contingent, and co-evolutionary nature of social change. It invites a praxis that is reflexive not only about its aims but about the complex systems through which those aims must be pursued.

2.9 Bricolage at the heart of the GCF

Bricolage is a foundational element within the Grounded Complexity Framework because it operates from an understanding that the Complexity of our lived experiences demands a flexible, multi-dimensional approach; it can integrate multiple theoretical concepts to form a cross-theoretical approach for this research. Bricolage, according to Kincheloe and Berry (2004, p.2), is grounded 'out of respect for the complexity of our lived world.' A central point of Bricolage is that it encourages theoretic, methodological and analytical pluralism, offering a substantial approach to understanding the multifaceted nature of adult education. Bricolage proves particularly effective in capturing the dynamic interplay of historical, social, and ideological factors that shape educational practices (Kincheloe, 2005, 2007).

The decision to use Bricolage in this thesis arises from its capacity to handle the multi-layered and emergent characteristics of adult education. Unlike traditional methodologies that might confine analysis within rigid boundaries, Bricolage encourages interdisciplinary knowledge creation and methodological pluralism to yield a richer and more nuanced analysis.

In this research, Bricolage is operationalised through Kincheloe and Berry's (2004) concept of a Point of Entry Text, which becomes the starting point for iterative rounds of data collection and analysis. The flexibility of Bricolage enables the researcher to select the most suitable and insightful analytical tools to gain a deeper understanding of the research subject. An example might be using a policy document as the initial anchor for Policy Analysis, followed by a critical analysis of the discourse in the same text, and a thematic analysis to focus on broader themes, culminating in a theoretical analysis of Cross-Theory Dialogue, creating a layered analysis of the data. This creates an iterative feedback loop where findings from one method inform subsequent phases of enquiry. Such iterative flexibility ensures that the research adapts and responds to emerging insights, thereby allowing a comprehensive examination of the continually evolving adult education landscape under neoliberal policy regimes. This is further described in Chapter 3.

Bricolage was selected for its flexibility in integrating diverse data types and theoretical traditions, enabling a responsiveness to emergent patterns rather than adherence to fixed categories. Other methodologies, including ethnography, mixed methods, and case studies, were considered. However, these were less suited to the Complexity-led ontology of this research. Ethnography, as classically defined by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), emphasises cultural immersion, and thick description provides depth at the level of lived experience, but tends to prioritise localised, single-site narratives. In contrast, the Grounded Complexity Framework is designed to account for multi-level interactions and systemic entanglements, tracing how localised professional experiences are shaped by—and recursively shape—structural, policy, and ideological forces. Rather than privileging one scale of analysis (micro, meso, or macro), GCF supports interpretive movement across domains. Similarly, while mixed methods and case study designs offer breadth, they often rely on pre-established typologies or research instruments that may occlude the emergence of novel or entangled meaning-making processes central to this study's aims.

Case study designs, particularly those outlined by Yin (2018), offer contextual depth and are often used to explore bounded systems of practice. However, this study resists treating its field site(s) as analytically bounded or internally coherent. The governance dynamics shaping adult education under neoliberalism spill across institutional, temporal, and conceptual boundaries, making it difficult to define a stable 'case' without artificially fixing what is, in fact, fluid and entangled. The Grounded Complexity Framework instead supports an inquiry model attuned to emergence, contradiction, and recursive causality—**privileging** interdependence and movement over boundary-setting. While case studies typically involve tightly framed questions and demarcated units of analysis, this research required a methodology that was open to shifting levels of explanation and interpretive scales.

Bricolage was selected not simply for its flexibility, but for its strategic responsiveness to complex, situated problems in adult education research. Rather than subscribing to a single methodology, bricolage permits the researcher to draw from multiple sources such as data types, theories, and analytic tools, as needed, adapting iteratively as new insights emerge. Bricolage can accommodate fragmented, multi-scalar, or cross-institutional data without enforcing artificial coherence. This adaptability allows the research to move reflexively between structural conditions, practitioner narratives, and theoretical interpretation—supporting a holistic account that honours Complexity without requiring formal closure. In this way, bricolage facilitates inclusive, reflexive inquiry capable of surfacing under-recognised patterns across domains.

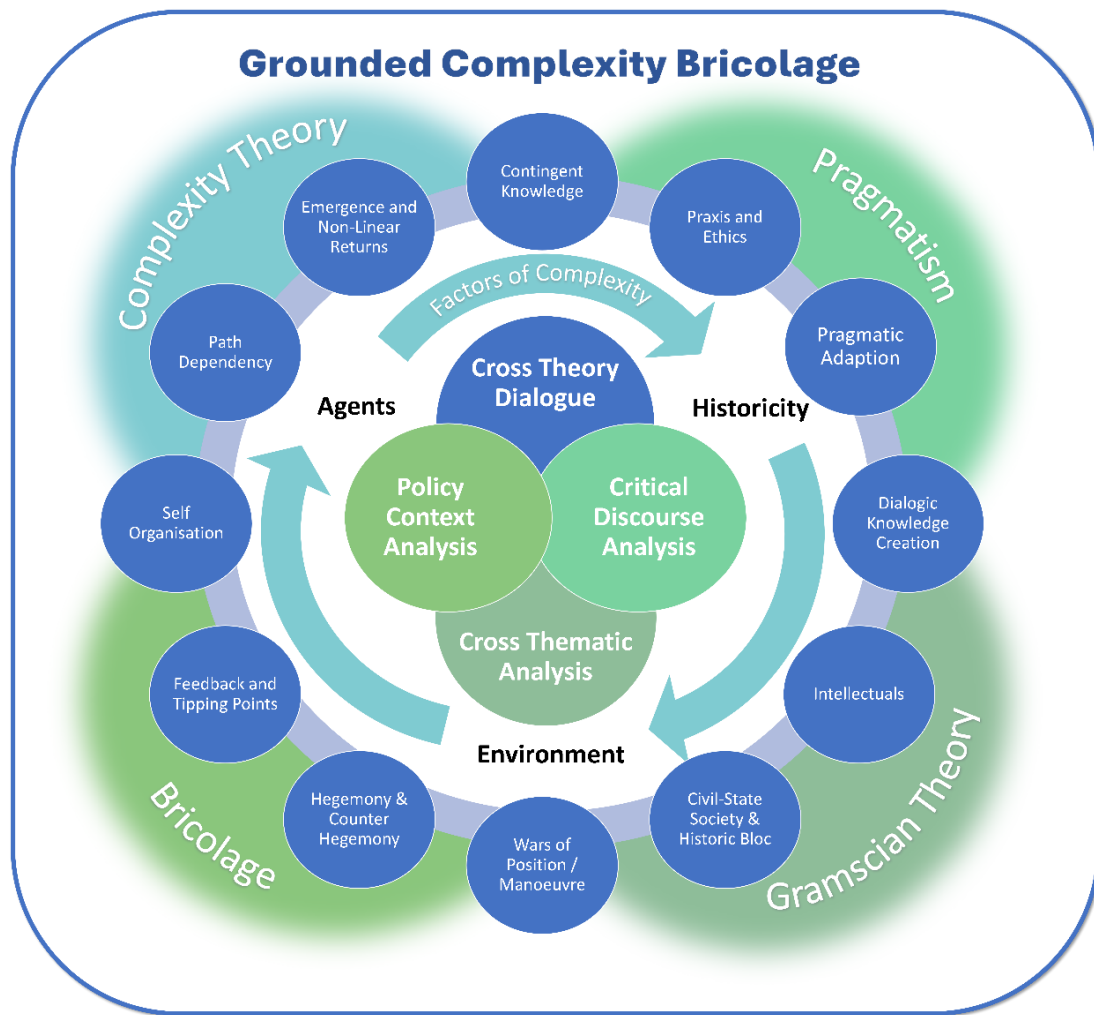


Figure 5: Grounded Complexity Framework

Establishing Bricolage as the methodological foundation ensures that this thesis remains responsive to the complex realities of adult education under Neoliberalism and New Public Management (NPM). It offers an adaptable platform for engaging with multi-layered data across domains and analytical traditions. The next chapter sets out how this methodological orientation is operationalised through a detailed research design, and how each element of the GCF Complexity Theory, Gramscian analysis, and Pragmatism guides the investigation.

Chapter 3 Research Methodology: The Bricolage

3.0 Introduction

Chapter 2 established bricolage as the methodological core of the Grounded Complexity Framework, selected for its responsiveness to Complexity, its rejection of fixed categories, and its capacity for integrating diverse analytic tools. This chapter sets out how that methodological stance was operationalised—first through the research design, then through data collection and analytical procedures.

- **3.1 The Research Design:** Describes the qualitative research framework, showing how the GCF and Bricolage approach guided methodological choices.
- **3.2 Data Collection Methods:** Details the data collection techniques used, including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, demonstrating their relevance within the Bricolage framework.
- **3.3 Analytical Techniques:** Outlines the analytical methods from the Grounded Complexity Analysis Framework using the POET process and demonstrates how it was used to interpret the data in line with GCF principles.
- **3.4 Methodological Limitations and Reflexive Considerations:** This section outlines key methodological limitations, including the restricted scope to formal provision, the underrepresentation of market-aligned voices, and the interpretive nature of the analysis.
- **3.5 Ethical Considerations, Validity, and Rigour:** This section addresses ethical issues such as participant consent and confidentiality and explains

measures to ensure the research's validity, rigour, and trustworthiness, including triangulation and member checking.

- **3.6 Conclusion:** This section synthesises the methodological approach, linking the GCF to data collection and analysis procedures.

3.1 The Research Design

Governance, as introduced in Chapter 1 (Section 1.1.2), is understood as a relational, discursively constituted process operating across multiple Complexity domains. This framing underpins the GCF's methodological design, which employs Bricolage to navigate the Complexity and contingency inherent in studying governance in adult education.

3.1.1 Research Time Period

The 1903 starting point represents the first significant moment when Local Education Authorities were formally tasked with overseeing adult education in their localities, marking a transition toward a more unified system. This historical anchor enables research to trace the socio-political and ideological transformations that have shaped the sector, particularly in response to the rise of neoliberal influences in the late 20th century. It also encourages a comparison to present-day conditions in the neoliberal environment prevalent in the state under the current government.

3.1.2 Review of Core Policy Documents and Debates

The research design draws on three historically and ideologically significant periods of policy intervention in adult education. These periods were selected not for exhaustive coverage, but because they offer strategic insight into turning points where the sector's purpose, governance structure, and ideological framing were notably redefined. Each reflects moments of heightened discursive activity

through which the values underpinning adult education were contested, reshaped, or consolidated.

- The 1919 Final Report from the Ministry of Reconstruction positioned adult education as a civic and ethical imperative, essential to national renewal after World War I. It established adult learning as a public good tied to democratic engagement and social cohesion (Ministry of Reconstruction, 1919).
- The 1973 Russell Report exemplifies the sector's ideological pivot point—marking the early influence of neoliberal priorities. It reflects a growing tension between holistic, socially inclusive educational aims and a rising emphasis on economic productivity and employability (Department of Education and Science, 1973).
- The period of the 1992 Further and Higher Education (FEHE) Act, including the 1988 Education Reform Act and the 1991 White Paper, signals a decisive restructuring moment. This phase formalised market logics, institutional autonomy, and performance accountability, embedding audit-driven governance across the sector (Hansard, 1991, 1992; Great Britain, 1988, 1991, 1992).

These periods are treated not simply as historical benchmarks, but as windows into the shifting power relations and governance imaginaries that have shaped adult education in England. The selection of these texts forms a central part of the research design, providing anchoring points for tracing the ideological realignments examined in subsequent chapters.

The specific analytical treatment of these documents—how they were read, coded, and interpreted—is detailed in Section 3.2.1.

3.1.3 Criteria for Participant Selection

Given the complexity of the subject matter, the research employed purposive sampling to ensure the selection of participants who are deeply embedded within

the adult education sector. The decision to focus on practitioners with over five years of experience was deliberate to guarantee that participants had navigated the prominent policy realignment driven by neoliberalism and NPM since the deregulation of teaching in 2012, which is discussed in chapters 4 and 5 in relation to professional Identity. This depth of experience was considered necessary for generating reflective and authentic narratives. Though in the end, the mean average years in the sector was nearly double that, at 11 years across participants, contributing to the tone of the responses.

The diverse settings from which participants were drawn, including Community Learning Centres, Institutes of Adult Learning, and Further Education Colleges, attempted to reflect the varied landscape of adult education in England, which aligns with the Complexity Theory underpinning the research, emphasising the interconnected nature of systems and the importance of capturing multiple perspectives.

However, within these constraints, an intentional strategy that allowed participants to self-volunteer reflected a desire for those engaged in the research to be invested in its outcomes. This is particularly important in Complexity-led research, where the goal is to uncover the nuanced, context-specific realities that practitioners encounter in their daily work. However, the engagement of three referred participants who then volunteered also further enriched the data.

3.1.4 Research Boundaries

The research established provisional limits to ensure a focused and manageable scope. These boundaries are necessary to provide clarity and coherence to the analysis without sacrificing the richness of the data.

- **Geographical Focus:** While the thesis primarily concerns the English adult education sector, it acknowledges the global interconnections that influence national policies. The spread of neoliberal and NPM principles through

international bodies such as the World Bank is a crucial layer of context, underscoring how global economic trends permeate local policy decisions.

- **Educational Scope:** The research is tightly focused on adult education, primarily from the age of 19, as this is post-compulsory education. However, in practice, FE colleges take learners from the age of 16, which makes it more challenging to disaggregate data. This definition excludes compulsory and higher education, but also informal (for instance, one-to-one volunteer-supported learning), work-based, and non-formal education (for instance, U3A), all of which serve beneficial functions in English education but are not complicated by the same constraints and conditions as formally organised and regulated learning.
- **In this thesis, the term ‘adult education’ is employed as both a *descriptive and a* political category.** It refers specifically to the formal education of adults in England. It encompasses a broad institutional ecology: further education (FE) colleges, Local Adult and Community Learning (ACL) services, independent training providers, local education authority (LEA) provision, and charitable or third-sector organisations engaged in adult education delivery. While acknowledging that overlapping policy pressures affect adjacent domains, such as skills training, public health, and employment services, this study is methodologically and analytically bounded to those institutions whose core remit is the education of adults.

However, to drift momentarily into theory, this terminological choice is not only practical but methodologically grounded. It reflects the epistemological commitment, central to this study’s Complexity-informed design, to treat language as constitutive of the realities it seeks to investigate. As such, *adult education* is preferred over narrower policy constructs, such as ‘skills provision’ or ‘lifelong learning,’ which, as Biesta (2015) contends, reduce education to a technical instrument of economic utility. The decision to retain this broader, historically embedded term serves as a methodological stance, resisting the framing effects of dominant governance imaginaries and sustaining fidelity to a

tradition in which adult education has served civic, cultural, and ethical as well as vocational purposes (Ball, 2003). In this sense, the terminology adopted is inseparable from the thesis's analytical orientation.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

This research uses a multi-method strategy within the Bricolage framework to capture the nuanced effects of Neoliberalism and New Public Management (NPM) on adult education. The GCF shapes the methods, ensuring a thorough exploration of the research questions. Each method provides a distinct view of the evolving dynamics in adult education:

Types of Data Sources

- **Document Analysis:** Analysis of policy documents contributed to a macro-level understanding of ideological transition by situating adult education within broader political and administrative shifts. Bowen (2009) underscores the value of document analysis as a tool for uncovering institutional intentions and systemic priorities, while Ozga (2000) frames policy as a discursive instrument through which neoliberal logics of governance are normalised and operationalised. Together, these perspectives informed the interpretive approach used to examine how state documents encode shifts in educational purpose, accountability, and managerial control.
- **Focus Groups:** Group discussions among practitioners and leaders explore collective challenges and shared values, moving beyond personal views and demonstrating a shared understanding that develops throughout the conversation. This method captures how neoliberal policies influence group dynamics and professional strategies (Morgan, 1997). See Appendix 2 for the focus group protocol.
- **Semi-structured Interviews:** Used to collect in-depth practitioner and managerial narratives, focusing on how individuals navigate performative

demands and shifting professional identities under neoliberal governance. See Section 3.2.2 for a complete account of interview design rationale, ethical adaptations, as well as Appendix 1.

3.2.1 Selection of Policy Documents

As outlined in Section 3.1.2, five core policy documents were selected for their historical and ideological salience in shaping the governance of adult education in England. This section outlines the methodological approach to these texts within the Bricolage framework.

Informed by Ball's (1990; 1995) conception of policy as both text and discourse, the documents were analysed not simply for content but as artefacts that encode shifting power relations and ideological commitments. Ball's view that policy is a site of "power/knowledge production" shaped the interpretive lens, foregrounding the rhetorical strategies through which neoliberal and managerialist logics were normalised.

This was further supported by Kincheloe's (2005) insistence that policy analysis must interrogate the epistemological assumptions and political intentions that inform what is documented, how, and by whom. His argument that policy artefacts are historically situated and ideologically saturated aligned with this study's commitment to methodological reflexivity and layered interpretation.

Together, these frameworks legitimised a purposive and interpretive approach to document selection and analysis. Documents were treated as discursive interventions within broader fields of governance, rather than neutral reflections of policy intent. This enabled the research to track how educational purposes have been reframed over time—particularly the marginalisation of civic and ethical discourses in favour of market-driven, performative agendas.

The five policy artefacts listed below were treated as discursive snapshots, each analysed for its role in narrating, legitimising, or contesting dominant governance

imaginaries. These moments were not approached in isolation, but rather as part of an evolving trajectory of reform and resistance. The full schedule for document analysis, including coding approach and analytic questions, is included in Appendix 3.

Selected documents:

- a) The 1919 Report on Adult Education (Ministry of Reconstruction, Adult Education Committee)
- b) Adult Education: A Plan for Development (Russell Committee Report, 1973)
- c) Education Reform Act 1988
- d) Education and Training for the 21st Century (DES White Paper, 1991)
- e) Relevant Parliamentary Debates on the Further and Higher Education Act (Hansard, 1991–1992)

3.2.2 Sampling Strategy, Participant Selection, and Adaptive Integrity

Bricolage's epistemological commitments informed the sampling strategy employed in this study. Rather than following a fixed or sequential model, participant selection was treated as a responsive and iterative process guided by contextual opportunities, thematic emergence, and methodological integrity.

Two overlapping approaches, opportunistic and purposive sampling, were employed. Initial recruitment drew on existing practitioner networks, enabling the inclusion of diverse voices across institutional types and professional roles. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) note that opportunistic strategies can be especially effective when researching complex social systems, as they provide access to a broad range of experiences and facilitate naturalistic engagement. As the research progressed, purposive sampling was introduced to explore themes emerging from early data, allowing for a deeper investigation of institutional contrasts and sectoral unevenness.

Participants were selected based on their professional role, institutional setting, and experience. Please see Appendix 5 for details on Participant Information. All were qualified practitioners or practitioner managers with a minimum of five years of experience, ensuring that their reflections captured the cumulative effects of sectoral change. This criterion was significant for examining how reforms, such as the removal of the Teaching Qualification Framework (TQF) in 2012, reshaped practitioner identity and professional purpose. A total of 25 participants were included: 10 participated in extended interviews, 17 contributed to single-topic focus groups, and some individuals participated in both. New participants were reviewed against the evolving sample to preserve representational balance and avoid redundancy.

Participants were drawn from three core institutional settings:

- Community Learning Centres, reflecting a civic, locally responsive model of provision.
- Institutes of Adult Learning, historically centrally funded with permissive grants that shielded them from more rigid, performance-based funding regimes.
- Further Education (FE) Colleges, which experienced the earliest and most sustained effects of New Public Management (NPM) reform.

This institutional spread allowed for a comparative view of how neoliberal logics were differentially absorbed and contested across the sector. To ensure ethical clarity, no participants were drawn from the researcher's employing institution. Instead, volunteers and referrals were used to maintain both autonomy and diversity.

During the final phase of data collection, a secondary purposive sample was added to include four participants from nationally prominent Institutes of Adult Learning, which had only recently begun to experience intensified performative

and financial pressures following post-2015 funding reforms. Their inclusion extended the analytic reach of the study by incorporating a temporal dimension. These institutions had historically been protected from the rigours of marketisation but were now increasingly subject to the same logic as FE colleges and adult community learning (ACL) providers.

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated substantial adaptation. Interviews and focus groups were conducted remotely using video conferencing and email exchanges. These adaptations, while not without limitations, proved consistent with the principles of Bricolage. Kincheloe and Berry's (2004) characterisation of the bricoleur as a methodological negotiator was directly applicable: decisions about format and sequencing were made in response to unfolding conditions, without compromising the research interpretive depth. Remote methods also facilitated wider geographic participation and created reflective spaces that may not have emerged in traditional formats.

Ethical safeguards were prioritised throughout. Participants received full information about the research aims, their rights, and data handling procedures. In accordance with the guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018), informed consent was obtained, and all personal data was anonymised and securely stored. These measures fostered relational trust and enabled open discussions of sensitive professional experiences during periods of sectoral change.

This sampling strategy thus reflects a principled balance between theoretical responsiveness and practical constraint. By maintaining analytic openness while ensuring representational depth, the study captured a broad spectrum of practitioner experiences, including voices from the institutional margins. The result is a dataset that supports a nuanced, historically situated account of how adult education professionals have navigated the shifting conditions of neoliberal governance.

3.2.3 Focus Groups: Facilitation, Ethics, and Dynamics

Focus groups fostered collective discussions among practitioners and managers, offering a space to explore shared challenges, values, and the interaction between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces within the sector. This method was beneficial for capturing group dynamics and the social construction of meaning as participants collectively reflected on their experiences and the broader implications of NPM policies.

The focus groups enabled diverse perspectives to emerge, revealing common themes and divergent viewpoints that might not have surfaced in individual interviews. This approach aligns with the Bricolage framework's integrative nature, drawing on shared knowledge and experiences while acknowledging the complexity of adult education.

While focus group responses are less represented in the data quoted in Chapter 5, the analysis of the resulting data was integral in the development of later interviews and in identifying the thematic foci during the policy analysis write-up. Appendix 2 provides the Focus Group Schedule.

This research involved two types of focus groups. Four groups took place, with two groups having the researcher present and two without. All allowed audio transcription was also accompanied by question prompts supplied from the focus group schedule to structure the session.

Planned Focus Groups

Group 1: Organisational CPD Event. This focus group, held during an after-hours Continuing Professional Development (CPD) event, included four practitioners and managers from a single organisation. They discussed how they navigate evolving demands and performance metrics under Neoliberal and NPM policies. An internal peer facilitated the discussion to minimise bias, with the researcher not present.

Group 2: Sector Network Event. This focus group included five senior leaders, managers, and policymakers from various organisations gathered at a sector network event. The discussion focused on the evolution of adult education's civil values and strategies since the 1919 Final Report, particularly regarding the influence of NPM. The researcher observed without participating to minimise bias.

Opportunistic Focus Groups

For both of these two groups, which arose serendipitously from conversations with practitioners, all participants nevertheless had the PIS before the meeting and were happy to sign the consent form and have the session recorded for transcription, which was shared with them after the event, so that they could confirm they were happy with the content being shared.

Group 3: Planned Colleague Conversation. This focus group arose when an existing participant invited four colleagues to discuss their experiences with adult education under NPM. With no researcher present, a participant facilitated the discussion, providing an organic setting to explore perspectives on professionalism in adult education.

Group 4: Peer-Led Discussion - This group consisted of four people who discussed their planned responses to a new national funding change. The peer-led format encouraged natural dialogue and offered insights into the practical impacts of policy changes on their work in education; the researcher was present but did not influence the conversation.

Managing Ethical and Power Dynamics in Focus Groups

The dynamics of each focus group were shaped not only by their structural composition but also by the relational ties among participants. In groups where individuals shared pre-existing connections, such as through a class or collaborative project, the tone of the discussion was notably more open, with

participants expressing themselves more freely and responding organically to one another's experiences. These social proximities enhanced the conversational flow but also required methodological attentiveness: group cohesion, while facilitating dialogue, could obscure dissent or suppress divergent views. Analysing these interactions thus required sensitivity to both explicit contributions and tacit forms of agreement or silence.

The researcher's positionality was a particularly significant factor in Groups 2 and 4, where an established relational history with participants introduced potential asymmetries of power. Bourke (2014) argues that positionality is not a fixed identity. It is a form of negotiated space shaped through interaction and context. This view informed a reflexive stance in which the researcher remained continually alert to how their presence might influence group dynamics, topic emphasis, or participants' willingness to critique sectoral norms. The researcher's familiar positioning offered both advantages and complications: while it contributed to an atmosphere of trust, it also carried the risk of implicit deference or self-censorship among participants.

To mitigate this, the approach drew on Hammersley and Atkinson's (2007) framework of *reflexive listening*, which recognises that the researcher is always implicated in the co-construction of meaning. In practice, this involved adopting a facilitative posture, introducing topics only when prompted, minimising interventions, and allowing the discussion to evolve without steering it towards pre-defined themes. This methodological orientation aimed to strike a balance between openness to emergent insights and an ongoing awareness of the researcher's mediating role. The resulting dialogues were shaped collaboratively without assuming that neutrality or detachment could be fully achieved.

Ethical protocols were implemented to ensure transparency and participant autonomy. Each group member received a detailed participant information sheet outlining the study's aims, their role, and the voluntary nature of their involvement (see Appendix 4). Written consent was obtained in advance, and

audio recording was conducted only with explicit agreement. These procedures were not only institutional requirements but integral to establishing trust within the group setting. A verbatim transcription of each session supported subsequent thematic analysis, which identified shared concerns and values related to adult education under neoliberal reform. The group discussions offered a meso-level perspective, enriching the analysis by highlighting collective interpretations that both complemented and occasionally complicated the individual interview data. Focus groups shaped thematic prioritisation; interviews offered deeper personal narratives.

Please refer to section 3.5 for further ethical considerations.

3.2.4 Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were designed to align closely with the overarching research questions and the principles of the GCF, with particular emphasis on capturing practitioner experiences within a sector marked by neoliberal governance and performative accountability regimes. This method enabled the researcher to explore four core thematic areas: (1) historical and policy contexts, (2) the impact of performative cultures, (3) the evolution of professional identity, and (4) the tensions between institutional compliance and practitioner values under New Public Management (NPM).

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their capacity to generate rich, situated narratives while maintaining thematic coherence across participants. Kvale (2007) argues that such interviews enable a structured yet flexible mode of engagement, allowing the researcher to probe beneath surface-level responses and follow emergent insights. This is particularly appropriate for complex, identity-related enquiries in shifting policy contexts. Similarly, Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) emphasise that semi-structured formats facilitate the balance between consistency and depth, making them especially valuable in

studies where lived experience is shaped by systemic constraints and contested discourses.

The interview schedule focused on themes of performativity and professionalism, reflecting concerns raised by Ball (2003) and Avis (2009) about how accountability regimes reshape practitioner identity. These theoretical foundations are revisited and expanded in Chapter 5, where they guide the interpretation of practitioner narratives.

Practitioners were engaged in a sequence of episodic interviews where feasible, allowing ideas to evolve through iterative exchange. Each session encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences across historical and organisational contexts before progressively moving toward questions of identity, relationships, and professional purpose under NPM. The semi-structured format facilitated this movement while preserving responsiveness to each participant's narrative trajectory.

As the interview process unfolded, the guide was adjusted in response to emerging themes and participant input. The iterative nature of this development reflects a Complexity-informed design: rather than treating interviews as discrete, extractive encounters, the research approached them as co-constructed, reflexive conversations. Ethical approval accounted for this flexibility through the inclusion of graduated prompt options, allowing questions to vary by thematic focus and participant lead.

Participants were offered the opportunity to review transcripts and provide clarifications or amendments via email, as well as occasionally in person. In some cases, further insight was gathered through natural discussions, as participants clarified their thoughts after re-reading transcripts or highlighting additional points, which deepened the longitudinal texture of the data. These measures ensured the reliability of the accounts and the alignment of the method with the values of ethical reflexivity and participant empowerment embedded in the GCF. A full version of the interview guide is provided in Appendix 1.

3.2.5 Understanding the Role of Gatekeepers

Navigating access to participants in adult education required a context-sensitive approach to gatekeeping, reflecting the sector's heterogeneous employment structures and institutional hierarchies. Gatekeeping practices were designed to uphold ethical integrity, ensuring that participation was both voluntary and transparently authorised where appropriate.

Practitioners in adult education frequently work under flexible conditions, often on a part-time, sessional, or freelance basis, enabling them to operate across multiple institutions. In such cases, participants were able to exercise independent agency in consenting to participate, and formal organisational approval was not required. However, where participants were employed full-time by a single institution or where recruitment involved a cluster of staff within one organisation, gatekeeper consent was actively sought to maintain ethical transparency and institutional accountability.

This distinction followed Hammersley and Atkinson's (2007) argument that gatekeepers hold discursive and practical power in shaping access, boundaries, and the interpretive field of the research. In three cases involving full-time practitioners or leaders employed by a single institution, organisational permission was secured to ensure participation did not contravene institutional norms or generate unintended tensions. This was particularly important where the researcher had prior professional ties to the setting; gatekeeper engagement helped to clarify roles and avoid potential coercion.

Where participants held senior positions or operated autonomously, such as self-employed consultants, part-time lecturers, or leaders with portfolio roles, formal gatekeeping was neither required nor ethically necessary. In these cases, participants had sufficient professional independence to give their informed consent directly. This approach aligns with Clark's (2011) caution that unnecessary gatekeeping can inhibit authentic engagement and with Crow *et*

al.'s (2006) argument that managing these relationships requires vigilance to avoid implied coercion or reputational risk. By adjusting the gatekeeping strategy to reflect employment status and institutional role, the study safeguarded participant autonomy while meeting the guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) on consent, confidentiality, and organisational ethics.

Ultimately, these strategies reflected the Bricolage ethos of the wider methodology: a flexible, contextually responsive approach that acknowledged both structural Complexity and ethical nuance. Gatekeeping was viewed as a relational and ethical practice that requires negotiation, reflexivity, and sensitivity to power dynamics.

3.2.6 Adaptive Methodologies and Research Disruption

The data collection process encountered several challenges, particularly in adapting to the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Remote methodologies, including virtual focus groups and asynchronous email follow-ups, necessitated both logistical planning and conceptual flexibility to maintain participant engagement and ensure the integrity of data collection. These adaptations were part of a broader methodological stance rooted in Complexity, contingency, and responsiveness. Kincheloe (2004) describes Bricolage as an approach involving 'construction and reconstruction, contextual diagnosis, negotiation, and readjustment' (p. 3), where researchers 'tinker' with the method in order to maintain fidelity to their epistemological commitments. This adaptive ethos was essential to sustaining methodological coherence in a shifting research environment, enabling the study to explore how neoliberal reform has shaped adult education while accommodating the practical realities of global disruption.

These adaptations also brought unexpected benefits. Remote methods enabled broader participation, particularly from geographically dispersed practitioners,

and created new spaces for reflective engagement that may not have emerged in traditional face-to-face settings. In this respect, the methodological adjustments were extensions of the study's underlying commitment to Complexity, plurality, and relational agency.

The COVID-19 pandemic also imposed significant limitations on the original data collection strategy. The research initially aimed to incorporate direct observation, shared online spaces, and visual storytelling to complement interviews and focus groups. These techniques were designed to enrich the ethnographic dimension of the study by capturing practice as it unfolded within institutional contexts. However, the closure of educational sites and the rapid shift to remote operations precluded access to Further Education colleges, cancelling plans for in-person observations and real-time engagement with policy implementation.

This disruption coincided with transitions in the researcher's professional role, including changes in employment, which further complicated sustained participant engagement and logistical continuity. These circumstances required both ethical and reflexive renegotiation and methodological reconfiguration. In response, a formal extension of Ethics Approval was sought and granted, permitting a second phase of data collection.

This adaptive response is consistent with the principles of Bricolage. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) argue that qualitative research must be responsive to 'naturally occurring opportunities to extend inquiry,' especially when confronted by unforeseen constraints. Rather than abandoning core research aims, the study reconfigured its timeline and techniques to preserve methodological integrity. During the extended phase, four prior participants were re-engaged via email, offering reflective commentary on their original interviews. This form of asynchronous follow-up added a longitudinal and iterative dimension to the data, deepening the analytic understanding of professional experience under shifting policy conditions.

The study's methodological flexibility reflects what Kincheloe (2005) describes as the defining feature of Bricolage: an approach that privileges responsiveness, creativity, and the pragmatic use of available resources. While the loss of observational data inevitably constrained some aspects of the original design, the revised approach maintained coherence with the research's epistemological commitments and enhanced its capacity to respond meaningfully to context. The adaptations ultimately ensured that the data remained both rich and relevant, capturing the lived effects of neoliberal governance in a moment of systemic uncertainty.

Alongside these logistical challenges, the research faced significant difficulties in accessing consistent and comparable statistical data on adult education across different historical periods. This problem reflects not only gaps in the archival record but also meaningful changes in categorisation, quantification, and reporting practices that have governed the field over the past century. As Mills and Morton (2013) argue, the production of educational data is itself historically situated and ideologically mediated; the categories used to measure participation or outcomes are not neutral descriptors but reflections of prevailing policy rationalities. In this study, such inconsistencies were most acute in attempts to track longitudinal patterns in adult education participation and policy framing. While central government data was prioritised where possible, comparisons across time remain necessarily interpretive rather than empirically definitive. Biesta (2007) similarly reminds us that education is not a field amenable to simple generalisation or linear causality; methodological ambition must be tempered by epistemological humility. As such, the study approaches historical comparison as a discursive and conceptual exercise rather than a purely quantitative one, drawing on textual, rhetorical, and structural analysis to interpret sectoral change.

3.3 Analytical Techniques: GCF Process

The analytical techniques in this research were framed within the GCF, as outlined in Chapter 2 and embedded within the Bricolage approach developed by Kincheloe and Berry (2004). Bricolage enabled a responsive yet theoretically coherent mode of inquiry, capable of adapting to emergent insights without compromising conceptual integrity. This flexibility was not unbounded: the GCF operationalised Bricolage through a systematic series of iterative steps, each building upon the previous, reflecting the non-linear dynamics characteristic of Complexity Theory and maintaining a coherent relationship with both discourse and practice.

Although Bricolage accommodates methodological adaptability, its use in this study was explicitly framed by critical reflexivity and conceptual rigour. This ensured that flexibility did not collapse into inconsistency but was instead directed by the purposive integration of Complexity Theory, Pragmatism, and Gramscian analysis (Berry, 2004; Kincheloe, 2005). Methodological choices were therefore responsive to emergent findings while remaining anchored in an evolving theoretical architecture.

As the analysis progressed, the GCF was further refined through the incorporation of additional analytic tools, most notably Cross-Theory Dialogue (CTD), which enabled the interrogation of complex relational dynamics as they unfolded across historical and empirical contexts. Reflexivity was required to address the complex and evolving realities of adult education under neoliberal reform.

To sustain theoretical integrity across historical and empirical materials, the GCF integrated a pluralistic repertoire of analytical tools. This approach enabled the research to track the ideological and structural evolution of the adult education sector while remaining attentive to the contested meanings and practices embedded within it. As Berry (2004) emphasises, the integration of diverse

analytical traditions can yield a more nuanced understanding of complex phenomena.

Central to this process was the selection of Point of Entry Texts (POETs), which functioned as focal artefacts for iterative analysis. In Chapter 4, the POETs included the 1919 Report on Adult Education and the 1973 Russell Report, selected to examine significant moments in adult education policy: the post-war reconstruction period, characterised by civic and emancipatory ideals, and the early 1970s, which marked the ideological preconditions for neoliberal reform. In addition, Hansard Parliamentary transcripts related to the 1988 Education Reform Act, the 1991 White Paper, and the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act were analysed for their discursive construction of governance imaginaries during a period of accelerated policy transformation.

Chapter 5 extended this approach using empirical data derived from 10 semi-structured interviews and four focus groups, which comprised 26 hours of recorded material. These transcripts offered insight into the lived experience of practitioners as they navigated institutional constraints and shifting policy frameworks, enabling the integration of practice-based testimony with the systemic and discursive analysis outlined in earlier chapters.

To support the transparency and replicability of the analytical process, detailed examples, including annotated policy extracts and a cross-mapped synthesis table, are provided in Appendix 6. These materials serve not merely as illustrative supplements, but as methodologically significant demonstrations of how the analytical techniques were operationalised within the GCF structure. Their relocation supports clarity in the main text while preserving full access to the underlying interpretive rationale.

3.3.1 What is the POET Analysis Process

As noted above, Bricolage encourages the identification of a POET, which is iteratively analysed using different tools. Within the GCF, the choice of tools is contextually responsive and theoretically guided, reflecting the framework's commitment to non-linear, emergent analysis. This approach aligns with the theoretical underpinnings of Complexity Theory, emphasising emergent, context-sensitive, and iterative methodologies. Each analytical tool was applied reflexively and iteratively, responding to the unique demands of the data and research questions. This section outlines the analytical steps, their positioning within the GCF, and the rationale for their use. A worked example from Chapter 4 is included in Appendix 6 (Example A1.1) to demonstrate how this process was applied in practice.

3.3.1.1 POET Analysis 1: Thematic Analysis

Thematic Analysis: Scaffolding, Refinement, and Expansion

Thematic analysis served as the foundation of the POET Analysis Process, enabling the identification, refinement, and synthesis of recurring patterns and relationships within the data. Initially, thematic coding was guided by broad categories aligned with the research questions and early theoretical frameworks, including professionalism and autonomy, culture, continuity and change, purpose and values, structures and challenges, and agency.

However, the thematic analysis was not static; it evolved through an iterative and reflexive process informed by three critical factors:

1. **Emergent Insights from the Data:** As the analysis progressed, new thematic codes emerged organically from the data, capturing unexpected dimensions of adult education, such as resistance and compliance, and the role of rhetorical devices, including moralising language, in policy texts.
2. **Revisiting and Refining Codes:** Thematic codes were revised, expanded, or combined throughout the analysis. Early codes like culture and autonomy

were reconsidered in light of deeper insights, evolving into ideology and agency, respectively.

3. **Incorporation of Contemporary Literature:** Continued engagement with historical and contemporary literature contextualised themes within broader theoretical and ideological debates. For example, critiques of neoliberal governance have informed the reframing of professionalism as a contested and fragmented concept.

Examples of Thematic Evolution

Several major thematic codes underwent significant transformations:

- **Professionalism and Autonomy to Agency:** Early coding focused on autonomy as individual decision-making. Practitioner narratives and policy contexts revealed systemic constraints, reframing autonomy as a dynamic agency that incorporates acts of resistance, compliance, and ethical praxis.
- **Culture to Ideology to Civil Values:** Initially framed as shared norms, culture was reinterpreted as ideologically contested. This transition revealed underlying civil values, such as humanist, social reformist, and neoliberal priorities, that drove educational purposes. Praxis was integrated as a lens for value-led decision-making.
- **Structures to Structures and Challenges:** Thematic analysis of funding and regulatory frameworks expanded to include sectoral, societal, and educational challenges. For instance, tensions between workforce preparation and lifelong learning were coded as critical to understanding systemic pressures.

Implications of Thematic Evolution

The iterative refinement of themes within the analysis has deepened the understanding of adult education by transitioning from fixed constructs, such as autonomy and culture, to more dynamic and contested concepts, including agency and values. This evolution bridged the different domains of analysis, connecting individual practitioner actions to broader systemic forces. At the same

time, civil values were linked to ideological frameworks that influence organisational and societal goals.

Thematic progression also illuminated contradictions at the heart of the sector. Fragmented professionalism and contested civil values exposed deeper ideological fault lines, while the expanded structural codes captured interlocking pressures from workforce, civic, and institutional domains.

Crucially, this thematic evolution ensured a strong alignment between the themes and the data. By allowing themes to emerge organically and evolve reflexively, the analysis remained grounded in the realities uncovered in the data while remaining responsive to the nuances of the research subject. This approach upheld the GCF's central commitment: to examine Complexity without reduction and to remain attuned to the entangled character of discourse, practice, and power in adult education.

This iterative refinement process is further illustrated in Appendix 6 (Example A1.1), where the application of thematic, archaeological, and discursive tools is demonstrated concerning a key extract from the 1919 Report. While the present section has outlined the rationale and conceptual scaffolding of thematic analysis, the appendix provides an applied example that captures the layering and evolution of interpretive insight within the GCF framework.

3.3.1.2 POET Analysis 2: Policy Archaeology

Policy archaeology, drawing directly on Ball's (1990) framework, explored how key policy texts constructed problems and reflected broader socio-political structures. This analytical step positioned the data within its historical and ideological milieu, foregrounding the 1919 Report as a product of its time.

This was conducted iteratively with thematic analysis to ensure that emerging patterns were situated within the socio-political and historical contexts that shaped their production. The purpose of this stage was to understand how the

discursive constructions within the POETs responded to and intervened within dominant policy paradigms of their respective periods.

To illustrate, policy archaeology applied to the 1919 Report revealed a framing of adult education as both an organic outgrowth of democratic aspirations and a mechanism of state legitimacy. The document responded to the upheavals of post-war reconstruction by positioning education as a civic solution to societal fragmentation, while simultaneously embedding reformist and paternalistic ideologies that reinforced centralised authority. Barriers such as premature labour and fragmented provision were acknowledged but framed in ways that legitimised state intervention rather than grassroots solutions. The legacy of this framing, as the analysis reveals, established adult education as a civic necessity governed by hierarchical structures, a pattern that is echoed in subsequent policy trajectories.

These dynamics are presented in more detail through a worked example in Appendix 6 (Example A1.1), which includes the full coded extract from the 1919 Report and a structured commentary using six interpretive questions. This material demonstrates how policy archaeology was operationalised within the Grounded Complexity Framework to surface power relations, ideological tensions, and discursive legacy. It functions not only as an illustration but also as the methodological foundation for the historical analyses developed in Chapter 4.

3.3.1.3 POET Analysis 3: Critical Discourse Analysis

Fairclough's (1992, 1995, 2003) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was selectively and strategically employed to interrogate the relationship between language, power, and ideology in key texts. While CDA is typically organised around a three-tier model- textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice- this thesis draws on its conceptual orientation rather than applying its complete procedural structure. This adaptive use aligns with both Fairclough's own assertion that CDA is not a fixed method but a context-sensitive analytical

approach and with the methodological pluralism of the Bricolage framework (Kincheloe, 2005; Berry, 2004), which demands responsiveness to Complexity.

CDA was applied across multiple phases of the research. Chapter 4.6 supported a comparative discourse analysis of the 1919 and 1973 Russell Reports, illuminating how each articulated competing imaginaries of adult education, civic purpose, and governance legitimacy. It was also used in analysing Hansard transcripts in Chapter 4.9 and participant transcripts in Chapter 5, where attention to discursive strategies further exposed the ideological framing of policy and practice.

Rather than treating CDA as a standalone method, it functioned here as a lens to refine and deepen prior POET analyses, particularly following thematic and policy archaeological stages. This enabled close attention to rhetorical, metaphorical, and grammatical structures that reinforced or disrupted dominant narratives of governance. In this sense, CDA served not to 'apply' a checklist of methods but, in line with Fairclough's (2003) own emphasis, to 'open up' the ideological work of language within texts situated in historically contingent fields of power.

3.3.1.4 POET Analysis 4: Cross-Theory Dialogue

CTD was developed within this thesis as a distinctive analytical device for synthesising and interrogating theoretical meaning across complex and ideologically layered data. As outlined in Chapter 2, CTD draws on the entanglement logic of the GCF to enable interaction between conceptual elements from Gramscian analysis, Complexity Theory, and Pragmatism. While its conceptual foundations were defined in earlier chapters, its methodological role within the POET framework is distinct: it does not merely interpret data through a singular lens but constructs reflexive dialogues between contrasting theoretical perspectives.

Unlike simple juxtaposition of theoretical perspectives, CTD is not a parallel reading strategy. Instead, it is an abductive process that seeks to explore the tensions, overlaps, and dissonances between theories to generate new insights that would not arise from within a single paradigm. While thematic integration may smooth over differences, CTD deliberately foregrounds them as sites of productive friction. Its contribution lies in surfacing what one theory may silence, simplify, or misread in the terms of another. This moves the analysis from additive to genuinely synthetic: a dialogue that reshapes the interpretive terrain, not just populates it with multiple lenses. The dialogue is conducted iteratively throughout the analysis and functions as a conceptual hinge between empirical interpretation and theoretical elaboration.

The purpose of CTD within the GCF was twofold:

- To surface theoretical tensions that emerged in the interpretation of policy texts, participant narratives, and historical transitions.
- To construct layered interpretations of governance, agency, and ideology that remained faithful to empirical data while acknowledging systemic entanglement.

Practically, CTD was engaged at multiple points:

- Following thematic analysis and policy archaeology, it enabled the positioning of emergent patterns within broader ideological and structural contexts.
- During and after CDA, it allowed further interrogation of discursive formations through juxtaposed conceptual lenses.

Examples include the juxtaposition of hegemony and path dependence to interpret ideological stabilisation in Chapter 4, and the use of ethical praxis and passive revolution to understand micro-resistance in Chapter 5. In the early stages, CTD was guided by pre-defined pairings, but the process evolved into

more adaptive engagements in line with the Bricolage methodology, with concepts selected and refined responsively based on the analytical terrain.

3.3.1.5 POET Analysis 5: Meta Cross-Theoretical Dialogue

A final integrative step is possible and even encouraged as a form of reflexivity in Bricolage: one that draws these analyses together and synthesises their cumulative significance across the thesis. This fifth and final stage of the POET process, followed in this research, is therefore meta-analytical, functioning through the reflective alignment and analysis of theoretical development post-POET at a collective level. It positions CTD not only as an analytical technique but as a scaffold through which the conceptual architecture of the thesis is gradually assembled.

In this thesis, CTD operates recursively. Each instance of dialogue, whether focused on civic displacement, bounded agency, or semantic stabilisation, feeds forward into subsequent analyses, contributing to a spiralling elaboration of theoretical meaning. This recursive movement is most fully realised in Sections 4.12 and Chapter 5, where prior CTDs are revisited, reinterpreted, and integrated at a higher level of abstraction. There, the entangled logics of Complexity, hegemony, and agency, which are not merely summarised but re-composed, evidencing the thesis's conceptual architecture as an outcome of its method.

To support transparency in the cumulative structure of the thesis, a CTD–GCF Alignment Table is included in Appendix 6 (Example A1.3). This table maps each Cross-Theory Dialogue to its corresponding domain-level analyses, specifying the concepts placed in dialogue and their thematic contribution. Although excluded from the main text for reasons of clarity, it should be read alongside Sections 4.12 and 6.6, where the recursive architecture it evidences is reintegrated and synthesised.

CTD should therefore be understood as both a methodological step and a structural thread: each instance constructs a bridge between concepts, while

Meta-CTD reveals the architecture that holds these bridges together. If CTD allows for dynamic theoretical encounters, Meta-CTD reflects on how those encounters accumulate, repeat, and evolve across the thesis. For example, early dialogues between 'emergence' and 'hegemony' reappear in later chapters, but are now reshaped by practitioner testimony and policy shifts. Meta-CTD maps this recursive pattern, showing how the thesis's conceptual architecture is not static but co-constructed through ongoing analysis. This reflexive loop—where theory builds on itself—is what enables the GCF to sustain depth and coherence across diverse empirical and historical domains.

Thus, the Alignment Table in Appendix 6 provides a forward-facing view of this conceptual architecture. It illustrates how each CTD initiates a trajectory of theoretical elaboration, how these trajectories recur and intersect across GCF domains, and how they culminate in the integrative analyses of ideology, Complexity, and ethical agency presented in the thesis's final syntheses.

3.4 Methodological Limitations and Reflexivity

While the GCF and qualitative methodologies employed in this research offer rich insights into the dynamic nature of adult education, several limitations must be acknowledged. As outlined in Chapter 1.6, the study is bounded to formal adult education in England, deliberately excluding non-formal and informal contexts. This boundary, while analytically necessary, also introduces constraints on generalisability across the wider adult learning landscape and shapes the interpretive reach of the findings presented here.

Secondly, participant selection may introduce some biases. While a range of practitioners and practitioner-managers were included, independent training providers, particularly those more tightly embedded in market-driven delivery cultures, are underrepresented. This may result in a partial view of the sector's diversity, suggesting opportunities for future research to capture these additional perspectives. This under-representation is itself symptomatic of broader sectoral

asymmetries, where market-aligned providers often operate outside established professional networks, thereby reinforcing the fragmentation this study seeks to interrogate. Additionally, some managerial participants may have moderated their responses due to institutional positioning, thereby introducing subtle constraints on the narratives they shared.

Thirdly, the use of discourse analysis and interpretive methods introduces the possibility of analytic bias, given the researcher's influence on theme identification and interpretation. Mitigation strategies included the research employing reflexive practices throughout, including systematic thematic coding, triangulation of data sources, member checking with participants, and peer debriefing. The possibility of interpretive drift was addressed through reflexive memo-writing and regular review of emerging codes.

Finally, policy analysis is necessarily limited by access to formal documents and public records. Informal policy dialogues and internal communications are beyond the scope of this study, which may obscure some of the contradictions or contested narratives that emerged during key reforms. For example, internal institutional responses to new performance frameworks—often informal or undocumented—were not accessible through the data gathered.

These limitations are not failures of design but reflect the situated, contingent, and partial nature of knowledge production within a Complexity-informed epistemology. As discussed in Chapter 2, the GCF embraces methodological incompleteness as a condition of working within dynamic, entangled systems where certainty and closure are neither possible nor desirable.

3.5 Ethical Considerations, Validity, and Rigour

This research adhered to the ethical standards outlined in the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines (2018), which were the most current at the time of fieldwork. The University of East Anglia approved ethical protocols, which were revisited to ensure ongoing alignment as the research evolved. The

GCF and the Bricolage approach informed the study's ethical reflexivity and methodological coherence, supporting a research design that was both responsive to participants' realities and grounded in epistemological accountability.

3.5.1 Ethics-in-Practice and Reflexivity

Ethical responsibility was treated as an ongoing, situated practice. Informed consent, participant autonomy, and confidentiality were foundational throughout the study. Participants were fully informed of the research purpose, scope, and thematic areas in advance. Participation was voluntary, and withdrawal was possible at any point without consequence.

In keeping with ethical best practices, transcripts from interviews and focus groups were returned to participants for review, amendment, or withdrawal. This created space for participant reflexivity and reinforced the dialogic nature of the research encounter. Participants were invited to revisit earlier narratives and contribute further insights during follow-up exchanges, particularly in the extended post-COVID phase of data collection. This approach supported transparency, mutual respect, and ethical integrity.

Equally important was the researcher's own reflexive engagement. As a practitioner embedded within the adult education sector, the researcher's positionality informed every phase of the study, from the construction of interview questions to the interpretation of participants' accounts. Reflexivity was treated as an epistemological stance consistent with Kincheloe's (2005, 2008) conception of Critical Complexity. Kincheloe argues that reflexivity demands attention to how knowledge is situated, partial, and entangled with broader ideological, historical, and institutional forces. In this spirit, field notes and analytic memos were maintained throughout the project to document interpretive tensions, emergent uncertainties, and moments of positional reappraisal. This recursive practice of memoing, sense-checking, and dialogic testing against

participant feedback supported what Kincheloe terms a ‘critical complex epistemology’: one that foregrounds uncertainty and resists premature closure.

This layered, reflexive practice, which is both participant-led and researcher-initiated, cultivated a research environment grounded in ethical responsiveness, interpretive openness, and mutual respect.

3.5.2 Ethical Protocols

Four interrelated principles supported the ethical design of the research:

Informed Consent and Confidentiality: Participants were fully informed of the study’s scope, aims, and methods. Written consent was obtained before participation and reconfirmed during the transition to remote methods necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Pseudonyms were used to preserve anonymity, and all data were stored securely in accordance with data protection guidance (Wiles *et al.*, 2008). Confidentiality was maintained throughout, including during digital communications and virtual interviews.

Reflexivity and Ethical Vigilance: Drawing on Finlay (2002), ethical reflexivity was approached as a continuous process of critical self-awareness. This required the researcher to remain aware of how their own positionality, assumptions, and relationships influenced both the conduct of fieldwork and the interpretation of the data. In this context, ethical vigilance refers to the researcher’s sustained attentiveness to the shifting ethical landscape of the study, particularly as it was shaped by asymmetries of power, institutional dynamics, and the evolving realities faced by participants. The Bricolage approach, with its emphasis on methodological adaptability, also demanded a corresponding ethical responsiveness capable of navigating these complex and fluid conditions.

Participant-Centred Flexibility: The study remained attentive to participants’ comfort and well-being, particularly during the pandemic. Interviewing was

paused at the height of the crisis in recognition of the sector's strain. Remote interviews were only resumed with renewed consent, and all digital engagement took account of participants' privacy and preferences. In line with Tracy's (2010) notion of ethical flexibility, the research balanced procedural rigour with context-sensitive judgment.

Equity and Fairness: Efforts were made to promote inclusive and equitable participation. Recognising the diversity of participants' professional roles and life experiences, the study was attentive to potential asymmetries of power, especially within focus group settings. The composition of groups was designed to minimise hierarchical tension and create a space for open dialogue. Participants' contributions were treated as situated and valued knowledge rather than extractable data (Bassey, 1999).

3.5.3 Validity and Rigour

The study ensured methodological validity and rigour through principled alignment with the ontological and epistemological assumptions of Complexity Theory, Pragmatism, and Bricolage.

Methodological Coherence: A multi-method design was employed to capture the complex and entangled nature of adult education governance. Semi-structured interviews, focus groups, document analysis, and discourse analysis were employed in a structured yet flexible design, enabling the examination of shifting structural, discursive, and professional dynamics (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Triangulation was employed at multiple levels. Data triangulation compared practitioner narratives across settings, while methodological triangulation combined interviews, focus groups, and documentary analysis, thereby enhancing the robustness of the findings through cross-verification of emerging themes.

Member Checking: Participants were invited to engage in member checking during the analysis process, where they reviewed interpretations and clarified or elaborated on their contributions. This process not only ensured the accuracy of representation (Israel & Hay, 2006) but reinforced the co-constructed, ethically grounded character of the research.

3.5.4 Ensuring Trustworthiness

Transparent documentation, systematic analytical procedures, and rigorous attention to interpretive integrity supported the credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

Transparent Methods: A detailed audit trail was maintained, including field notes, memo-writing, coding decisions, and successive iterations of analysis. This enabled traceability from interpretive claims to their evidentiary and procedural origins (Yin, 2018).

Systematic and Grounded Analysis: The research employed multiple analytical lenses (e.g., thematic, critical discourse, policy archaeology) while remaining grounded in the participants' voices and narratives. This ensured both depth and responsiveness. Coding procedures were regularly reviewed to minimise interpretive drift and bias (Merriam, 2009).

Voice-led Inquiry: While thematic rigour was preserved, the participant's voice remained central throughout the analysis. This ensured that the findings did not overwrite the Complexity of lived experience. Narratives around job insecurity, micro-resistance, and ethical navigation under New Public Management were led by participant meaning-making rather than imposed interpretive frames.

3.6 Conclusion: Synthesis and Implementation of Methods

The methods used in this research provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the impact of NPM on adult education. The research offered a

nuanced exploration of the sector's complexities by employing semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and policy analysis within the Bricolage approach. Each method contributed uniquely: interviews provided personal narratives, focus groups revealed collective dynamics, and policy analysis contextualised systemic changes. Bricolage enabled this methodological diversity to cohere as an integrated analysis of NPM's multi-scalar effects on governance, professionalism, and civic purpose. The GCF's integration with Bricolage not only supported analytic adaptability but also offered a transferable model for researching Complexity in education governance, one that is grounded, reflexive, and epistemologically accountable.

Chapter 4 Governance Trajectory to 2017

4.0 Introduction

This chapter examines the evolution of adult education governance in England from 1903 to 2017. It adopts a relational understanding of governance as a dynamic process through which legitimacy, values, and strategic direction are negotiated between state, sector, and institutional actors (Ball, 2008). While Rhodes's (1996) structural framing remains relevant for understanding shifts in coordination and funding, Ball's emphasis on discourse and institutional negotiation better aligns with this thesis's focus on ideological contestation and practitioner agency.

Governance is therefore explored not as a fixed structure, but as a historically situated terrain of relational influence and normative struggle. Operationalising the Grounded Complexity Framework across this period, the chapter traces how the balance between civic and economic rationales has shifted, examining policy reforms, organisational responses, and practitioner experiences in their historical context. The framework used in this chapter aligns closely with the macro-organisation of Midgley's domains. However, where thematically appropriate, evidence from the domain-level analysis is occasionally grouped to support an integrative discussion.

4.1 Before 1919: Reform Pressures and the Emergence of Governance

Before 1919, adult education in England evolved through fragmented and locally contingent arrangements that lacked statutory coherence. This fragmentation cannot be reduced to administrative immaturity alone; rather, it reflected the

ideological tensions embedded within New Liberal thought. Harris (1992) highlights the ambivalence at the heart of this tradition, where appeals to civic obligation were countered by anxieties about the expansion of state authority. N. Rose (2001) extends this by identifying the period as one in which governmental rationalities increasingly sought to govern through ethical self-regulation rather than institutional centralisation. Within this context, Fieldhouse (1996) characterises adult education during this period as a landscape of cooperation among voluntary organisations, local authorities, and emerging state actors, each operating within their own ideological frameworks. Kelly (1992) and Vincent (1991) similarly highlight how philanthropic and grassroots initiatives partially compensated for structural absence, though without securing enduring institutional guarantees. As Tett (2014) later argues, this early configuration did not merely anticipate fragmentation; it actively encoded it as a durable feature of adult education governance, one that would re-emerge at successive moments of reform and retrenchment.

The section that follows organises this pre-systemic phase (1850–1919) into six structured themes, which holistically consider the natural, social, and subjective domains, each ordered by timeline. This evidences the interrelatedness of factors within the domains of Complexity. It is then synthesised in the meta-Complexity section, which follows. In tracing these evolutions, the chapter is attentive not only to structural transformations but also to shifting conceptions of education’s purpose, particularly the gradual displacement of civic, relational rationales in favour of economic instrumentalism (Biesta, 2015; Moon, 2006).

4.1.1 Domains of Complexity, 1903–1919: Natural, Social, and Subjective

4.1.1.1 Theme 1: Voluntary and Religious Origins (1850s–1900s)

Fieldhouse (1996) characterises early adult education as shaped by philanthropic liberalism, promoting moral and civic improvement within a

paternalistic ethos that often reinforced class hierarchies. While some institutions emphasised technical skills, particularly the Mechanics' Institutes, other forms of provision, such as Sunday schools, reading rooms, and moral instruction classes, functioned more directly as instruments of social discipline. These were aimed ostensibly at democratic empowerment, but in reality, they instilled civil values such as sobriety, punctuality, and deference, regulating the behaviour of the working classes in line with prevailing norms of respectability and social order. As N. Rose (2001) argues, such practices exemplify a broader strategy of governing through ethical self-regulation, where the cultivation of internalised norms serves to secure social cohesion without recourse to direct coercion.

Simon (1982) adopts an even more sceptical stance, arguing that as state involvement in adult education increased, it tended to subordinate civic intentions to bureaucratic oversight and administrative priority. In contrast, Taylor (1980b) argues that many of the civic principles later codified in the 1919 Report were already taking shape intellectually and institutionally, particularly within voluntary and university extension movements, even if these developments lacked systemic state coordination.

Jennings (1980) and Wiltshire (1980) emphasise the resulting organisational incoherence: while LEAs, universities, and voluntary bodies often articulated overlapping goals, they frequently operated at cross purposes, producing symbolic visibility without durable governance integration. Together, these accounts portray a pre-1919 landscape characterised by ideological aspiration as well as structural fragmentation: a field in which civic adult education was imagined, debated and even romanticised, and partly enacted, yet remained institutionally unorganised.

4.1.1.2 Theme 2: University Extension and Early Institutional Diversity (1870s–1910s)

Fieldhouse (1996) argues that from the 1870s, university extension schemes developed by institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge significantly expanded adult education into civic spaces, particularly in literate urban centres with strong local leadership. However, despite partnerships with local reformers, governance and pedagogy remained university-led and centrally managed. Goldman (1995) similarly observes that these programmes reflected elite institutional priorities and rarely addressed the political concerns or lived experiences of working-class learners. The most sustained opposition came from working-class education movements such as the Plebs League and the Labour Colleges, which emerged in the early twentieth century in response to what they viewed as the ideological paternalism and political neutrality of mainstream provision. These organisations promoted an alternative model of adult education: independent, socialist, and grounded in collective inquiry, with political economy and working-class agency at its centre (Simon, 1991; Kelly, 1992). While liberal reformers presented extension as democratic outreach, these critics emphasised its reinforcement of academic hierarchies and its marginalisation of politically transformative content. As Taylor (1980b) notes, the extension movement undoubtedly widened access but did so by reinscribing epistemic inequality, prefiguring later struggles over curricular authority, institutional legitimacy, and the terms of inclusion.

4.1.1.3 Theme 3: Urban Crisis and the Turn to Civic Education (1890s–1910s)

Reformers in the 1890s and 1910s increasingly linked low adult education to national decline, citing urban overcrowding, poor housing, and low educational attainment as tripartite threats to civic cohesion and imperial strength. Booth (1892) and Rowntree (1901) provided detailed statistical evidence of structural poverty, while Asquith warned in *The Times* (1901) of an undereducated working class endangering the Empire itself:

‘What is the use of talking of Empire if here, at its very centre, there is always to be found a mass of people stunted in education, prey to intemperance, huddled and congested beyond the possibility of realising in any true sense either social or domestic life?’ (Asquith, 1901)

These anxieties gave rise to civic experiments in education, but in the absence of statutory coordination, efforts remained fragmented and locally driven (Simon, 1991; Jennings, 1980). New Liberal theorists, such as T.H. Green and L.T. Hobhouse, articulated a concept of ‘positive liberty,’ framing education as a state-enabled opportunity grounded in moral and participatory citizenship. These perspectives encouraged policymakers to introduce incremental state support while maintaining the dominance of voluntary provision, a model in which civic associations and philanthropic actors retained primary responsibility. As Simon (1991) and Gillard (2018) argue, adult education was simultaneously cast as both a civic duty and a national necessity —a discursive fusion of moral reform and public responsibility that legitimised limited growth in state involvement without requiring a formal statutory framework.

4.1.1.4 Theme 4: Selective Incorporation and Governance Limits (1903–1911)

The 1903 Education Act marked a cautious expansion of state involvement in adult education by authorising, though not requiring, Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to fund provision (Simon, 1991; Jennings, 1980). This permissive framing led to uneven implementation: some authorities partnered with civic providers, while others withdrew from adult education altogether. From 1904, Treasury grants were extended to selected voluntary and university-affiliated organisations recognised as ‘responsible bodies’, enabling the state to support provision without assuming direct control over pedagogy or curriculum (Fieldhouse, 1996).

The emerging governance configuration in early twentieth-century adult education can be interpreted as tripartite in effect, though not by formal design:

1. Local Education Authorities (LEAs) were empowered to offer both practical courses and to manage local technical education colleges under discretionary powers;
2. University extension departments and liberal voluntary bodies, including the WEA, Northern College, and the Working Men's Institute, received modest public support to supplement self-funding, while retaining operational autonomy; and
3. More radical or independently organised initiatives, including socialist education movements, trade unions, and co-operative societies, operated largely outside the formal governance system, sustaining themselves through self-funding and voluntary labour.

Kelly (1992) highlights how official support was selectively extended to organisations aligned with gradualist and constitutionalist traditions, creating a pattern of legitimacy that reflected dominant liberal norms. Simon (1991) interprets this selectivity as a form of ideological filtering, whereby liberal reformism was absorbed. Fieldhouse (1996) emphasises that such endorsement imposed boundaries on legitimacy, narrowing both content and participation.

This embedded an ideological filtering mechanism into the very architecture of adult education governance. While Kelly (1992) focuses on the institutional consequences, excluding decentralised and politically explicit provision, Fieldhouse (1996) draws attention to the normative framing, where civic improvement and moral reform were treated as universal goods. Jennings (1980) adds that the partnerships between LEAs and voluntary bodies remained highly localised and discretionary, lacking a national framework to guarantee either access or ideological diversity. Simon (1991) highlights the constrained character of this pluralism, noting that although it adopted the language of diversity, it recognised only those forms of adult education that conformed to the assumptions of liberal reformism and gradual institutional change.

The WEA exemplifies how institutional legitimacy was negotiated within these boundaries and is widely documented in sector and academic literature. Founded in 1903 by Albert Mansbridge, it initially prioritised collaboration with universities, positioning itself as a vehicle for liberal adult education grounded in constitutionalist values and moral uplift. While the Association expressed rhetorical support for workers' education and engaged in limited dialogue with trade unions, this was initially secondary to its university extension mission, particularly through partnerships with Oxford, Cambridge, and Manchester. In 1907, it was formally recognised by the Board of Education as a Responsible Body, a status that secured access to Treasury funding but also imposed implicit constraints on its ideological range. It was not until the 1950s, as government distrust of unions eased, that the WEA's reputation for trade unionism and radical democracy was developed.

As Fieldhouse (1996) and Simon (1991) observe, efforts to deepen alliances with the Labour movement were curtailed in the post-war period, particularly as state actors grew increasingly wary of Bolshevism and class agitation. Warnings from the Board of Education made clear that overt political affiliations could jeopardise funding, prompting the WEA to consolidate its civic-liberal model and distance itself from more confrontational traditions of working-class education for several decades. Its legitimacy was thus secured through ideological moderation: while it expanded access and promoted democratic dialogue, it operated firmly within the parameters of liberal reform. In this sense, the WEA functioned less as a neutral intermediary than as a civic partner whose position within the tripartite framework depended on the containment, not the integration, of more radical alternatives.

Despite this selective inclusion, the reach of the formal adult education system remained limited. As both Fieldhouse and Simon observed, trade unions, religious societies, and cooperative societies often extended adult learning to underserved areas, sponsoring political education where civic or university provision was absent. However, these initiatives were denied official recognition.

Bolton (2012) notes that by 1910–11, over 639,000 adults were enrolled in state-supported evening classes, but this represented only around 3% of the working-class population over the age of 14, underscoring the restricted scope of state-sanctioned provision and the marginalisation of radical pedagogies.

4.1.1.5 Theme 5: Fragmented Provision and Regional Disparities (1890s–1910s)

In the absence of a formal policy framework, adult education provision during this period evolved in an ad hoc manner. Fieldhouse (1996) and Simon (1991) argue that provision evolved through local initiative, philanthropy, and informal partnerships, rather than through coordinated planning. Urban areas with strong civic networks experienced a surge in adult education, while rural regions remained underserved, exacerbating regional disparities.

Jennings (1980) and Kelly (1992) describe the sector as a patchwork of voluntary societies, LEAs, universities, trade unions, and religious organisations, lacking shared curricula, consistent funding principles, or quality assurance mechanisms. Fieldhouse (1996) notes that liberal reformers viewed this pluralism as a civic virtue. In contrast, state actors tolerated it as a politically expedient alternative to more radical or redistributive models of education, particularly during a period preoccupied with wider reforms in welfare and elementary schooling.

However, as Field (2006) argues, the lack of strategic coordination also undermined the development of a coherent sectoral identity. Without system-level accountability, the sector was unable to achieve the benefits of institutional scale or sustained pedagogical innovation. In this sense, fragmentation was not simply a transitional condition but an enduring structural logic, naturalised through political caution and sustained by a lack of statutory mandate.

For the purposes of this thesis, such fragmentation is therefore treated as both a *structural condition* and an *ideologically rationalised norm*. It emerged not only

from administrative discretion and uneven provision but from the deeper patterns of governance in which pluralism, voluntarism, and localism were valorised, yet strategically constrained.

4.1.1.6 Theme 6: Labour, Trade Unions, and Wartime Coordination (1914–1918)

The First World War exposed significant deficits in workforce education, public health, and technical skills, prompting the development of new forms of cross-sectoral coordination. Fieldhouse (1996) notes that the Board of Education, Labour Exchanges, and voluntary organisations experimented with joint funding and inter-agency planning to address these needs. However, as Kelly (1992) observes, while Labour Exchanges and technical training frameworks were incorporated into emerging governance arrangements, education led by trade unions or socialist organisations was systematically excluded. Liberal institutional actors retained curricular authority, and cross-sectoral partnerships largely reinforced the existing ideological boundaries of civic provision.

Noteworthy is the recurring theme of wartime discourse, which framed adult education as a patriotic duty. Simon (1991) and Gillard (2018) argued that civic ideals were mobilised to justify state expansion, casting education as essential to national resilience. However, Simon (1991) stressed that this mobilisation continued to narrow ideological scope. Socialist critiques of class inequality were subordinated to narratives of unity.

Fieldhouse (1996) and Simon (1991) argue that the war deepened existing tensions between liberal models of civic uplift and emergent socialist traditions of worker-led education. While the rhetoric of national service and social cohesion bolstered arguments for expanding public provision, these developments also reinforced the authority of existing institutional actors and constrained the ideological space for more radical educational alternatives. Voluntary organisations and LEAs were integrated more fully into governance

arrangements, but trade union and co-operative initiatives remained outside the recognised framework.

Although the war catalysed state expansion in adult education, this expansion did not entail an opening to ideological diversity. As Fieldhouse (1996) and Simon (1991) argue, the post-war governance settlement deepened the distinction between liberal civic uplift and more transformative traditions of worker education. By selectively endorsing voluntary bodies and university-linked providers, while excluding socialist, co-operative, and trade union-led initiatives, the state reinforced a narrow conception of educational legitimacy. This was not merely a reflection of institutional caution; it was an ideological act. The appropriation of civic language, duty, cooperation, and national service by policy actors served to naturalise a specific vision of adult education: one rooted in moral reform and social cohesion rather than redistribution or collective empowerment. A similar appropriation of established educational terms is visible in later periods, particularly surrounding the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, where civic vocabulary was again deployed to legitimate increasingly economised reforms. In Gramscian terms, this can be read as the initial conditions for the formation of a historic bloc, in which institutional arrangements, normative discourses, and state authority began to align and consolidate a bounded version of civic purpose. These foundational dynamics, of inclusion through moderation and exclusion through ideological filtering, would echo throughout the subsequent evolution of adult education governance.

These wartime developments culminated in a more formalised governance architecture. Between 1915 and 1918, the Board of Education extended Treasury funding to selected voluntary and university-affiliated providers through the emerging 'responsible body' system, as outlined in a series of official circulars (Fieldhouse, 1996; Jennings, 1980). These arrangements introduced conditionality through inspection, curricular oversight, and increasingly standardised reporting, marking a shift towards procedural regulation as a basis for legitimacy. While civic purpose remained an explicit rationale, these

mechanisms signalled an emergent logic in which institutional compliance increasingly mediated access to public support. The Fisher Education Act (1918) codified the state's expanding role in post-school education, particularly for young workers, reinforcing administrative centralisation. Fieldhouse (1996) and Simon (1991) argue that these developments represented a move away from participatory governance, institutionalising accountability structures that foreshadowed more systematic performance regimes in the later twentieth century.

4.1.2 Meta-Level Complexity: Path Dependencies and System Interactions

The governance of adult education before 1919 developed recursively from contingent and unequal interactions among civic, philanthropic, academic, and early state actors. These interactions were conditioned by initial structural asymmetries, including class-based inequalities, moral reform ideologies, and permissive governance mechanisms such as the 1903 Education Act, which both enabled participation and imposed normative boundaries. Boulton *et al.* (2015) describe recursion as a defining feature of complex systems, in which the outcomes of change become new conditions for further change, reinforcing particular trajectories over time. In this context, recursive adaptation contributed to the emergence of path dependence: governance decisions favouring liberal-conforming institutions acquired structural durability, while politically explicit or working-class alternatives were incrementally marginalised. Midgley's domains clarify how these interactions unfolded: Subjective constructions of class, duty, and moral citizenship framed civic purpose; Social arrangements, such as the 'responsible body' system, translated these values into institutional partnerships and funding eligibility; and Natural structures, such as geographic reach and professional authority, consolidated them into patterned provision. Together, these layers produced a governance ecology: a network of overlapping, unstable arrangements that reflected and reproduced underlying ideological hierarchies.

Critically, the period also witnessed an evolving contest over the purpose of adult education. Competing visions of moral improvement, civic training, and political mobilisation coexisted uneasily. Dominant liberal narratives achieved institutional consolidation, while alternative stances remained visible but peripheral. Some commentators, such as Bowl (2014), have argued that while early adult education often cited civic purposes, access and curricula were implicitly stratified by class and gender. This suggests that the dual rationales of social mobility and social cohesion may have reflected underlying tensions within early provision. As these interpretations were negotiated through practice, a form of constrained emergence arose: governance logic and civic meanings evolved together, but within the narrow bounds established by those initial asymmetries. This dynamic laid the groundwork for the 1919 Final Report.

4.1.3 Cross-Theory Dialogue: Path Dependence, Civil-State Relations, and Pragmatic Adaptation

To understand how the governance of adult education took shape prior to 1919, this Cross-Theory Dialogue places three GCF concepts —initial path dependence, Pragmatic adaptation, and civil–state alignment —into analytical tension. Each offers a different lens on the evolution of early institutional arrangements, but it is through their interaction that a more layered picture emerges: one of contingent constraint, negotiated agency, and ideological filtering.

Path dependence identifies how selective governance mechanisms consolidated advantage, though it cannot fully account for how civic actors negotiated those conditions. Early permissive legislation, such as the 1903 Education Act, and Treasury recognition of ‘responsible bodies’ created feedback loops that channelled legitimacy toward liberal-conforming organisations (Boulton *et al.*, 2015; Byrne & Callaghan, 2014). These recursive mechanisms embedded values and organisational forms, particularly those aligned with gradualism and constitutionalism, into the governance architecture.

Yet this framing risks over-emphasising structural inertia unless placed alongside more agentic interpretations of how actors responded.

Pragmatic adaptation reframes this trajectory by highlighting how reformers and educators navigated constraint through situated judgment. The WEA's selective partnership with universities, while reinforcing asymmetry, was not merely a concession to structural pressure. As Dewey (1916) and Cherryholmes (1999) suggest, such choices reflected contingent ethical reasoning; a strategic balancing of idealism and institutional survival. These pragmatic decisions did not simply follow path-dependent channels; they also reshaped them. The feedback processes that stabilised liberal provision were co-produced by actors seeking legitimacy through adaptation. In this reading, path dependence appears less as a precondition than a sedimented effect of relational action. Nevertheless, this pragmatism had consequences: by reinforcing liberal norms to secure institutional footholds, civic actors contributed to the narrowing of the discursive horizon of adult education.

Civil–state alignment draws attention to how structural conditions and pragmatic strategies were filtered through ideological legitimation. Morton (2000) argues that early adult education, while pluralistic in appearance, was organised through a hegemonic frame: liberal civic discourse became the default language of legitimacy, while oppositional or worker-led models were sidelined. This dynamic complicates the pragmatist reading. Situated adaptations were not only contextually rational but also became the discursive raw material for state legitimation. Relational compromises were recontextualised as affirmations of the prevailing order. Similarly, civil–state alignment reframes structural accounts of path dependence. The state did not merely entrench arrangements through feedback; it endorsed and amplified those aligning ideologically. Path dependence thus operated as an instrument of selective inclusion.

Taken together, these three concepts illuminate a formative governance ecology in which constraint, agency, and legitimacy were mutually conditioning. Early

path dependencies created structural asymmetries; civic actors adapted pragmatically to secure viability, and the state selectively aligned with those adaptations that reinforced liberal-universalist norms. The 1919 Final Report did not resolve these tensions but formalised them, encoding a civic-pluralist settlement shaped by historical asymmetries, situated compromise, and normative gatekeeping.

4.2 Governance Foundations and the 1919 Final Report

Commissioned amidst the reformist optimism of post-war reconstruction, the 1919 Final Report of the Ministry of Reconstruction's Adult Education Committee emerged from a convergence of civic idealism and institutional experimentation. Chaired by A. L. Smith, with support from Arthur Greenwood and E. S. Cartwright, the Committee brought together university extension leaders, WEA figures, trade unionists, and cooperative teachers—deliberately assembled to articulate a unified civic vision. Writing in the 1980 Nottingham reprint of the Report, Taylor (1980) interprets this configuration as a conscious attempt to institutionalise liberal adult education through cross-sectoral consensus, while Jennings (1980) cautions that, even as the Report was published, the national mood was already shifting toward fiscal retrenchment and political caution.

Although the Report received praise, including from the Board of Education, its recommendations were never formally enacted. Jennings (1980) famously called it “the most quoted and least enacted of official documents,” a phrase that captures its symbolic weight and political marginalisation. Wiltshire (1980) similarly affirms that its civic vocabulary and moral orientation—centred on obligation, service, and democratic participation—continued to shape the discursive architecture of adult education governance long after its publication. For these commentators, the 1919 Report functioned less as a statutory blueprint than as a symbolic horizon, enduring as both a reference point and an unrealised ideal within a structurally permissive and ideologically ambivalent system.

This section uses the GCF to identify the assumptions, civil values, and institutional roles codified in the report. A complete Meta-Level analysis is intentionally deferred to Section 4.6, where the 1919 and 1973 Reports are examined in comparative synthesis using the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis.

4.2.1 Natural and Social Domains: Structures and Institutional Roles

- **Tripartite model and civic structure:** The 1919 Report proposed a tripartite governance model in which universities, Local Education Authorities (LEAs), and voluntary organisations shared responsibility, with the Board of Education as a 'sympathetic co-operator' (Ministry of Reconstruction, 1919, para. 10). This reflected what Simon (1991) identifies as a New Liberal preference for statutory entitlement in favour of 'moral obligation' and local civic partnership. The Report, therefore, prioritised the voluntary sector as both structurally central and ethically exemplary.
- **Pre-existing state and institutional groundwork:** The Committee's deliberations did not begin from an institutional vacuum. The Lewis Report (1917) and the Fisher Act (1918) had already laid the administrative groundwork for post-school education, including strengthened state involvement in the provision for young workers.
- **Universities as infrastructural and civic anchors:** University extension expanded significantly in the pre-war period, with Fieldhouse (1996) noting that 114 Oxford centres were operational by 1914—an indicator of both institutional maturity and civic embeddedness. This momentum underpinned the Committee's assumption that adult education was not merely aspirational but structurally viable (Ministry of Reconstruction, 1919). At the same time, universities were framed as agents of democratic literacy. Through extramural provision, they were tasked with cultivating public reasoning and foundational

political understanding. Lovett (1988) argues that this role marked a partial breach in the exclusivity of higher education, aligning liberal education with broader civic reconstruction and embedding it within the nation's ethical and political life. However, not all commentators share this idealised view. Rose (2001) and McIlroy (1993) caution that university extension, while rhetorically democratic, often reproduced hierarchical relationships and limited access to those already socially mobile or ideologically aligned. As such, the civic role of universities, though significant, remained uneven and contested.

- **LEAs as civic facilitators:** LEAs were described as facilitators rather than authorities, urged to act ‘in a spirit of co-operation, not of control’ (para. 16). Fieldhouse (1996) interprets this as a practical extension of New Liberal beliefs in enablement without state interference.
- **Pluralism without guarantees:** Despite the inclusive framing, this pluralist governance design lacked enforceability. McIlroy (1993) argues that the absence of statutory guarantees created a system of permissive vulnerability, highly dependent on ‘the active goodwill of all concerned’ (para. 34) and exposed to future policy neglect. Taylor (1980) contends these omissions were a strategic compromise: the Committee favoured cohesion over confrontation. Jennings (1980) notes that this consensus among elite civic actors facilitated a harmonious vision, while excluding more radical or redistributive alternatives.
- **Latent tensions in civic rationales:** As Moon (2006) notes, early state involvement in adult education, even when framed as expressions of civil values, already reflected unresolved tensions between competing visions: education as a means of fostering critical citizenship, securing social cohesion, or advancing economic productivity. Although the 1919 Committee articulated a civic ideal, these latent tensions remained embedded within the structural and rhetorical choices of the Report, shaping future vulnerabilities in adult education governance.

Though this section does not conduct a complete discourse analysis, phrases such as ‘moral obligation,’ ‘national service,’ and ‘spirit of cooperation’ illuminate the Report’s ethical framing. These constructions will be examined in greater depth in Section 4.6.

4.2.2 Subjective Domain: Pedagogical Purpose and Ethical Discourses

- **Civic pedagogy and the moral construction of the learner:** The 1919 Report articulated a civic-ethical vision of adult education rooted in obligation, service, and democratic disposition. Its rhetorical register—marked by terms such as ‘duty,’ ‘ought,’ and ‘national necessity’—positioned the learner not as a passive recipient, but as a morally responsible citizen to be shaped through public education (Ministry of Reconstruction, 1919, paras. 1, 10, 14). As Biesta (2006, 2015) argues, this model emphasised socialisation over subjectification: preparing adults for civic participation rather than cultivating independent ethical agency. While the Report explicitly rejected economic or functionalist rationales, its framing remained paternalistic, casting education as something to be instilled rather than co-constructed. Taylor (1980) identifies this as part of a foundational binary in adult education between liberal and instrumental aims. Harrison (1961) likewise notes the prioritisation of ‘human studies’ and ‘citizenship training’ as a strategy to shape national identity rather than enhance employability.
- **Internal ideological tensions within the Committee:** The Committee’s civic vision was not ideologically uncontested. As Simon (1991) notes, its internal debates mirrored wider political divisions: Conservative members resisted expanding state responsibility, Liberal representatives advocated for voluntarist pluralism, and Labour figures promoted education as a social right grounded in redistribution and worker empowerment. The final Report synthesised these positions through inclusive civic rhetoric.

- **Educator as democratic agent and its later displacement:** The 1919 Report framed tutors as “agents of democracy” (Ministry of Reconstruction, 1919, para. 28), responsible for enabling reflective citizenship and cultivating the intellectual habits of public reasoning. This aligns with Mayo’s (1999) reading of early adult education pedagogy as a conscious political practice grounded in deliberative ideals. However, as Tummons (2011) later observes, technocratic and regulatory conceptions gradually displaced this civic model of professionalism. The educator as relational democratic agent was increasingly redefined through frameworks centred on compliance, standardisation, and performativity.

4.2.3 Framing Continuity and Deferral: The 1919 Report within the Analytical Structure

While the 1919 Report is central to the interpretation of the architecture of adult education governance, this section does not undertake a complete structural or discursive analysis. That treatment is intentionally deferred until Section 4.6, where the Report is examined in direct comparison with the 1973 Russell Report. The seventy-year distance between the two allows for a critical synthesis of ideological and institutional transformation. Although produced in different political contexts, both reports frame adult education as a civic good grounded in democratic participation. However, as the analysis in Section 4.6 will show, their underlying governance logics and discursive constructions diverge sharply. Where 1919 was grounded in civic obligation and voluntary coordination, the Russell Report reflects a shifting emphasis toward managerialism and professionalisation. This comparative lens reveals not only structural change but also the reconfiguration of adult education’s normative purpose over time.

4.3 Adult Education Governance in the Interwar Period (1919–1939)

The interwar period was characterised by the contested continuation of civic aspiration amid administrative constraints. The ambitions articulated in the 1919 Report faced significant implementation challenges, including fiscal austerity, decentralised administration, and the absence of statutory enforcement. During this period, the sector emerged within the fiscal, political, and social constraints created by both environmental and natural factors, as well as social ideological contestation, creating an environment of selective adaptation. Adult education as a whole remained heavily reliant on voluntary organisations that were both self-funded and increasingly funded by the state, but with highly variable local authority engagement, thus preserving structural unevenness despite growing rhetorical consensus.

4.3.1 Natural and Social Domains: Constraints and Institutional Adaptation

- **Persisting permissiveness and uneven engagement:** Although the 1919 Report framed adult education as a civic responsibility, no statutory duty followed. Local authorities retained discretion, while Fieldhouse (1996) notes that the absence of legal compulsion entrenched local inequalities and administrative inconsistency.
- **Increased funding amid systemic fragmentation:** Financial support for adult education rose during the interwar years. However, allocations were ad hoc and derived from surplus funds rather than strategic allocation, leading to what Simon (1991) argues as vulnerability to administrative drift and local interpretation.

- **Institutional pluralism and negotiated governance:** In the absence of national coordination, adult education developed through localised negotiation among LEAs, voluntary organisations, and universities. Simon (1991) argued that these arrangements reflected local political cultures and institutional capacity, while Marriott (2000) added that interpretations of adult education's role diverged sharply: some framed it as civic infrastructure, while others prioritised workforce preparedness, typically shaped by fiscal constraints.
- While Fieldhouse (1996) emphasises the expansion of civic adult education as a progressive institutional development, Marriott (2000) more critically foregrounds the ideological tensions within this pluralistic system, highlighting the gradual encroachment of instrumental, skills-based rationales even during a period rhetorically committed to civic renewal.
- **The WEA as intermediary and constrained actor:**
The Workers' Educational Association held a distinctive institutional position in the interwar landscape of adult education. With significant social and political influence, it produced a prolific body of civic advocacy and brokered key relationships between academic, civic, and governmental stakeholders (Jennings, 1980). This positioned the WEA as a central actor in advancing democratic dialogue and civic pedagogy. However, its reliance on state funding also subjected it to increasing political scrutiny, particularly in a period marked by fears of radicalism. The WEA's institutional credibility was thus entangled with strategic moderation, navigating the boundaries of state acceptability. This institutional positioning extended patterns first established in the pre-1919 period (see 4.1.1, Theme 4), where legitimacy was secured through selective incorporation into a liberal governance framework that implicitly bounded ideological range.
- **Civic pedagogy under constraint:**
At the practitioner level, educators within the WEA and similar organisations worked to sustain participatory and dialogic pedagogy under growing ideological constraint. Tutors often treated learners as co-constructors of

meaning, embodying the WEA's democratic ethos (McIlroy, 1993).

Nevertheless, this pedagogical freedom was not unlimited. As Field (2011) notes, tutors became adept at cautiously shaping curricula within the bounds of what was informally sanctioned, aware that political sensitivities could trigger institutional consequences. These conditions gave rise to forms of ethical discretion and subtle pedagogical improvisation—what might be termed situated civic professionalism in a climate of tacit censorship.

- **University partnerships and epistemic hierarchy:** Meanwhile, universities expanded their extramural reach by partnering with the WEA, though retained control over much of the curriculum and pedagogy. Fieldhouse (1996) and Kelly (1992) argue that elite universities, notably Oxford and Cambridge, expanded their extramural activities with financial support channelled through the University Grants Committee. This created a structural imbalance: while the system presented itself as pluralistic, institutional legitimacy remained concentrated among elite universities that controlled curriculum, funding, and standards. Community-based initiatives, by contrast, struggled for recognition and resources.
- **Partial oversight and informal content regulation:** Throughout the interwar period, the Board of Education expanded its advisory and inspection role. However, it often lacked the statutory authority, strategic coherence, or even the necessary political will for systemic coordination in many instances. From the mid-1920s, concerns about political radicalism, particularly in the wake of the Russian Revolution, led to increased informal scrutiny of adult education provision. Field (2011) and Jeffrey (1991) document how central oversight mechanisms, including selective scrutiny of tutors and curricular content, were used to enforce ideological conformity.

4.3.2 Subjective Domain: Contestation and Practitioner Agency

- **Civic expansion amid emerging economic framings:** The 1919 Report positioned adult education as central to democratic renewal, and this ideal retained both institutional and political support throughout the interwar period. Fieldhouse (1996) and Marriott (2000) emphasise that provision expanded significantly across LEAS, universities, and voluntary bodies, with liberal and civic forms of education, ranging from public lectures to extramural humanities and community classes, outnumbering vocational or technical programmes. Nonetheless, the imperatives of economic reconstruction and industrial recovery in the immediate post-war period reconfigured the landscape of adult education. Field (2006) argues that the expansion of technical colleges, facilitated through partnerships between Local Education Authorities (LEAs), state funding mechanisms, and industrial sponsors, was a central plank of national strategy even in this early period. These institutions became key instruments in the drive to modernise the workforce, particularly in regions with established manufacturing bases. Nevertheless, this expansion did not eliminate liberal or civic adult education. Instead, as McNair (1998) contends, it created a dual trajectory. While liberal adult education continued to articulate a vision of democratic engagement and cultural enrichment, it increasingly had to justify its claims to public funding within a policy environment structured around economic productivity. This shift, he suggests, marked a broader epistemological turn in which educational value was progressively reframed in terms of utility, and civic purpose became a more contested, and often residual, rationale for provision.
- **Fragmented professionalism and adaptive agency characterised the interwar adult education sector:** Jarvis (2004) argues that while university extension and WEA tutors often retained significant pedagogical autonomy, staff within technical colleges increasingly faced managerial oversight and

emerging expectations of performative accountability. Fieldhouse (1996) supports this view, noting that most adult educators worked across insecure, overlapping roles; an employment pattern that weakened collective identity, although it also afforded a degree of improvisational flexibility in teaching practice. Marriott (2000) characterises the system of this period as institutionally diverse and structurally fragmented, a patchwork sustained by overlapping moral imperatives and political projects rather than a unified national strategy. Biesta's (2006) later conceptualisation of educational purpose as a site of ideological contestation enables us to interpret this historical phase as one of *contested pluralism*, where civic, economic, and ideological aims coexisted in uneasy tension, without any single discourse achieving full dominance or institutional closure.

As Tummons (2011) argues, professional identity in adult education has historically been shaped not only by institutional structures but also by shifting governance discourses. Even during the interwar period, in the absence of formalised professional standards, educators' professional self-conceptions were locally negotiated, rather than institutionally codified, fostering adaptive but precarious forms of professional identity.

- **Civic pedagogy under constraint:** Despite increasing institutional pressures, many practitioners sustained dialogic and participatory approaches grounded in civic ethics. In the WEA, tutors frequently positioned learners as co-constructors of curriculum and meaning, particularly through local branch organisation and collaborative course planning. McIlroy (1993) demonstrates how this participatory ethos reflected both the democratic aspirations of the WEA and the structural limitations within which it operated, allowing for student influence while circumscribing the ideological range of what could be taught. However, as state funding expanded, so too did reliance on informal regulatory mechanisms. Following the Russian Revolution, concerns about political subversion intensified. Field (2011) and Jeffrey (1991) document how LEAs increasingly vetted tutors on ideological grounds, with individuals

excluded from teaching not through formal prohibition but through discretionary administrative decisions.

- **Reframing civic purpose through economic rationales:** The uneasy coexistence of civic and economic aims in the interwar period can be interpreted through Biesta's (2015) tripartite model of educational purpose. Civic provision, such as WEA programmes and university extension classes, primarily aligned with socialisation and *subjectification*, seeking to foster participatory citizenship and reflective agency. However, as fiscal pressures mounted and LEA support became increasingly conditional, qualification, understood as skills training and employability, gradually acquired greater institutional prominence. This shift recalibrated civic intent, encouraging providers to justify participatory learning in the language of utility and national productivity. The result was a subtle redefinition of purpose: adult education retained its dialogic and ethical ambitions, but within a funding environment that increasingly privileged measurable economic outcomes.

4.3.3 Meta-Level Complexity: Governance Evolution, Symbolic Containment, and Situated Agency

The interwar period marked a shift from pre-1919 voluntarism to partial alignment among LEAs, universities, and voluntary bodies, supported by permissive state funding. This expansion, however, lacked systemic coherence. It resembled a more contingent and unstable phase in the formation of the historic bloc, as explored in the next section. Earlier, we argued that the 1919 governance settlement exemplified a more deliberate alignment of institutional and normative forces. In contrast, the interwar historic bloc was symbolically cohesive and structurally fragile: civic values gained visibility, but without statutory guarantees or deep consensus, they remained vulnerable to displacement by emerging economic rationalities.

Nevertheless, this symbolic cohesion masked unresolved tensions. As Fieldhouse (1996) and Tuckett (2010) argue, the growing prominence of adult education made it vulnerable to economic rationalities and contested policy agendas. Mittleton-Kelly (2003) observes that complex systems stabilise around attractors that appear integrative but can constrain long-term adaptability. Here, institutional coordination was shaped less by shared vision than by contingent alignment: cooperation was possible because civic purposes remained loosely defined, not because ideological consensus had been achieved.

Practitioner identity emerged within this unsettled environment. With no formal profession, standards, or statutory foundation, adult educators operated across fragmented roles and inconsistent institutions. Their agency was exercised through responsive practice, grounded in civic ideals, shaped by moral discretion, resource constraints, and pragmatic negotiation. This was adaptive professionalism: an ethic of civic engagement sustained through institutional improvisation rather than systemic support.

Later scholarship suggests that the vulnerabilities of this provisional civic settlement persisted. Bowl (2014) and Gleeson *et al.* (2015) argue that without structural guarantees, civic adult education remained perpetually exposed to the encroachment of economised policy frameworks, a pattern that would resurface in intensified form in later periods.

4.3.4 Cross-Theory Dialogue: Emergence, Bloc Formation, and Situated Ethical Agency

This Cross-Theory Dialogue revisits and extends three theoretical concepts introduced in Chapter 2- emergence, historic bloc, and ethical agency. Through this, it interprets the contingent alignment of adult education governance during the interwar period. Whereas earlier sections described the material and discursive configuration of the sector, the CTD reframes these developments to

interrogate the structural, ideological, and agential dimensions of their interaction.

Emergence, as elaborated in Section 2.4.1, describes the generation of novel patterns through decentralised, adaptive relations among system components. In the context of interwar adult education, this explains how coordination among LEAs, universities, and voluntary providers developed without a strong statutory directive. Rather than being designed, coherence emerged through mutual adjustment, civic vocabularies, and shared commitments to liberal values. As Boulton *et al.* (2015) argue, such formations are always contingent and unstable, shaped by interaction and never fully controlled by it. Mittleton-Kelly (2003) adds that while conditions such as feedback, diversity, and flexibility can facilitate emergence, these are not neutral in their effects. In this period, institutional alignment stabilised around certain civic principles without guaranteeing ideological openness.

This is where the concept of a historic bloc, developed in Section 2.7.2, sharpens the analysis. While emergence explains structural coalescence, historic bloc interrogates its ideological stance. For Gramsci (1971), a historic bloc forms when material structures, institutional alignments, and cultural norms reinforce each other, producing a durable configuration of hegemony. In adult education, provisional unity among civic actors, such as LEAs, WEA, and universities, reflected more than functional cooperation. It constituted an ideological settlement that privileged non-confrontational liberalism and excluded oppositional forms of worker education. Femia (1987) reinforces this reading, arguing that historic blocs operate by incorporating compatible narratives while marginalising dissent. The appearance of consensus thus masked a deeper filtering of educational legitimacy through liberal norms. As Mayo (2008) notes, blocs must be sustained by intellectual labour, discursive legitimation, and institutional practice. The 1919 Report played a central role in this regard, aligning educational legitimacy with a bounded vision of democratic

reconstruction. The bloc's coherence was never total; its durability relied on the suppression of more radical alternatives.

The interaction between emergence and historic bloc reveals an important asymmetry. Emergence accounts for contingent institutional coordination; historic bloc exposes the ideological limits embedded within that process. The apparent pluralism of the interwar governance ecology was, in this light, tightly bounded. Forms of provision irreconcilable with liberal-universalist norms were filtered out through selective institutionalisation. What appeared as adaptive collaboration also enacted ideological closure; a progression from the symbolic cohesion described earlier, now refracted through institutional filtering and exclusion.

To understand how civic intent persisted within these constraints, the third concept, ethical agency, becomes critical. Section 2.6.2 conceptualises ethical agency through Pragmatist accounts of moral action as relational, situated, and value-laden (Dewey, 1916; Cherryholmes, 1992; Biesta, 2009a). Adult educators in this period did not act from formalised professional positions or stable mandates. Their agency was exercised through discursive and curricular improvisation: translating civic values, participation, ethical dialogue, and reflexive learning into viable practice within the bloc's parameters. This was not resistance in conventional terms and reflected what Biesta (2015) describes as ethically attuned judgement; an embodied form of civic intent enacted within constraint, rather than a direct expression of subjectification.

Together, these three concepts yield a layered interpretation of early adult education governance. Emergence explains the contingent formation of institutional arrangements. Historic bloc reveals the ideological limits embedded in those arrangements. Ethical agency clarifies how practitioners sustain civic values within those limits, acting inside rather than outside the hegemonic frame. The CTD thus reframes the interwar period as one of Pragmatic cooperation and

bounded institutionalisation, where civic purpose was maintained through the situated labour of educators navigating constraint.

4.4 Post-War (1939–1973): Expansion, Regulation, and Emerging Economic Priorities

The period from 1939 to 1973 marked the most expansive and institutionally legitimised phase of multi-purpose, state-funded adult education in England. Often described as a ‘golden age’, it featured widespread access, strong public legitimacy, and a broad civic consensus that learning was a public good. The post-war welfare state incorporated adult education into its ideological and administrative architecture, fostering partnerships between LEAs, voluntary bodies, universities, and newly re-formalised further education institutions. Pedagogies grounded in public reasoning, moral development, and democratic inclusion were not only tolerated but, for a time, structurally supported.

Nevertheless, expansion did not resolve underlying tensions. The very governance structures that enabled access also introduced the logic of accountability, central coordination, and vocational alignment. Civic intent was sustained rhetorically and increasingly operationalised through performative mechanisms and economic rationales. This era is best understood as one of selective incorporation and adaptive consolidation, where democratic aspiration and instrumental governance evolved in parallel.

4.4.1 Natural and Social Domain: Structural Growth and Economic Drift

- **Discretionary policy with uneven outcomes:** The 1944 (Butler) Education Act incorporated adult education into the national legislative framework, instructing LEAs to consider it as part of their remit. However, the Act imposed no statutory obligation and allocated no ring-fenced funding, leaving the

provision discretionary. As a result, regional disparities persisted. By the 1950s, participation had expanded to over 2.4 million learners through LEAs, voluntary bodies, and existing and new FE institutions. Yet this growth masked systemic inequities. While some authorities, such as the ILEA, developed expansive civic programmes that integrated liberal education with community engagement, others underperformed or withdrew. Fieldhouse (1996) and Brookfield (1985) both emphasise that access remained highly contingent on local political will and resource availability rather than on a coordinated national strategy.

- **Administrative absorption of civic provision:** Voluntary adult education providers and independent colleges were increasingly integrated into LEA-managed systems during the 1960s. Framed as rationalisation, this process replaced collaborative pluralism with bureaucratic oversight. Fieldhouse (1996) documents how this transformation reduced sectoral autonomy and reoriented civic learning toward administrative priorities. The 1970 White Paper codified this direction, centring adult education planning on productivity and governance efficiency. This did not wholly displace civic content; however, it constrained its institutional flexibility.
- **From Negotiation to Control: Erosion of Local Pluralism:** The earlier governance ecology of adult education, characterised by negotiated relationships among LEAs, universities, the WEA, and voluntary groups, was progressively restructured into a more centralised, vertically controlled model. Fieldhouse (1996) documents how this pluralistic arrangement began to erode in the post-war decades, as local authorities were drawn into increasingly formalised partnerships with central government. The Department of Education and Science (1970), in its White Paper *Adult Education: A Plan for Development*, outlined a vision for coordinated growth which repositioned LEAs as intermediaries of central priorities. Rather than fostering decentralised innovation, the White Paper formalised accountability expectations and financial oversight mechanisms, effectively subordinating

local discretion to national planning objectives. Jones (2020) argues that although advisory boards and consultative structures were introduced during this period, these mechanisms often reinforced existing hierarchies and excluded grassroots voices. Together, these developments marked a shift from pluralist negotiation to controlled alignment, narrowing the space for civic experimentation and locally grounded provision.

- **Professionalisation and standardised oversight:** The period saw the emergence of the ‘state educator’ through qualifications such as the City & Guilds 730 series and institutions like the Further Education Staff College. Jarvis (2004) and Biesta (2006) argue that while this process professionalised the field, it also subjected adult education to new forms of performative control. Evaluation criteria increasingly reflected vocational norms, narrowing pedagogical discretion and aligning professional identity with institutional compliance. These developments framed professionalism through qualification and regulation—a framing that, as later chapters explore, would become a point of contestation in both governance policy and practitioner experience.
- **Legacy of wartime pedagogies and the marginalisation of participatory models:** The Army Bureau of Current Affairs (ABCA), created by the War Office in 1941, aimed to prepare British servicemen for democratic citizenship through weekly discussion sessions and curated pamphlets on current affairs. Although ABCA was notable for promoting dialogic methods and civic reflection within a military setting, its content and staffing were tightly overseen to prevent ideological risks, particularly fascist sympathy or unregulated political influence, reflecting wartime anxieties over propaganda control. It was noteworthy that while the programme achieved widespread popularity, especially among conscripted troops, it generated political concern. Some Conservative MPs accused ABCA of bias after the 1945 Labour landslide, arguing that its educational ethos contributed to a politicised electorate. As Field (2011) notes, this was an unintended consequence rather than an

orchestrated agenda; an example of how pedagogical openness can produce disruptive civic effects even within constrained institutions. Despite this civic potential, the ethos of ABCA did not significantly shape post-war adult education policy. Instead, as J. Rose (2001) and Field (2011) argue, post-war governance moved toward technocratic and administratively coordinated models, marginalising dialogic approaches in favour of measurable vocational outcomes. The ABCA experience thus reflects both the potential of participatory pedagogy and the state's growing interest in regulating ideological content—a wartime intensification of the liberal filtering tendencies first seen in pre-war adult education governance (see Chapter 4, Theme 4).

- **Emerging Fiscal Constraint and Structural Narrowing of Civic Provision:**
By the early 1970s, the post-war economic consensus was beginning to fracture. The 1973 oil crisis, stagflation, and mounting public sector borrowing introduced fiscal pressures that would reshape educational governance. Fieldhouse (1996) identifies this period as a structural turning point: while civic expansion remained rhetorically endorsed, its practical foundations were being undermined. Ball (2007) argues that economic instability catalysed a shift in governance discourse, accelerating the political appetite for efficiency, performance, and accountability. These trends reflected a broader twentieth-century trajectory that increasingly attempted to model public governance on business principles, resulting in the framing of education in terms of measurable outputs and institutional efficiency. While earlier forms of adult education delivery and focus were not displaced, provision was required to justify itself within increasingly economised terms, foreshadowing the discursive ambiguity of the Russell Report.

Recent scholarship reflects that tensions between civic expansion and the embedding of vocational priorities underpinned the period's structural evolution. Moon's (2006) meta-study of educational purpose highlights that although access broadened, the underlying governance gradually shifted the normative justification for adult education from civic to instrumental rationales. This adds

further depth to Fieldhouse's (1996) account by showing that the structural broadening of provision concealed an ideological narrowing of its foundational aims, a theme explored in greater detail through system adaptation in Section 4.4.3.

4.4.2 Subjective Domain: Practitioner Agency and Shifting Educational Purpose

This section examines the ideological construction of the purpose of adult education between 1939 and 1973. While civic ideals remained central to public discourse, their institutional articulation became increasingly complex and nuanced. Democratic participation, personal growth, and social ethics were frequently affirmed, yet there were signs that these goals were beginning to be reinterpreted through emerging performance metrics and national planning agendas. Rather than viewing the post-war period as ideologically stable, subjective Complexity explores it as a moment of contested meaning, where ethical commitments persisted, albeit often through adaptation to shifting governance logics.

- **Vocational Translation and the Reframing of Civic Pedagogy:** In technical institutions, curriculum design increasingly focused on job skills and was underpinned by expectations for outcomes and measurable competencies. As Marriott (2000) and Ball (2003) observe, this was not driven by specific legislation but rather embedded through funding regimes and performance frameworks. Many practitioners retained civic commitments, but these were often reframed as transferable skills or personal development to align with institutional demands.
- **Fragmentation of Professional Identity and Status Hierarchy:** The diversification of adult learning contexts generated divergent professional expectations. Tutors in formal institutions benefited from standardised qualifications and growing legitimacy, while practitioners in voluntary or

community contexts experienced declining autonomy and informal status (Crowther, 2004; Jarvis, 2004). This splintered the concept of practitioner professionalism into multiple perspectives based on different experiences and expectations.

- **The Open University's Role in Post-War Adult Education:** From a subjective standpoint, The Open University (OU), established in 1969 and formally launched in 1971, radically expanded access to higher education, enrolling over 25,000 students in its first year, far surpassing initial projections. It offered modular courses, distance learning, and institutional recognition to adult and non-traditional learners who had been largely excluded from mainstream provision. As Cantor (1989) observes, however, the OU's civic mission was mediated through centralised systems of governance and academic standardisation. Access was extended within technocratic structures, and the possibilities for dialogic pedagogy and participatory intent were limited. The OU exemplified how civic ideals could be operationalised through, and simultaneously constrained by, state-led innovation. Moreover, its rapid growth introduced new dynamics into the adult education sector. As providers such as the WEA, technical colleges, and LEA-supported programmes contended with finite state resources, tensions emerged over institutional identity, student recruitment, and policy visibility. In this way, the OU catalysed a more competitive environment, one increasingly shaped by implicit market principles, even if not yet formally marketised.
- **The Faure Report and the Affirmation of Civic Purpose:** The Faure Report (1972), commissioned by UNESCO, articulated a global vision of adult education grounded in democratic participation, civic responsibility, and humanistic values. It marked a high point in the normative consolidation of adult education's public mission, offering formal international recognition of principles that had long been enacted in UK practice but seldom codified in policy. For many adult practitioners, the Report served as an authoritative affirmation of civic ideals, reinforcing a sense of ethical legitimacy amid

shifting domestic priorities (Brookfield, 1985). While the document had limited direct impact on British policy, it became a symbolic resource for practitioners seeking to preserve educational democracy in the face of growing administrative and economic pressures.

The changing professional landscape also reveals a growing tension between traditional civic professionalism and emerging technical-professional models. Gleeson *et al.* (2015) argue that performative accountability mechanisms have reframed practitioners' roles around compliance and quantification, thereby narrowing the scope for autonomous, relational, and educational practice. This fragmentation foreshadowed the challenges to professional identity that would become fully visible after the Russell Report.

4.4.3 Meta-Level Complexity: Ideological Thresholds and Systemic Drift

Between 1945 and 1973, the governance of adult education in England evolved through a process of recursive constraint in which institutional, discursive, and ideological forces became increasingly misaligned. The post-war period retained a rhetorical commitment to civic adult education, but the cumulative interaction of planning mechanisms, discretionary authority, and administrative absorption progressively narrowed the space in which civic aims could be enacted. What Complexity Theory helps reveal is how civic ideals transformed into increasingly conditional and system-contingent forms of legitimacy.

From a Complexity-informed perspective, this period can be characterised as a shift in the system's attractor state. Early post-war pluralism, grounded in partnership between LEAs, universities, voluntary associations, and professional practitioners, was not replaced in a singular policy event. Instead, it was gradually reconditioned through procedural repetition: the standardisation of professional qualifications, the absorption of independent providers into local administrative structures, and the codification of funding priorities around

measurable outputs. As Cilliers (1998) and Boulton et al. (2015) argue, such systems evolve through feedback, not fiat. The civic aspirations of adult education did not vanish; they were sedimented into a framework that increasingly privileged procedural coherence, bureaucratic stability, and resource predictability.

This path-dependent drift created a governance formation, seemingly consistent on the surface but internally characterised by structural contradiction. As new institutions like the Open University emerged, they reasserted adult education's public mission while simultaneously institutionalising the very logic that constrained dialogic and community-based provision. Similarly, LEAs remained formally responsible for civic programming; however, their capacity to support such work became contingent upon discretionary funding, performance justification, and political alignment. The system thus retained civic vocabulary but only within a tightening orbit of administrative compatibility.

As Bowl (2014) observes, while policy narratives maintained a commitment to widening participation, the experiential realities of practitioners and learners revealed growing disjunctions between rhetorical inclusivity and operational exclusion. This divergence between discursive attractors and systemic practice highlights how educational purpose was selectively operationalised according to institutional expediency.

These patterns of system adaptation produced a surface continuity in civic discourse while embedding governance logics increasingly aligned with procedural efficiency and central coordination. Civic educational ideals, though rhetorically sustained, were recast within institutional architectures that privileged accountability and administrative control. The Faure Report (UNESCO, 1972), while affirming a democratic vision of lifelong learning, functioned less as a structural intervention than as a discursive attractor—briefly consolidating civic intent across systems without altering their underlying dynamics. As Field (2006) later observed, this discursive prominence was rapidly appropriated and

reframed within emerging neoliberal vocabularies centred on labour flexibility, individual responsibility, and efficiency.

Viewed through Complexity Theory, this period reflects a meta-stable system state: rhetorically consistent but internally misaligned. The attractor of civic education remained visible, but institutional gravity increasingly pulled towards quantifiability, centralisation, and procedural coherence. What emerged was a layered system in which the symbolic architecture of civic learning masked a functional reconfiguration of educational purpose. At this moment, situated on the cusp of the Russell Report, the governance structures retained the language of democratic inclusion while progressively constraining the operational viability of civic pedagogy. The interaction of feedback, path dependence, and discursive sedimentation shaped a governance formation defined less by rupture than by recursive narrowing, setting the conditions for subsequent ideological rearticulation.

4.4.4 Cross-Theory Dialogue: Path Dependence, Passive Revolution, Ethical Agency

The governance trajectory between the 1919 and 1973 Reports can be more fully understood by placing three concepts —path dependence, passive revolution, and ethical agency —into analytical tension. Each captures a different system behaviour: one structural, one ideological, and one agential. Their interaction yields a layered account of how adult education's civic project was both sustained and constrained within a shifting governance ecology.

Path dependence (Boulton *et al.*, 2015; Cilliers, 1998) describes how policy systems become structured by recursive feedback, where earlier institutional adaptations generate self-reinforcing norms. In adult education, post-war arrangements- such as LEA funding pathways, performance tracking, and decision-making centralisation- formed governance 'attractors' that reduced institutional flexibility. These patterns narrowed the adaptive space for pluralist or

dialogic provision through the sedimentation of practice. Innovations like the Open University emerged during this period, but within increasingly codified boundaries that reinforced alignment with workforce and accountability agendas.

However, structural inertia alone cannot account for the rearticulation of governance logics. Here, the concept of *passive revolution* offers a necessary lens. As Morton (2003) and Donoghue (2018) argue, it describes hegemonic shifts achieved through the incorporation and redirection of oppositional discourses. Bates (1975) further clarifies this as a strategic reconfiguration of consent that neutralises opposition while sustaining dominant interests. Civic traditions once associated with democratic participation were reframed through policy language privileging individual responsibility and economic productivity (Field, 2006). This was not mere discursive drift, but a deliberate re-signification: the civic vocabulary of the 1919 Report became a legitimating discourse increasingly aligned with coordination, efficiency, and performative measurement.

Yet neither path dependence nor passive revolution accounts for the persistence of civic practice within institutions increasingly shaped by managerial priorities. This is where ethical agency offers critical insight. As Cherryholmes (1999) observes, educational agency is not rule-bound but relational, emerging through reflection, negotiation, and judgment. Practitioners during this period responded to narrowing constraints through curricular adaptation, relational pedagogy, and interpretive flexibility. Biesta and Ormerod (2006) characterise this as 'situated ethical judgement,' wherein democratic values are translated into viable practices under restrictive conditions. However, this agency was ambivalent. By rearticulating civic aims in the language of personal development or employability, practitioners preserved aspects of civic intent while also reinforcing the structural logic they navigated.

Placed in dialogue, these concepts expose a governance configuration shaped by negotiated constraint. Path dependence illuminates how systemic routines

narrowed institutional alternatives. The concept of passive revolution clarifies how civic discourse was re-purposed to legitimise this narrowing. Ethical agency reveals how practitioners adapted meaning within these pressures. What persisted was not civic governance as a structural mandate, but civic professionalism as a pedagogical ethic. The civic rationale survived through situated practice, though increasingly on conditional terms.

4.5 The Russell Report (1973) as Transitional Artefact

The period from 1973 to the early 1980s marked a subtle but significant shift in the governance of adult education in England. The civic commitments of the post-war settlement, grounded in ideals of democratic access, cultural inclusion, and educational plurality, came under mounting political, economic, and ideological strain. In this transitional context, the *Russell Report* (DES, 1973) stands out as both a culmination of the adult education sector's collective aspirations and an early site of institutional negotiation with an emerging policy orthodoxy oriented toward coordination and accountability.

Commissioned by a Labour government committed to consultation and received by Edward Heath's Conservative administration, with Margaret Thatcher as Secretary of State for Education, the report was shaped through extensive sectoral participation. It drew upon the insights of practitioners, administrators, voluntary bodies, and academic institutions to articulate a forward-looking vision for adult education. While its language affirmed participatory principles and civil values, its proposals also responded to growing pressures for efficiency, planning, and strategic alignment. The Report thus reflected the normative commitment to democratic learning and also a strategic attempt to embed those values within an increasingly centralised and fiscally constrained policy environment.

This dual character gave the *Russell Report* both strength and ambiguity. On the one hand, it represented a sincere effort by the sector to institutionalise civic

ideals; on the other, it introduced mechanisms of rationalisation that would later facilitate their erosion. Its influence lay less in the immediate transformation of provision than in the reframing of legitimacy: preserving democratic vocabulary while introducing new evaluative logics and planning instruments that aligned with incipient modes of New Public Management.

This transformation did not occur in isolation. It coincided with the 1973 oil crisis, stagflation, and the broader unravelling of Keynesian economic assumptions. These crises redefined the state's role in economic management and public service provision, accelerating the turn from civic welfare to fiscal discipline. In adult education, ideals of collective provision and public reason were increasingly reframed through the logic of market responsiveness, personal responsibility, and bureaucratic oversight.

This section, therefore, examines the *Russell Report* as a moment of both reflective and anticipatory adjustment. It was situated between the post-war expansion described in the previous section and the overt realignments of the 1980s and 1990s. In retrospect, it can be seen as a formative phase in the reconstitution of governance: a period in which the civic norms of adult education were retained discursively but increasingly recontextualised through institutional mechanisms that laid the groundwork for a new historic bloc. The sector's restructuring remained partial. However, the ideological trajectory had been set.

4.5.1 Natural and Social Domain: Sector Coordination and Institutional Drift

- **The Russell Report was designed as a strategic consolidation of civic adult education.** The report was produced through extensive consultation across the adult education sector, including LEAs, local colleges, 'responsible bodies' like the WEA, universities, and voluntary bodies. Fieldhouse (1996) highlights the report's ambition to articulate a coherent national vision grounded in civic participation, liberal values, and educational democracy. Its

proposals reflected a sector-wide aspiration to formalise adult education as a permanent, legitimate part of national provision.

- **While framed in participatory terms, the report embedded centralising mechanisms.** Despite its democratic tone, the *Russell Report* introduced recommendations for rational coordination that could be, and were, used to consolidate central oversight. Marriott (2000) argues that its emphasis on strategic planning and system coherence signalled a shift away from locally negotiated provision. Clyde (1981) notes that DES selectively appropriated the report's proposals, expanding monitoring systems without creating statutory duties. These administrative adaptations repurposed civic recommendations into instruments of control.
- **The implementation of the report's recommendations was uneven and shaped by structural inconsistencies.** Brookfield (1985) demonstrates that the local adoption of the Russell framework varied significantly depending on the level of authority commitment and infrastructure. In many rural or under-resourced areas, civic provision contracted despite the report's stated aim to expand access. This gap between civic rhetoric and delivery outcomes reflected not only local disparities but also broader national issues. It also reflected the absence of protected funding or enforceable entitlements.
- **Voluntary provision and the logic of dependency:** While the Russell Report acknowledged the foundational role of bodies such as the WEA and university extension departments, it provided no funding protections or statutory autonomy. As Fieldhouse (1996) and Clyde (1981) note, the absence of ringfenced budgets and enforceable duties left these actors increasingly vulnerable to administrative drift—a dynamic Clyde terms “integration by dependency,” whereby civic provision was structurally absorbed without retaining operational independence.

4.5.2 Subjective Domain: Professional Identity and Strategic Alignment

- **Civic legitimisation through policy authorship:** The profession treated the Russell Report as a vehicle for civic legitimisation. Far from being imposed externally, the report was actively shaped by leading practitioners who sought to secure institutional recognition for the public role of adult education. Fieldhouse (1996) argues that it represented the sector's effort to codify its civic identity in policy, drawing on shared professional values rooted in liberal humanism, cultural inclusion, and critical pedagogy.
- **Consultation as professional self-definition:** The report's wide-ranging consultation process functioned as an act of professional self-definition. Rather than responding passively to policy agendas, the field asserted its own civic ethos and educational priorities through participatory authorship. The resulting policy artefact mirrored the profession's internal commitments and normative frameworks.
- **Recasting adult education as a distinct sector:** The Russell Report institutionalised adult education by naming it as a sector in its own right. This redefinition provided increased visibility and organisational coherence, allowing practitioners to be recognised within national planning structures. However, this reclassification also politicised the sector, creating an environment that risked reshaping its terms of legitimacy and practice.
- **From community responsiveness to policy alignment:** Fieldhouse (1996) notes that, as adult education became incorporated into systemic planning frameworks, legitimacy was increasingly tied to alignment with administrative and funding priorities. Professional identity began to shift from relational engagement across civic spaces to formal positioning within hierarchies of delivery, evaluation, and accountability.

- **Tensions in the evolving construction of professionalism:** The Russell Report's framing captured a pivotal moment in the profession's trajectory. Tummons (2011) argues that professional identity increasingly became aligned with bureaucratic governance structures, eroding the autonomy that characterised earlier civic models. Writing later, Moore and Clarke (2016) describe this dynamic in later NPM phases through the lens of 'cruel optimism', whereby practitioners sustained commitments to civic pedagogical values even as these were rendered fragile by performance systems.
- **Codification and institutional capture of professionalism:** Gleeson *et al.* (2015) observe that the consolidation of national frameworks often codified professionalism in ways that privileged institutional coherence over practitioner agency. While the Russell Report offered a platform for professional visibility, it also signalled a more profound transition: from a professionalism rooted in civic engagement to one increasingly defined by system logic and strategic accountability.

4.5.3 Meta-Level Complexity: Discursive Anchoring and Semantic Flexibility

The *Russell Report* (1973) occupies a distinctive place in the evolving governance of adult education in England. Produced in a moment of institutional uncertainty and ideological flux, it served as a discursive artefact: a text that preserved the semantic framework of civic adult education while accommodating an emerging logic of system rationalisation and coordination (Ball, 1994; Fairclough, 2003). Its performative function lay in articulating a provisional consensus, a vocabulary through which diverse actors could continue to invoke shared ideals, even as their institutional realities diverged.

Within the GCF, the report can be interpreted as a mechanism of transitional coherence. It maintained a rhetorical commitment to democratic access and civic value, yet translated those commitments into a language compatible with

administrative planning and evaluative rationality. As Boulton *et al.* (2015) observe, complex systems often evolve through incremental adaptation, whereby new practices and expectations emerge through recursive layering and institutional sedimentation. Cilliers (1998) characterises this process as a feedback-driven recalibration, wherein changes are absorbed gradually, often beneath the surface of apparent continuity. In this light, the Russell Report functioned as a stabilising text: preserving the discursive scaffolding of civic purpose while adapting its institutional articulation to fit the logic of system coordination and accountability.

These shifts also signal a redefinition of education's underlying purposes. Biesta (2015) argues that education must continually balance between civic, personal, and economic objectives. However, systemic pressures often force a narrowing of these purposes towards economic functionality. The Russell Report, while affirming the civic mission of adult education, embedded it within emerging administrative and planning rationalities that began to reframe educational value in terms of strategic contribution to governance objectives. Moon (2006) similarly observes that transitional periods in education frequently result in a compression of complex educational aims into procedural and outcome-based frameworks. The Russell Report sustained the rhetorical architecture of civic adult education, not merely by echoing prior ideals, but by recoding them in an emerging technocratic grammar compatible with planning and evaluation systems.

Passive revolution offers a valuable interpretive frame. As Filippini (2017) argues, passive revolution describes ideological reordering through absorption and recontextualisation rather than overt conflict. In the *Russell Report*, the civic tradition was neither affirmed unconditionally nor repudiated directly; instead, it was absorbed into a policy language increasingly shaped by coordination, efficiency, and instrumental planning. This process did not eliminate civic commitments but rendered their realisation conditional upon alignment with emergent governance norms.

The report's ambiguity was a structural feature of its historical function. It enabled continuity of language at a moment when the structural and ideological foundations of civic adult education were being reorganised. Practitioners, policymakers, and institutional actors could locate their aims within its pages, even as those aims were being quietly reformulated through shifts in funding, oversight, and strategic purpose.

Such interpretive ambiguity is best understood through its discursive effects. The *Russell Report* sustained the possibility of civic discourse in adult education, even as the conditions for its practice were increasingly defined by technocratic and performative norms. The extent of this conceptual shift, and the divergence from earlier visions of adult learning, is the subject of the comparative analysis in Section 4.6.

4.6 A Comparative Analysis of the 1919 and 1973 Reports

The 1919 Final Report and the 1973 Russell Report constitute formative discursive interventions in the governance of adult education in England. Each emerged during a moment of structural and ideological transition: the 1919 Report in the context of post-war reconstruction and the consolidation of social liberalism, and the Russell Report amid the unravelling of Keynesian consensus and the early rise of economic managerialism.

Both documents framed adult learning as a public good extending beyond economic utility, yet their structural logics and ideological trajectories diverged. The 1919 Report described adult education as 'a permanent national necessity,' articulating a civic vision grounded in democratic obligation. In contrast, the Russell Report sought to coordinate and consolidate what had remained a fragmented sector, marking a shift toward managerial ambiguity and conditional legitimisation.

This section treats both reports as discursive constructions of adult education's institutional and ideological role, employing a critical discourse analysis

(Fairclough, 1995; 2003) as adapted within the GCF. It examines how each text reconfigured adult education as a governable field and how the discursive repositioning of civic adult education signalled a broader reimagining of policy possibility. As Ball (1994; 2008) argues, policy texts operate not merely as action frameworks but as performative instruments, embedding logics of governance, conferring legitimacy, and producing compliance through discourse.

4.6.1 Natural Domain: Governance Architecture and Structural Realignment

The 1919 Final Report and the 1973 Russell Report each proposed a distinct structural configuration for adult education, shaped by the political and ideological conditions of their respective times. While both affirmed adult learning as a public good, their frameworks of provision and institutional responsibility reflected contrasting governance imaginaries. This section applies Discourse Analysis to examine how each report constructed structural legitimacy and to trace the shift from dispersed civic pluralism to increasingly centralised system coordination. As Fieldhouse (1996) and Jones (1974) observe, this shift marked a broader transformation in the state's role: from enabling moral and civic development to attempting to structurally embed adult education within a new emergent bureaucratic order—an order increasingly shaped by the narrowing of civic values and the onset of neoliberal political rationalities.

- **Civic-pluralist structure in 1919 anchored in dispersed responsibility and ethical obligation:** The 1919 Report advanced a multi-actor system involving universities, LEAs, and voluntary bodies, with the Board of Education in a coordinating role. It described adult education as ‘a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship’ (para. 1) and insisted that ‘the means through which it is realised must remain various’ (para. 14). Fieldhouse (1996) characterises this as a civic infrastructure based on subsidiarity and layered responsibility, not central control.

- **Discursive emphasis on growth, diversity, and democratic development.** The 1919 Report invoked metaphors of organic development, e.g., describing adult education as ‘a fruitful soil, not a hothouse plant’ (para. 22), to frame provision as emergent, community-rooted, and civic in tone. This positioned state structures as enablers of democratic learning rather than its designers.
- **Russell Report’s framing of fragmentation and need for rationalisation:** In contrast, the 1973 Russell Report diagnosed the field as ‘fragmented and in many areas incoherent’ (Part I, para. 3.4), constructing a discursive problem of structural disorganisation. Its structural logic is centred on coordination, integration, and efficiency, shifting governance rhetoric toward centralised planning. Jones (1974) identifies this as a departure from civic pluralism toward ‘functionalist modernisation.’
- **Managerialist vocabulary and layered hierarchy of provision:** The Russell Report called for ‘a more systematic approach... to promote a rational pattern of services and avoid duplication of effort’ (Part III, paras. 12.1–12.2). Huddleston and Unwin (2013) argue that this marked the transition to adult education as a ‘technical delivery system,’ where planning, funding, and curriculum design were stratified across administrative levels.
- **Discursive recontextualisation of adult education’s purpose:** Despite its comprehensive scope, the Russell Report did not articulate universal entitlement. Purvis (1976) observed that ‘structure without entitlement’ reinforced the peripheral status of adult education behind a reformist façade, suggesting managerial reordering without ethical reframing. This discursive shift, traced across earlier sections, finds fuller expression here in the Russell Report’s ability to retain civic provision nominally while functionally marginalising its normative base.

These structural logics reflect policy reform and constitute divergent constructions of governable Complexity. The 1919 Report imagined adult education as a plural, ethically grounded national endeavour. In contrast, the

Russell Report reframed it as a rationalised subsystem requiring coordination and functional alignment. This redefinition displaced ethical pluralism with conditional managerialism, narrowing the structural imagination of civic learning. The implications for professional agency and institutional autonomy, particularly the repositioning of civic intent within emerging governance rationalities, are developed further in the following domains and revisited in the Meta-Level synthesis.

4.6.2 Social Domain: Repositioning of Sectoral Agency

The 1919 and 1973 reports went beyond merely describing institutional roles: each text actively constructed a vision of sectoral agency that embedded ideological commitments and legitimised particular governance arrangements. Applying discourse analytic principles, particularly attention to modality, nominalisation, and interdiscursivity, this section identifies how the reports framed the responsibilities of voluntary bodies, LEAs, practitioners, and the state, as well as the discursive logic underpinning the concept of partnership. Across these domains, a transition is evident: from civic mutualism to bureaucratic instrumentalism and from moral legitimacy to administrative coherence.

- **Voluntary organisations as civic vanguards (1919) vs peripheral contributors (1973):** The 1919 Report elevated organisations such as the WEA as central to adult education's civic mission, lauding their 'spirit of service' and 'self-sacrificing work' (1919, p. 5). The modality conveyed moral urgency and ethical esteem here. Clyde (1981) identifies this as part of a broader normative framing in which voluntary agencies were not auxiliaries but formative actors. By contrast, the Russell Report described the voluntary provision as 'a modest contribution' (para. 221), employing qualified language that subtly downgraded their role. Hughes (1977) interprets this rhetorical shift as indicative of a structural repositioning: civic actors were supplemental; their legitimacy tied to their capacity to align with system-wide planning.

- **LEAs as enablers of civic coordination (1919) vs administrative intermediaries (1973):** In 1919, LEAs were positioned as collaborative agents, vehicles through which national principles were locally realised. Those acting in a ‘spirit of co-operation, not control’ (p. 16) were praised for fostering autonomy and civic engagement. In 1973, this discursive positioning was diluted. The Russell Report described LEAs in terms of ‘regional planning,’ ‘information systems,’ and ‘statutory responsibility’ (paras. 250–253), reconstituting them as components in a planning apparatus. Purvis (1976) viewed this as the onset of quasi-corporate accountability. Through this lens, such shifts, particularly in the use of nominalisations like ‘coherent planning’, abstracted and depersonalised agency, signalling a transition from relational governance to managerial hierarchy.
- **Practitioners as moral educators (1919) vs standardised deliverers (1973):** Educators in the 1919 Report were cast as ‘agents of democracy,’ expected to ‘enlighten’ and ‘uplift’ learners (p. 21). The report’s lexical field evoked pedagogical vocation and moral trust. This contrasted sharply with the Russell Report’s emphasis on ‘terms and conditions of service’ and staff ‘deployment’ (para. 315), aligning professional identity with institutional needs rather than civic function. Hughes (1977) and Ball (1994) both suggest that such reframing prefigured the emergence of performative professionalism, whereby practitioners were defined more by contractual obligations than by ethical purposes. This shift was not only one of institutional location but of epistemic role: the educator moved from custodian of public reason to agent of delivery frameworks, a transformation cemented through planning discourse and qualification regimes. The subjective and ethical implications of this redefinition are examined in greater depth in Section 4.6.3.
- **The State as Guarantor of Public Value (1919) vs Architect of System Design (1973):** The 1919 Report presented the state as a steward of democratic opportunity, asserting that ‘a duty lies upon the State’ to guarantee educational access (p. 2). This constructed a moralised, relational role. In

contrast, the Russell Report's language, 'national strategy,' 'planning machinery,' and 'defined responsibilities' (paras. 29, 37, 241), positioned the state as a system engineer. Clyde (1981) acknowledged this as a Pragmatic adaptation, but Ball (2008) later interpreted it as a precursor to governance by metrics: a shift in which the political was evacuated in favour of technocratic oversight.

- **From professional autonomy to institutional performativity:** These discursive shifts reflect broader structural transformations in the governance of educational professionalism. As Tummons (2011) observes, the expansion of accountability regimes redefined practitioner identity through frameworks of oversight, standardisation, and managerial control. Professional roles were increasingly shaped by externally imposed expectations rather than practitioner-led judgement. The implications of these shifts for educators' moral agency and pedagogical purpose are taken up in the following Subjective domain.
- **Dual positioning and discursive contradiction:** In the Russell Report, this tension is already nascent: sectoral actors are rhetorically affirmed as autonomous partners yet structurally repositioned as components within a strategically coordinated delivery system. This duality, visible through critical discourse analysis, signals the contested and transitional nature of professionalism at this historical juncture.

Taken together, these discursive shifts reframed adult education governance as a technical field requiring hierarchical coordination rather than a civic space animated by relational legitimacy. The sector's core actors—voluntary groups, LEAs, and practitioners—were repositioned through redefinition: their historical roles persisted in name but were now subordinated to a grammar of system logic, strategic integration, and institutional efficiency. While actors were rhetorically affirmed as autonomous partners, they were structurally repositioned as components of a centrally coordinated system. This discursive contradiction—between the language of partnership and the logic of hierarchical control—

signalled a transitional configuration of professionalism and governance that would deepen in the decades to follow. These effects are further interrogated in the following Subjective domain and revisited in the chapter's Meta-Level synthesis.

4.6.3 Subjective Domain: Changing Constructions of Learners and Educators

While the preceding section examined how adult education actors were positioned within governance structures, this section explores how learners, educators, and pedagogical purpose were constructed as moral, political, and epistemological subjects.

Between the 1919 and 1973 Reports, the discursive construction of learners, practitioners, and pedagogical purpose underwent a significant ideological shift. While both texts engaged adult education as a vehicle for social formation, they embedded contrasting assumptions about agency, purpose, and legitimacy. Drawing on Fairclough's principles of critical discourse analysis, particularly interdiscursivity, metaphor, and modality, this section explores how the subjectivities at the heart of adult education were reimagined. The comparison reveals a shift from civic-humanist idealism to managerial differentiation, laying the foundations for the later performative turn in governance.

- **Learners as moral subjects (1919) vs administrative categories (1973):**
The 1919 Report constructed learners as co-creators of a democratic society, employing metaphors of cultivation and growth, 'the fruitful soil,' 'germs of intellectual interests' (pp. 35–36), to foreground latent civic potential. Learners were to be nurtured, not categorised. By contrast, the Russell Report introduced discrete figures, 'the housewife,' 'the retired man,' and 'the mature student' (Part II, paras. 3.1–3.5), framing the adult learner as a type with specific service needs. This segmented logic, as Hughes (1977) observed, reframed access as eligibility and participation as service consumption. CDA

confirms a shift from dialogic to classificatory framing, with implications for how agency and entitlement were subsequently operationalised.

- **Practitioners as organic intellectuals (1919) vs system operatives (1973):**
In 1919, the educator was a civic actor, tasked to ‘quicken interest,’ ‘stimulate discussion,’ and ‘inspire participation’ (p. 28). These modal verbs conveyed active co-production of knowledge and democratic solidarity. This aligns with Gramsci’s conception of the educator as an ‘organic intellectual,’ whose legitimacy derives from their alignment with a collective ethical purpose. In 1973, this framing gave way to institutional designation. The Russell Report emphasised ‘uniform conditions of service’ and professional regulation (Russell, pp. 47–49), presenting practitioners as elements of workforce planning. These lexical choices, particularly the use of metaphor, obligation, and modality, will be revisited through critical discourse analysis in Section 4.6 to trace how their meanings were retained, recontextualised, or eroded in subsequent governance texts.
- **Pedagogy as moral formation versus managed provision: The 1919 Report embedded pedagogy in a civic project, where** adult education was to ‘enable full citizenship,’ grounded in discussion and mutual inquiry. This contrasted sharply with the Russell Report’s emphasis on ‘resource deployment,’ ‘rational planning,’ and ‘priority areas’ (paras. 12.2, 29). Purvis (1976) critiqued this redefinition as an erosion of moral depth, arguing that pedagogical value was increasingly assessed through systemic coherence and strategic alignment, rather than relational purpose.
- **Learner agency: Democratic co-production vs. individualised access.**
Learners in the 1919 Report were framed as engaged citizens capable of transformation through participation. In the Russell Report, agency was recast in behavioural terms: to ‘attend,’ ‘choose,’ and ‘benefit’ from provision. This consumerist idiom, as interpreted through Fairclough’s (1995) critical discourse framework, repositions the subject from collective actor to service

recipient, thereby flattening the dialogic and political dimensions of educational engagement.

These discursive realignments redefined the subjective foundations of adult education. While the 1919 Report advanced a civic-humanist imaginary anchored in relational agency and moral development, the Russell Report repositioned learners and practitioners within a managerial framework of eligibility, standardisation, and regulated access. This ideological shift did not obliterate civic purpose. However, it reframed it in conditional terms, opening discursive space for the performative governance logics that would consolidate in later decades. These tensions, between ethical purpose and operational control, between agency and compliance, signal a transformation in how adult education is imagined and justified, both as a practice and as a policy.

This ideological reframing can also be located within broader debates about the shifting purposes of education. Biesta (2015) argues that modern education systems increasingly privilege economic and performative goals over civic and democratic aims, often recasting learners as consumers rather than participants in collective life. The Russell Report's segmented construction of learners, grouped by typologies of service need, prefigures this transition, subtly reorienting adult education toward a model of managed consumption. As Moon (2006) observes, such discursive shifts compress the plural purposes of education into administratively legible outcomes, weakening the space for broader ethical or civic formation. In this sense, the Report's discursive strategy reflects adaptation to fiscal constraint as well as participation in a deeper epistemological reordering of education's aims.

4.6.4 Meta-Level Complexity: Systemic Divergence and Discursive Reordering

Between 1919 and 1973, the governance of adult education in England was shaped by a broadly civic rationale rooted in ideals of citizenship, moral

development, and public responsibility. By the time the Russell Report was published, however, these values, although still prominent in the report's language, were increasingly refracted through emerging governance logics oriented toward planning, coordination, and system rationalisation. Rather than signalling an abrupt ideological shift, the Russell Report enacted a moment of strategic accommodation.

The Russell Report operated as a transitional artefact in adult education governance, maintaining the outward vocabulary of civic pluralism while incrementally reconfiguring its institutional meaning. Terms such as 'rational planning', 'efficiency', and 'sector coordination' signalled a discursive shift in which civic ideals were not discarded but redeployed to legitimise emerging governance arrangements. This semantic realignment enabled continuity of language while embedding performance-oriented priorities into the sector's administrative logic.

The concept of systemic emergence, as outlined by Boulton et al. (2015) and Cilliers (1998), provides insight into this shift. Complex systems stabilise not through radical discontinuity but through feedback loops and semantic layering. The Russell Report functioned in precisely this manner: it sustained rhetorical coherence while enabling underlying transformation. This mechanism enabled civic values to circulate within an administrative logic that was increasingly shaped by managerial coordination and control.

This ambivalence also altered how educational purpose was imagined. The Russell Report reflects what Biesta (2015), as incorporated into the GCF, identifies as the compression of educational aims, where civic, personal, and economic purposes are nominally retained but systemically skewed toward the latter. Moon's (2006) account of procedural simplification as a form of epistemic reduction complements this reading: Civic Complexity was translated into administratively tractable forms.

Gramsci's concept of passive revolution, as developed within the GCF and elaborated upon by Filippini (2017) and Morton (2003), provides a further explanatory layer. The absorption of civic ideals into a technocratic grammar displaced their normative force without removing them from policy discourse. Civic language retained symbolic power but was refunctioned to support emerging governance arrangements.

This process enabled continuity of language at the moment that adult education's institutional foundations were being reorganised. Practitioners and policymakers could continue to articulate commitments to civic inclusion and participation, but these commitments were now conditional upon alignment with evaluative rationalities grounded in planning and performance.

The Russell Report, therefore, should be read not only as a response to changing governance pressures but as a constitutive element of them. Its discursive flexibility provided a transitional semantic scaffold, allowing the civic lexicon to mediate a shift toward a new governance imaginary without explicitly repudiating its past. This capacity to maintain coherence while facilitating divergence would prove instrumental in legitimising the transformations that followed.

4.6.5 Cross-Theory Dialogue: Path Dependence, War of Position, and Situated Enquiry

This CTD applies three GCF concepts- path dependence, war of position, and situated inquiry- to explore the transitional dynamics embedded in the Russell Report. Together, they illuminate how structural inertia, ideological incorporation, and reflective agency interacted within the evolving governance terrain of adult education during the 1970s.

Path dependence, as defined within the GCF (Boulton *et al.*, 2015; Cilliers, 1998), explains how earlier arrangements, such as discretionary LEA funding

and vocational drift, structured the institutional and discursive field in which the Russell Report was produced. These precedents constrained the space of policy imagination. Although the report affirmed civic ideals, it did so within a system already shaped by rational planning and efficiency discourses. The resulting feedback limited the range of legitimate proposals and reinforced institutional logics oriented towards coordination.

The war of position (Donoghue, 2018; Morton, 2003) reveals how ideological transformation often occurs through discursive incorporation rather than confrontation. The Russell Report's alignment of civic language with managerial rationalities exemplifies this process. Civic values were not discarded; they were redeployed in ways that validated emerging administrative priorities. Rather than resisting dominant norms, the report functioned as a mechanism through which older ideals were reframed and absorbed. This repositioning contributed to the consolidation of a governance bloc that would underpin later performative restructuring.

Situated inquiry, grounded in the Pragmatist strand of the GCF, offers a counterpoint to structural and ideological constraint by interpreting agency as reflective and experimental rather than oppositional. Cherryholmes (1999) frames inquiry as a mode of action through which educators test possibilities relationally, 'doing to see what will happen' and emphasising adaptation over confrontation. Vanderstraeten and Biesta (2006) approach situated action with greater institutional caution, noting that inquiry within education always takes place within discursive systems that both limit and enable. Practitioners responding to the Russell Report's ambiguities negotiated these tensions by integrating dialogic values into vocational curricula, adjusting accountability frameworks, and asserting local relevance under centralised conditions. These actions preserved civic intent, not by always rejecting system logics, but by reworking them incrementally, demonstrating what Cherryholmes identifies as inquiry-as-action while operating within the epistemological constraints that Vanderstraeten and Biesta argue are difficult to transcend.

Placed in tension, these concepts recast the Russell Report not as a culmination of civic aspiration or its negation, but as a discursive artefact shaped by metastable dynamics. Path dependence defined what could plausibly be proposed. The war of position structured how values were ideologically repositioned. Situated inquiry traced the persistence of agency through context-bound adaptation. Together, they reveal a system undergoing recursive transformation, in which semantic coherence enabled reorganisation rather than resolution. The Russell Report thus instantiated a metastable formation: one in which discursive stability enabled ideological recalibration without systemic rupture.

4.7 Governance Shifts (1973–1992) and the Road to Marketisation

The period from 1973 to 1992 represents a transitional phase in the governance of adult education in England, in which civic discourses were retained rhetorically but increasingly subordinated to economic, administrative, and evaluative imperatives. This period was marked by a gradual and layered realignment, in which new governance logics — specifically, planning, performativity, and output justification — emerged and were embedded through funding mechanisms, policy guidance, and institutional drift.

While the Russell Report (1973) preserved the civic vocabulary of earlier decades, its emphasis on strategic planning signalled a shift in the policy grammar of adult education. Subsequent economic crises catalysed public sector retrenchment, exposing adult education's structural vulnerability and diminishing its claim to statutory legitimacy. Within this context, the legitimacy of civic provision became increasingly conditional, dependent on its ability to align with managerial rationalities and economic metrics.

This section applies the GCF to trace these transformations across three domains. The Natural Domain examines how fiscal constraint, conditionality, and

bifurcated funding architectures constrained LEAs and restructured institutional incentives. The Social Domain explores the discursive shift in how civic purpose was redefined and disciplined through managerialism and output-based oversight. The Subjective Domain addresses how practitioners navigated these constraints through situated adaptation, improvisation, and ethical recalibration.

4.7.1 Natural Domain: Conditionality, Disempowerment, and Parallel Structures

- **Fiscal contraction and conditionality:** The mid-1970s economic crisis, which was characterised by stagflation, rising unemployment, and the effects of the 1973 oil crisis, prompted severe fiscal retrenchment across the UK public sector. The 1976 IMF loan, issued in response to mounting balance-of-payments pressures, required and formalised austerity measures that included sharp reductions to local authority budgets. In adult education, this translated into a retraction of the post-war principle of universal adult education entitlement. Provision was increasingly justified through targeted eligibility, with funding directed toward those who could demonstrate instrumental outcomes, such as employment readiness or social rehabilitation. Tett (2014) characterises this period as the genesis of a legitimacy regime in which educational value was increasingly tied to demonstrable economic return. Purvis (1976) had already observed that adult education's marginal status made it acutely vulnerable during fiscal retrenchment, underscoring its structural weakness within the broader educational hierarchy.
- **Contradictory expectations of LEAs under fiscal constraint:** LEAs remained formally responsible for adult education throughout this period, yet were asked to exercise planning and oversight functions without guaranteed resources or protected budgets. Central government grants were not ringfenced, and local authorities were required to allocate from combined funding pools that also supported compulsory education. Clyde (1981) and Marriott (2000) describe this dynamic as a form of *jurisdictional incoherence*:

LEAs were accountable for outcomes they could not reliably fund. Tatton (1988) highlights how, even where civic intent was retained the erosion of fiscal discretion, rather than direct disempowerment, undermined local autonomy. This was a constraint that blurred responsibility across multiple tiers of governance.

- **Diversification of funding and strategic bifurcation:** The establishment of the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) introduced a new stream of adult training provision outside traditional LEA oversight. This reflected the increasing fragmentation of funding pathways: some resources continued to flow through LEAs (via local taxation and general grants), others were directed nationally, and some, such as MSC programmes, were channelled directly to designated bodies. Clyde (1981) and Fieldhouse (1996) interpret this as a functional bifurcation: one strand of adult education retained civic framing, while another aligned more closely with national reskilling priorities. Unlike LEA-coordinated civic provision, the MSC introduced centrally commissioned programmes that bypassed local governance altogether, embedding adult learning within a national economic strategy.
- **Institutional reconfiguration of FE provision:** The growth of adult education within FE colleges was shaped by Labour's industrial strategy, which increasingly linked provision to employment sectors and workforce development. Jarvis (2004) notes that this period saw a shift in institutional culture, as colleges reoriented their programmes to reflect external policy demands. Avis (2005) later identifies how managerial priorities came to shape everyday administrative practice following incorporation. While such structures were not yet fully in place during the 1980s, the institutional emphasis on performance targets and output justification began to surface in this period, laying the groundwork for the subsequent erosion of civic and educational aims.
- **Managerial drift and symbolic conditionality:** Circulars such as DES 6/81 instructed LEAs to prioritise provision with measurable social utility. Ball

(2007) interprets such instruments as early expressions of New Public Management, exerting governance pressure through implied norms rather than statutory reform. Chris Duke (1986) argued that bodies such as ACACE promoted a vision of continuing education that was rhetorically inclusive but functionally instrumental, reducing civic discourse to conditional policy targets. This marked a symbolic narrowing of legitimacy: civic rationales persisted in name but were increasingly required to legitimate themselves through vocabularies of utility and procedural accountability. What appeared as policy continuity in language masked a deeper discursive shift, in which democratic and relational educational purposes were tolerated only to the extent that they could be rearticulated within emerging performance regimes.

4.7.2 Social Domain: Neoliberal Drift and the Redefinition of Purpose

While neoliberal rationalities increasingly shaped British social policy from the late 1970s, their effects were uneven across sectors. In contrast to more immediate reforms in areas such as housing, compulsory education, and welfare administration, adult education remained a relatively peripheral site of intervention during this initial phase. The sector's marginal political visibility, limited centralisation, and continued entanglement with civic and voluntary traditions meant that early changes were largely discursive and conditional. Lucas (2018) argues that this ongoing marginal status made adult and further education politically easier to restructure in the 1990s, once more central institutions had already been addressed. Bowl (2017) similarly observes that the delayed imposition of neoliberalism in adult education created sharp tensions for practitioners, who found themselves navigating increasingly ambiguous policy pressure while maintaining commitments to dialogic, democratic, and relational pedagogies. Although these pressures did not immediately dismantle civic provision, they gradually reconfigured its legitimacy by embedding managerial and economic criteria as the dominant conditions of policy relevance. This

incremental realignment created a governance landscape in which later structural changes- particularly those introduced through the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act- could be pursued more forcefully, under the guise of institutional autonomy and rational modernisation.

- **Discursive drift and redefinition of civic aims (1974–1983):** From the mid-1970s, adult education policy began to adopt the language of planning, efficiency, and measurable outcomes. Under Labour, civic aims were increasingly embedded within regional economic strategies, while circulars such as DES (1977) encouraged LEAs to quantify retention and throughput (Clyde, 1981; Fieldhouse, 1996). Ball (2007) characterises this as a proto-managerialist phase that laid the groundwork for more explicit market reforms. Since 1979, Conservative governments have redefined adult education as a means of labour market activation and promoting individual responsibility. Jarvis (2004) and Avis (2003) describe this as a discursive realignment, reframing learners as clients and institutions as service providers. The cumulative effect was a semantic narrowing of civic purpose, subordinating participatory and democratic rationales to the logics of employability and fiscal discipline.
- **Marginalisation and reconfiguration of civic provision through audit and oversight:** Civic, cultural, and community-based programmes, once central to adult education, became increasingly marginalised as public funding frameworks shifted their focus towards economic priorities. To remain viable, these programmes were often reframed in instrumental terms- an adaptation that reflected the growing dominance of audit logic. Grace (1994) and Ball (2003) trace how programmes grounded in critical, developmental, or participatory aims were rendered ineligible for public support unless aligned with outcomes-based criteria. Dwyer (1994) identifies quality assurance frameworks as the discursive mechanism that normalised this exclusion. These pressures also reshaped sectoral governance: Clyde (1981) and Robson (1998) document how collaborative and localised planning structures

were displaced by centralised targets and managerial procedures.

Collectively, these shifts hollowed out relational governance and embedded a model of bureaucratic control legitimated through audit expectations.

- **Discursive realignment and centralised discipline:** Bowl (2014) contends that the subordination of civic aims was not simply a response to fiscal constraint but a deliberate discursive realignment that privileged productivity narratives over alternative social imaginaries. This shift was not merely technocratic in character. It exemplifies what Gamble (1988) identifies as a central paradox of Thatcherism: the integration of a free-market economic agenda with a highly centralised and interventionist state. In adult education, this paradox became structurally embedded. The state's role, far from receding, was reconfigured as a disciplinary apparatus, one that enforced conformity to market imperatives under the guise of modernisation. These shifts redefined adult education as an instrument of labour market activation, with civic values retained rhetorically but recontextualised through administrative planning and performance metrics. The result was not only governance reform, but an epistemological narrowing of what adult education was permitted to be.

4.7.3 Subjective Domain: Professional Fragmentation and Adaptive Response

From the mid-1970s, adult education policy in England entered a phase of discursive realignment. Rather than being centrally restructured, adult education experienced indirect governance shifts that redefined legitimacy through policy language. Adult Education's limited centralisation and enduring civic traditions meant that early reforms primarily reshaped language and legitimacy rather than structure. As Lucas (2018) and Bowl (2017) note, this marginal status enabled more forceful reorganisation in the 1990s. By then, economic utility and performance logic had already displaced civic rationales as dominant policy frames. This section examines how proto-managerial discourse, fiscal pressure,

and audit logics incrementally redefined educational legitimacy, preparing the sector for structural transformation.

- **Civic adaptation and relational improvisation under constraint:** practitioners developed diverse strategies to sustain civic pedagogical values as institutional conditions narrowed. Kelly (1992) and Fieldhouse (1996) trace the continuity of dialogic and critical traditions within the WEA and university extension programmes. Field (2006) and Hoggart (1957) document how civic aims were embedded within vocational formats to maintain institutional legitimacy. These adaptations were neither wholly resistant nor compliant. Jarvis (2004) and Ball (2007) interpret them as strategic manoeuvres for ethical coherence within performative regimes. Despite increasing precarity, especially for sessional and flexi-contracted staff, civic intent persisted in forms grounded in trust-based relationships and situated professional judgement (Bathmaker and Avis, 2005).
- **Institutionalisation of performative norms and audit-based legitimacy:** By the 1980s, professional legitimacy became increasingly contingent on alignment with institutional productivity. Funding frameworks prioritised metrics such as student retention, employability, and cost efficiency. Bathmaker and Avis (2005) argue that managerial regimes redefined professional identity by subordinating educational judgement to external performance goals. Grace (1994) views this shift as a breach of the moral contract between educator and community, while Ball (2003) and Jarvis (2004) identify it as a reconstitution of sectoral norms through audit vocabularies, inspection regimes, and policy metrics. These pressures eroded the discretionary space for pedagogical judgement and redefined effectiveness in bureaucratic rather than relational terms.
- **Ideological discipline and the paradox of modernisation:** Bowl (2014) argues that the subordination of civic aims was not simply a response to fiscal pressures, but a deliberate discursive realignment that privileged productivity

over plural social imaginaries. This reconfiguration did not reduce state involvement, but rather retooled it as a disciplinary mechanism for market alignment.

4.7.4 Meta-Level Complexity: Semantic Retention and Managerial Embedding

Between 1973 and 1992, the governance of adult education in England underwent a recursive reconfiguration. While policy did not introduce an immediate structural overhaul, a gradual layering of conditionality, economic justification, and evaluative compliance began to narrow the terrain of legitimate educational practice. From a GCF perspective, this represents an emergent governance ecology: one shaped not by abrupt replacement, but by the cumulative interaction of fiscal constraint, discursive redefinition, and adaptive institutional routines.

The retention of civic discourse throughout this period was structurally ambivalent. Civic values were neither formally discarded nor fully operationalised. Instead, they were repurposed within the language of planning, social utility, and labour market activation. This semantic retention served to deflect critique, allowing policymakers to maintain rhetorical allegiance to democratic traditions even as relational and dialogic practices were increasingly deauthorised within funding regimes.

This dynamic of rhetorical continuity and operational narrowing produced a metastable governance condition. The adult education sector remained institutionally dispersed and professionally committed to civic aims, but its strategic direction was increasingly shaped by audit regimes and conditional funding mechanisms. Managerial discretion, rather than direct policy mandates, became the primary vector for institutional alignment with central priorities.

Importantly, this was not a linear or uniform process. The relative marginality of adult education shielded it from early restructuring, yet this very marginality enabled more intensive consolidation by the early 1990s. Civic aims persisted, but their institutional viability was increasingly tethered to their capacity to be reframed in economically legible terms.

The GCF views this period as a constitutive moment: one in which the ideological space of adult education was redrawn without explicit rejection of its civic traditions. The full theoretical implications of this process, particularly the formation of a historic bloc, the logic of systemic emergence, and the limits of adaptive agency, are addressed in the Cross-Theory Dialogue that follows.

4.7.5 Cross-Theory Dialogue: Historic Block, Systemic Emergence, and Pragmatic Adaptation

This CTD places the concepts of historic bloc, systemic emergence, and Pragmatic adaptation into analytical tension to interpret the ideological, structural, and agential dynamics shaping adult education governance in England between 1973 and 1992. The interaction of these concepts reveals how new governance logics coalesced, not through direct imposition or immediate displacement, but through processes of absorption, feedback, and situated recalibration.

The formation of a neoliberal historic bloc during this period unfolded through the gradual recontextualisation of civic discourse. As Gramsci (1971) argued, historic blocs achieve coherence through the alignment of institutional practices, cultural norms, and economic rationalities. Rather than displacing earlier ideals, policymakers reworked civic language into the idioms of planning, employability, and performance. This alignment did not signify consensus but represented a provisional ideological unity, strategically sustained through the semantic redirection of public purposes. Drawing on Morton (2003) and Filippini (2017), this process is best understood as a strategy of incorporation: a realignment that

depended on rendering civic ideals compatible with the emerging priorities of economic rationality and administrative coherence.

Systemic emergence, as theorised within Complexity Theory (Boulton et al., 2015; Cilliers, 2000), clarifies how this realignment materialised within institutional routines. Instruments such as audit regimes, conditional funding, and the proliferation of semi-autonomous governance bodies functioned as distributed mechanisms of constraint. These mechanisms did not impose a singular logic from above but instead generated recursive feedback loops that narrowed the range of legitimate practices over time. The resulting governance configuration exhibited metastable properties; flexible enough to absorb critique but increasingly structured around performative expectations. Apparent continuity masked the gradual sedimentation of audit norms, managerial values, and accountability frameworks into everyday decision-making processes.

Within this landscape, Pragmatic adaptation complicates interpretations of either closure or resistance. Educators responded to constraints through locally situated strategies that sustained civic and relational commitments under new conditions. Drawing on Cherryholmes (1999) and Biesta (2006), this concept emphasises relational judgement, ethical improvisation, and contextual responsiveness. Adaptation here did not overturn dominant logics, yet neither was it reducible to passive compliance. Rather, it enacted forms of ethical positioning that were embedded within, and shaped by, the very institutional conditions practitioners were attempting to navigate.

Placed in dialogue, these concepts illuminate a recursive configuration of governance. Historic bloc clarifies how legitimacy was recalibrated through ideological absorption; systemic emergence traces how this recalibration was operationalised through feedback and procedural drift; and Pragmatic adaptation demonstrates how agency persisted as a constrained, situated force within this ecology. Educators' strategies negotiated system boundaries rather than confronting them directly, sustaining civic values through practice forms that

were already conditioned by performative logics. These interactions did not resolve into consensus but produced an adaptive regime in which competing rationalities coexisted, fragile, negotiated, and differentially articulated across sites.

In this interplay, the Grounded Complexity Framework reframes the 1973–1992 period as a phase of cumulative consolidation, shaped by feedback among discursive, institutional, and professional domains. Adult education remained on the margins of direct policy reform longer than many sectors, yet this apparent delay facilitated a gradual narrowing of ideological and procedural space. Civic dispositions endured, not as stable legacies, but as recalibrated ethical orientations; improvised within shifting terrains of legitimacy. The task of analysis is not to resolve the tension between structure and agency, but to map their interdependence: to demonstrate how ethical intent, ideological adaptation, and institutional constraint were intertwined in shaping the sector's evolving governance imaginary.

4.8 The 1992 FEHE Policy Period: Structural Consolidation and the Reframing of Adult Education Governance

The years between 1988 and 1992 marked a phase of structural consolidation in the governance of adult education in England. Building on earlier developments in rising performance funding, audit culture, and managerial oversight, this period formalised key tenets of neoliberal policy, leading to the 1992 Further and Higher Education (FEHE) Act. This legislation reconfigured Further Education (FE) colleges from local authority-administered institutions into autonomous corporate entities, rendering institutional viability increasingly dependent on compliance with national performance criteria, employer alignment, and economic output measures.

While adult education had previously remained at the periphery of neoliberal reform, the FEHE Act signalled a strategic shift. The call by FE colleges for

greater institutional autonomy was framed as a modernising move, but was appropriated by neoliberal policy actors as a justification for wider system disruption. This permitted the reorganisation of adult education structures under the guise of institutional rationalisation, enabling a more forceful imposition of market-aligned governance across the entire sector. The result was a restructuring of both policy and practice, in which civic purposes were subjected to conditional legitimacy within economically prescribed parameters.

These changes represented the cumulative institutionalisation of policy trends already emergent in the preceding decade. The 1992 reforms extended earlier initiatives introduced through the 1988 Education Reform Act in compulsory education and applied them systematically to adult and Further Education. The governance model that emerged displaced deliberative coordination in favour of performance management, with civic and democratic purposes retained discursively but increasingly subordinated in operational terms.

While these reforms significantly narrowed the conditions under which civic-oriented provision could operate, the ideological contest over the public purpose of adult education continued. Section 4.9 examines the discursive struggles that accompanied the passage of the FEHE Act, including parliamentary debates and academic responses. Taken together, Sections 4.8 and 4.9 trace the restructuring of adult education governance both in its institutional design and its contested political meaning.

4.8.1 Natural, Social and Subjective Domains: Structural Reconfiguration and the Ideological Normalisation of Market Governance

- **Economic restructuring and the instrumental redefinition of education:**
The breakdown of the Keynesian economic consensus and the industrial stagnation of the 1980s reshaped the rationale for public education. Adult education was repositioned as a lever for national productivity and labour

market adaptability, displacing civic entitlement frameworks as the primary justification for public provision. Field (2006) and Keep (2009) show how economic imperatives restructured institutional expectations, embedding performance and economic relevance as core principles of governance.

- **Cruel optimism and the reframing of civic ideals:** These developments exemplify what Moore and Clarke (2016) describe as the phenomenon of ‘cruel optimism’ within professionalism —the maintenance of affective attachments to civic ideals even as institutional conditions progressively erode the possibility of their realisation. Within adult education, practitioners and organisations were encouraged to maintain the appearance of civic commitment, although this was increasingly articulated through institutional vocabularies of productivity and strategic compliance.
- **Compliance and procedural redefinition of success:** Tummons (2011) similarly observes that professionalism became increasingly predicated on compliance with audit cultures, redefining success as procedural adherence rather than relational or civic engagement. Thus, the restructuring of adult education governance was experienced both as policy realignment and as a profound reconstitution of the terms through which professional agency and educational purpose were rendered credible.
- **Statutory restructuring and competitive governance:** The 1988 Education Reform Act introduced competitive funding, audit regimes, and performance management, which were extended to adult and further education. The 1991 White Paper reframed civic ideals such as lifelong learning as instruments of employability and fiscal efficiency. The 1992 FEHE Act then severed colleges from LEA oversight, reconstituting them as autonomous corporate entities. Fieldhouse (1996) and Coffield (1999) show how this statutory realignment embedded performance-based funding and economic responsiveness as conditions for institutional viability.

- **Embedding economic responsiveness as institutional identity:** The imposition of corporate governance models shifted internal authority structures towards executive leadership oriented around market demands. Colleges were incentivised to prioritise employer partnerships, workforce development programmes, and quantifiable outputs as indicators of institutional success. Ecclestone (2004) and Keep (2021a) argue that this reorientation reshaped institutional culture, redefining authority structures and subordinating collegial governance practices to the competitive demands of economic responsiveness.
- **Institutionalisation of performance metrics as governance instruments:** Performance metrics, including learner completions, employer surveys, and unit-cost efficiency, replaced deliberative consultation as the primary validators of institutional success (Ball, 2003; Gleeson, 1993). These tools retroactively defined what counted as provision, systematically marginalising civic and non-vocational learning that lacked measurable economic outcomes.

4.8.2 Meta-Level Complexity: Systemic Embedding, Ideological Consolidation, and the Cross-Sector Export of Governance Logic

Between 1988 and 1992, adult education governance in England underwent a recursive structural and ideological consolidation that transformed earlier patterns of drift and conditional displacement into stabilised systemic norms. This period witnessed the cumulative embedding of market logic, performative metrics, and economic instrumentalism as the central organising principles of institutional legitimacy, progressively narrowing the operational space for civic rationales within the governance field.

From a GCF perspective, this transformation reflects a case of emergent systemic realignment, driven by recursive feedback mechanisms and institutional conditioning. Reforms introduced during this period, like competitive funding

regimes, performance-based accountability, and corporate restructuring, generated path-dependent trajectories, in which initial adaptations became self-reinforcing through procedural repetition. These reforms did not merely constrain behaviour through top-down imposition but produced governance attractors: stable configurations of institutional logic that shaped what counted as legitimate action. As procedural expectations stabilised, institutional options became constrained by precedents that limited policy creativity, reflecting the recursive sedimentation of market-oriented assumptions into decision-making structures.

Ideologically, this consolidation can be interpreted through hegemonic absorption, as conceptualised in Gramscian theory. Filippini (2017) emphasises that hegemonic stability is achieved not by eradicating alternative discourses but by selectively incorporating and repurposing them. Civic terms such as access, inclusion, and lifelong learning were not abandoned during this period, but redefined within economised grammars of employability, responsiveness, and auditability. This semantic rearticulation enabled apparent continuity of vocabulary to mask a reconfiguration of purpose. Policy texts, inspection frameworks, and parliamentary language increasingly treated civic ideals as valid only insofar as they supported productivity objectives. These ideological operations are examined further in the discursive analysis presented in Section 4.9.

The feedback loops connecting discursive realignment to institutional practice generated a form of recursive closure, in which the possibilities for civic or democratic education were structurally and epistemologically diminished. While the symbolic infrastructure of the post-war settlement remained formally visible, its substantive role in governance decision-making was weakened. The resulting system was metastable: it absorbed critique and minor adaptation, yet was increasingly structured around performance regimes that rewarded economic alignment and marginalised relational, dialogic, or transformative pedagogies.

This process also reflected a deepening shift in educational purpose. Drawing on Biesta's (2015) tripartite framework—qualification, socialisation, and subjectification—it is evident that civic and ethical rationales (associated with socialisation and subjectification) were progressively subordinated to qualification imperatives. The GCF interprets this narrowing as a form of ideological constraint through epistemological sedimentation, in which plural educational values are crowded out not by argument but by policy routines, data regimes, and discursive frames that treat economic utility as common sense. Bowl (2014) reinforces this reading by arguing that such constraints are not passive consequences but the result of deliberate design, embedded in the operational choices of funding, inspection, and oversight.

Taken together, these dynamics illustrate how structural, discursive, and epistemic elements interacted to consolidate a governance regime in which civic learning persisted only under conditional and marginal terms. By 1992, the performative logic initiated in earlier reforms had become institutionally embedded, and the possibility space for alternative imaginaries was shaped by attractor states that privileged economic legitimacy. The implications of this transition, particularly the interplay between institutional constraint, discursive continuity, and adaptive agency, are further explored in the Cross-Theory Dialogue that follows.

4.8.3 Cross-Theory Dialogue: Institutional Lock-In, Historic Bloc Formation, and Contingent Knowledge

Moving beyond institutional embedding, this Cross-Theory Dialogue applies three GCF concepts —path dependence, institutional lock-in, and contingent knowledge — to interrogate how these dynamics acquired structural durability and epistemic legitimacy. Together, they illuminate how policy trajectories became self-reinforcing, how epistemic norms were naturalised, and how civic imaginaries were marginalised through conditional absorption rather than overt

exclusion. These concepts provide a layered explanation of transformation achieved via recursive constraint and epistemological sedimentation.

Path dependence, as theorised in the GCF through Boulton *et al.* (2015) and Byrne & Callaghan (2014), explains how earlier reforms narrowed future policy possibilities. Revisions to funding, inspection, and institutional coordination during the 1980s did not merely alter administrative practice; they redefined the parameters of viable governance. Performance-linked budgets, audit regimes, and restructuring mechanisms generated procedural routines that elevated instrumental priorities. These constraints operated less through prohibition than by shaping what could plausibly be proposed or enacted within institutional settings.

Institutional lock-in, drawn from political science (Pierson, 2004), sharpens this reading by capturing how once-established reforms become resistant to reversal. While path dependence emphasises narrowing pathways, lock-in reveals how deviation becomes structurally prohibitive. By the time of the Further and Higher Education Act (1992), mechanisms such as output funding, sectoral incorporation, and national audit had become infrastructural norms. These tools no longer functioned as policy options but as prerequisites for institutional legitimacy. Femia (1987) adds that such hegemonic durability depends not only on structural enforcement but on the successful diffusion of cultural assumptions that naturalise constraint. Coercion, in this configuration, appears as common sense.

Contingent knowledge, developed in the GCF through Biesta (2009b) and Cherryholmes (1992), reframes these dynamics epistemologically. Biesta argues that knowledge claims- such as employability or performance- are historically situated, shaped by discursive regimes rather than empirical neutrality. Cherryholmes complements this by emphasising the political conditions under which certain claims are rendered authoritative. Together, they expose how the displacement of civic learning during 1988–92 occurred not through disproof but

through semantic recontextualisation. Frameworks of training, targets, and institutional contribution did not reject civic knowledge outright; they represented it in terms that rendered it conditional, inefficient, or obsolete. Governance was no longer articulated as a space of ethical contestation but as a site of technical optimisation.

Placed in tension, these concepts reveal the recursive consolidation of a performative regime. Path dependence clarifies how early reforms restricted the conditions for future policy development. Institutional lock-in explains how those constraints became stabilised through infrastructural and cultural norms. Contingent knowledge interprets how these constraints were rendered epistemically legitimate, producing a context in which civic rationales could persist only by adopting economised vocabularies.

While not named here as a primary interlocutor, this configuration reflects Gramsci's concept of the historic bloc. What emerged was a bloc in which material structures, discursive rationalities, and institutional norms cohered to sustain neoliberal governance. This was not a rejection of civic values, but their containment within a framework whose common sense no longer permitted plural educational futures.

This CTD thus reframes the 1988–92 period not as a technocratic refinement but as a recursive reorganisation of what governance meant, how legitimacy was constituted, and which imaginaries could credibly shape the future of adult education.

4.9: The Discursive Construction of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act

The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act marked a pivotal moment in the governance of adult and further education in England, consolidating a neoliberal framework that redefined both institutional structures and educational purpose.

Market logic, performative accountability, and outcome-based funding were embedded into the sector's governance architecture, displacing the post-war civic conception of adult education as a public good grounded in social responsibility. This consolidation was achieved not only through statutory reform but also through the co-option and semantic redirection of traditional adult education discourses, recasting systemic transformation as both rational and necessary.

Building on the competitive funding regimes and market-aligned rationalities introduced in the preceding decade, the Act formally transferred Further Education (FE) and Sixth Form Colleges from local education authority (LEA) oversight to new arm's-length national funding bodies, the Further Education Funding Councils (FEFC) and restructured aspects of Higher Education governance. These statutory reforms installed a model of institutional autonomy substantively shaped by national performance oversight, thereby entrenching an economistic rationale and structurally marginalising civic and participatory educational traditions.

This section does not focus on the operational effects of the Act, which are addressed elsewhere (Sections 4.8 and 4.10), but instead interrogates the discursive labour through which its legitimacy was constructed. Using the Grounded Complexity Framework (GCF) and drawing on Midgley's four domains, Natural, Social, Subjective, and Meta-Level Complexity, this analysis applies selected mechanisms from critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how parliamentary debate, across party lines, strategically mobilised semantic ambiguity, economic urgency, and intertextual authority to reconfigure governance assumptions. Contemporary academic voices, including Dwyer (1994), Gleeson (1993), Hyland (1992), and Powell (1992), are engaged as situated interlocutors within this contested discursive terrain. Particular attention is paid to the tensions and ambivalences within both supportive and oppositional discourse, recognising that the field of contestation was neither uniform nor univocal.

4.9.1 Natural Domain: Normalising Market Logic and Centralisation

The Hansard debates surrounding the 1992 FEHE Act reveal a concerted effort to normalise a systemic restructuring of adult education by recasting it as a technical and economic necessity. Ministers invoked the language of reform, coherence, and international competitiveness to justify centralisation, audit-driven governance, and performance-based funding. This discursive rationalisation functioned to depoliticise the Act's ideological realignment, naturalising the displacement of civil values in favour of economic functionality.

- **The 1991 White Paper framed structural reform as an economic imperative defined by outputs and cost-efficiency:** *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (DES, 1991) proposed a governance model grounded in 'output targets,' 'strategic commissioning,' and 'value for money' (p. 6), prioritising quantifiable institutional performance over broader civic purposes. Powell (1992) argues that this technocratic framing embedded a structural bias against adult learners whose outcomes could not be easily commodified. Dwyer (1994) supports this interpretation, critiquing the rhetorical construction of inevitability in such policy texts and exposing how the appearance of necessity obscured the fundamentally political nature of these choices. In Faircloughian terms, the White Paper's instrumental register performed a depoliticising function, presenting efficiency as an uncontroversial, natural objective.
- **The Bill's introduction in Parliament reinforced a rhetoric of dysfunction and rationalisation:** Kenneth Clarke declared, 'We are faced with a mess of incoherence and inefficiency in further education, and this Bill will bring clarity and coherence' (HC Deb, 21 March 1991, vol. 188, col. 435). The lexical field of 'mess' and 'remedy' discursively frames systemic overhaul as common-sense tidiness. Gleeson (1993) interprets such framings as central to discourses of modernisation, which rely on constructing the existing system as

dysfunctional in order to foreclose alternative imaginaries. Yet the presence of ministerial defensiveness, such as Clarke's assurance that 'diverse provision' would be preserved, hints at residual tensions between rhetorical modernisation and civic tradition.

- **Centralisation was framed discursively as decentralisation through the language of autonomy and independence:** Clarke claimed that colleges would 'be freed from stifling local authority control' (HC Deb, 21 March 1991, col. 436), while Lord Belstead described the new arrangements as a 'light-touch structure' (HL Deb, 16 January 1992, vol. 534, col. 771). However, these claims accompanied the imposition of centralised audit regimes and funding oversight. Clarke and Newman (1997) describe this strategy as 'paradoxical decentralisation,' whereby institutional autonomy in form is accompanied by intensified functional control. NIACE (1993) corroborates this reading, noting that rhetorical autonomy masked sharply narrowed discretion over curriculum, resource allocation, and strategic direction.
- **Opposition speakers challenged the characterisation of centralisation as politically neutral or benign:** Ann Cryer warned that 'removing colleges from LEA control will destroy long-standing mechanisms for community planning' (HC Deb, 20 May 1991, vol. 191, col. 203), while David Blunkett described the proposals as 'remote, centralised, and disconnected' (HL Deb, 11 February 1992, vol. 534, col. 562). These interventions positioned LEAs not as bureaucratic obstacles but as civic intermediaries, challenging the technocratic narrative and foregrounding the importance of relational governance.
- **International comparisons were strategically mobilised to construct inevitability and suppress domestic critique:** Clarke cited OECD data to claim that 'competitors are ahead of us in aligning education with labour market needs' (HC Deb, 21 March 1991, col. 436), yet without critical elaboration. Keep *et al.* (1992) argue that such references often served as discursive gestures rather than grounded evidence, deploying intertextual

authority to position reform as globally necessary. Fairclough's (1992) concept of intertextual legitimation clarifies how these appeals functioned to constrain dissent by framing market alignment as a common sense international perspective.

- **Semantic contestation of terms such as 'freedom' and 'autonomy':**

Although the Bill invoked institutional independence repeatedly, Belstead himself critiqued the rigour of proposed audit mechanisms (HL Deb, 16 January 1992, cols. 770–773). This exemplifies what Fairclough (1992) terms semantic contestation—a dynamic explored more fully in Section 4.9.4.

- **The Act reoriented governance from civic coordination to market responsiveness:** The FEFC replaced LEAs as the funding intermediary, disbursing resources in accordance with nationally prescribed performance targets. Although colleges appeared to gain formal autonomy, their operational survival became contingent on compliance with externally defined economic goals. In this respect, the Act instantiated a shift from civic planning to conditional autonomy within a performative governance regime.

While these discursive strategies were framed as anticipatory and reformist, they also created the conditions under which later structural changes could be interpreted as necessary, inevitable, and normatively justified.

4.9.2 Social Domain: Reframing Legitimacy and Institutional Roles

The parliamentary debates leading to the 1992 FEHE Act exposed deeper ideological struggles over legitimacy, authority, and the purposes of adult education. These debates reconstructed the social landscape of adult education governance by elevating market norms and rearticulating institutional roles through discourse.

- **Parliamentary rhetoric reframed adult education as administratively fragmented and outdated:** Kenneth Clarke described the status quo as a 'patchwork of local authority bureaucracy that has long outlived its usefulness' (HC Deb, 21 March 1991, vol. 188, col. 433), thereby positioning LEAs as the problem to be solved. Powell (1992) reads this as an intentional de-legitimation of democratic structures in favour of centrally managed systems. Dwyer (1994) similarly suggests that rhetorical appeals to 'coherence' and 'modernisation' functioned ideologically to obscure the centralisation of power.
- **LEAs were cast as impediments rather than as agents of civic inclusion:** While Blunkett defended LEAs as vehicles of democratic accountability, warning that their removal would 'centralise power in the hands of unelected funding councils' (HL Deb, 11 February 1992, vol. 534, col. 551), Clarke declared them 'obstructive to progress' (HC Deb, 21 March 1991). Gleeson (1993) argues that this binary framing allowed centralised managerialism to be positioned as a rational alternative to participatory governance.
- **Colleges were discursively reconstructed as entrepreneurial actors:** Clarke asserted that institutions had been 'held back by outdated local control' and would now be 'freed to pursue excellence' (HC Deb, 21 March 1991, vol. 188, col. 436). Dwyer (1994) critiques this portrayal as emblematic of new managerialism, which frames institutions as market-responsive units. FEDA (1996) later confirms how such discursive shifts reshaped institutional narratives, sidelining earlier civic purposes.
- **Adult learners were reimagined as passive consumers:** Clarke stated that reforms would 'allow individuals to choose from a wider range of provision and ensure they get value for money' (HC Deb, 21 March 1991, col. 437). Powell (1992) interprets this construction as subordinating adult learning to market-based consumer logic. NIACE (1993) notes that learner agency has been increasingly defined in terms of client responsiveness rather than democratic participation.

- **Educators were either marginalised or positioned as delivery instruments:** Lord Belstead's assurances about improving standards and flexibility (HL Deb, 21 November 1991, vol. 532, col. 1300) implied a compliance role rather than an active professional voice. Barber (1992) critiques this as a discursive suppression of educator agency and a narrowing of professional identity to mere compliance with output.
- **Employers emerged as the key arbiters of educational legitimacy:** Lord Renfrew asserted that 'employers must have confidence that what is taught aligns with the needs of the labour market' (HL Deb, 21 November 1991, vol. 532, col. 1312). Fairclough's (1992) concept of interdiscursive authority is directly applicable: market logics were discursively embedded within policy debate through the privileging of employer perspectives.
- **Oppositional discourses struggled to reassert civic governance models:** Ann Cryer warned that the reforms would 'sever the connective tissue that links education to community needs' (HC Deb, 20 May 1991, vol. 191, col. 702). However, Dwyer (1994) shows how such critiques were marginalised through discursive strategies that painted them as nostalgic resistance to progress.
- **The cumulative discursive shift redefined legitimacy itself:** Where civic embeddedness had once conferred legitimacy, the new regime recalibrated legitimacy around compliance with audit metrics and market-aligned performance targets. NIACE (1993) warned that 'adult learners will be the losers,' yet such concerns were subordinated to narratives of rational improvement. Hartley (1994) and Bradley and Howard (1992) demonstrate how performative metrics recoded civic provision as inefficiency. Bowl (2014) identifies how adult educators engaged in tactical 'ducking and diving' to preserve civic aims within these constraints. Arbuckle (2015) further illuminates how professional identities were fractured, with civic agency surviving only in contingent, negotiated forms.

4.9.3 Subjective Domain: Learners as Consumers, Practitioners as Delivery Instruments

The Hansard debates associated with the 1992 FEHE Act reveal a reframing of professional and learner subjectivities. Parliamentary rhetoric did not merely describe changes; it actively reconstructed the moral and professional identities of practitioners and learners within a performative, market-oriented discourse. The debates show how subject positions were normatively recast to align with neoliberal priorities of employability, responsiveness, and efficiency.

- **Practitioners repositioned as instruments of performative delivery:** Kenneth Clarke asserted that reforms would ‘ensure that all institutions raise their standards and become more responsive to the needs of the real world’ (HC Deb, 21 March 1991, vol. 188, col. 435). Ball’s (1990) analysis of subordinated professionalism clarifies how this reframing recast practitioners from autonomous pedagogical agents into delivery mechanisms, aligned with centralised targets. Dwyer (1994) deepens this argument by showing how democratic professional values were actively eroded.
- **Adult learners reframed as ‘responsibilised’ economic actors:** The White Paper Education and Training for the 21st Century (DES, 1991) asserted that education should ‘equip individuals with the skills demanded by employers’ (p. 5). Clarke echoed this, insisting the sector must ‘respond quickly and flexibly to what employers want’ (HC Deb, 21 March 1991, col. 437). Powell (1992) and Hyland (1992) document how learners were reimagined not as citizens with civic entitlements but as labour-market investments shaped by performative expectations.
- **Attempts to articulate alternative subjectivities were marginalised:** Lord Taylor’s intervention called for education to ‘foster reflection, confidence, and independent thinking,’ warning that the Bill would ‘turn students into economic units’ (HL Deb, 11 February 1992, vol. 534, col. 556). Yet, as Dwyer (1994)

contends, the dominant discourse pre-empted such alternatives by framing them as inefficient, outdated, or irrelevant.

- **The performative modality of obligation constrained subjective agency:** Ministerial speeches employed modal constructions, colleges ‘must adapt,’ students ‘should expect to compete’ (HC Deb, 21 March 1991, cols. 435–437). Fairclough (1992) demonstrates how such language naturalises externally imposed expectations, framing subjectivities in advance through obligation rather than aspiration.
- **Suppression of the relational and ethical dimensions of teaching:** Practitioners were almost exclusively referenced in relation to standardised outputs. Clarke’s repeated emphasis on measurable outcomes (HC Deb, 21 March 1991) exemplifies this narrowing. Barber (1992) argues that such framing suppresses professional fearlessness, the ability to prioritise ethical and relational aims over metric compliance.
- **Erasure of civic learner identity and the narrowing of educational subjectivities:** While ‘access’ and ‘choice’ were rhetorically invoked, these terms were reoriented around employability. Bradley and Howard (1992) highlight the marginalisation of community-based and developmental learning. Hyland (1992) similarly notes the disappearance of civic literacy goals from funding eligibility.
- **Semantic appropriation of civic language to mask ideological realignment:** Clarke’s assurance that reforms would ‘extend choice and access for all’ (HC Deb, 21 March 1991, col. 438) disguised a deeper structural redirection. Powell (1992) and Hartley (1994) both show how this appropriation of civic vocabulary helped neutralise opposition while embedding performative logics.
- **Internalisation of performative subjectivities:** Practitioners were expected to internalise managerial norms; learners were encouraged to see themselves

as ‘responsibilised’ competitors. Hargreaves (1994) conceptualises this as the rise of post-welfarist performativity, whereby inclusion and empowerment became subordinated to audit cultures. Fieldhouse (1996) observes that civic commitments did persist but were often displaced into oblique forms of ethical improvisation within hostile governance environments.

4.9.4 Meta-Level Complexity: Semantic Realignment and the Consolidation of Hegemony

The FEHE Act marked a critical consolidation of the hegemonic reordering of adult education governance in England. Earlier reforms had incrementally destabilised the post-war civic settlement; the 1992 Act codified this trajectory by structurally embedding audit, performance, and market-aligned governance into the institutional architecture of adult and further education. This consolidation was not solely legislative but also cultural: a structural entrenchment underpinned by semantic adaptation and normative realignment, collectively forming a neoliberal historic bloc.

The distinction between war of position and war of manoeuvre, as defined within the GCF, offers a key interpretive lens. The gradual re-articulation of civic discourse into neoliberal vocabulary exemplifies a war of position, an ideological sedimentation of new ‘common sense.’ Simultaneously, abrupt manoeuvrist interventions, such as the removal of LEA oversight and the reallocation of funding to arm’s-length bodies, restructured the governance field to pre-empt future dissent. These mechanisms operated in tandem: semantic displacement laid the cultural groundwork while institutional reforms operationalised it.

This cultural labour was integral to hegemonic saturation. Parliamentary invocations of ‘freedom,’ ‘choice,’ and ‘lifelong learning’ (e.g. Clarke, Belstead) served as acts of semantic repurposing rather than descriptive accuracy. Filippini (2017) shows how continuity in vocabulary enables ideological transformation to masquerade as incremental reform. In this case, the rhetoric of civic entitlement

was retained, yet its epistemic anchoring was altered, re-signified in terms of market alignment and competitiveness.

Powell (1992) and Hartley (1994) argue that this appropriation of emancipatory language was not benign: terms such as 'access' and 'equality' were recoded within economistic grammars that legitimised exclusionary outcomes. Mayo (2014) warns that such semantic shifts '*empty emancipatory language of its radical content*' (p. 50), shielding hegemonic change from critique while absorbing its lexicon.

The dismantling of LEAs exemplified this process of preclusion. Although justified as an efficiency reform, the removal of LEAs eliminated key sites of local civic coordination. Mayo (2008) contends that hegemonic projects succeed not only by promoting certain values but also by foreclosing the institutional conditions necessary for contestation. The closure of participatory infrastructures thus embedded constraint within the very architecture of governance.

Donoghue (2018) argues that neoliberal discourses do not eliminate critique but incorporate it within a semantic field structured to reproduce hegemonic norms. In Hansard, civic arguments from figures such as Blunkett and Taylor surfaced, yet the already economised terrain of debate limited their traction. Mayo (2014) characterises this narrowing of the 'sayable' as symptomatic of hegemonic maturity: dissent is tolerated but neutered, conditioned by dominant assumptions.

From a Pragmatist perspective, this narrowing of deliberative space is illuminated by Cherryholmes' (1999) concept of situated inquiry. Here, the capacity for ethical deliberation was bounded by institutional settings pre-structured through power. Sanderson (2009) similarly observes that ostensibly evidence-based policy frameworks serve to simulate openness while delimiting outcomes, thereby replicating normative closure under the guise of procedural rationality.

However, the system remained incomplete. Hegemonic blocs, as Gramsci and Mayo (2008) both affirm, are dynamic and contested. Fragments of civic resistance persisted, in Hansard scripts, scholarly critiques (e.g. Dwyer, 1994; Hyland, 1992), and the disquiet voiced by practitioners such as Barber (1992). Within a Complexity-informed reading (Boulton *et al.*, 2015), these tensions represent sites of potential recursive emergence: accumulated dissonance that may, over time, generate reconfiguration.

Thus, while the FEHE Act entrenched a neoliberal bloc within adult education governance, it also preserved residues of contestation. The realignment was profound, yet not definitive; an emergent consolidation was shaped by recursive interactions between institutional restructuring, ideological saturation, and the persistent, albeit constrained, legacy of civic educational traditions.

4.10: Governance Consolidation (1992–2010)

Before turning to practitioner narratives, it is necessary to revisit the conceptual frame that guides the analysis of professional experience in this chapter. Two critical dimensions drawn from the literature are foregrounded: the contested construction of professional identity under neoliberal governance, and the reframing of educational purpose in increasingly economised institutional contexts. A central analytic focus is the concept of *practising from the edge*, introduced in Chapter 2 and developed further in Section 4.11. Rooted in Gramscian, Pragmatist, and Complexity-informed traditions, this concept describes how practitioners sustain civic and ethical professionalism through adaptation, relational judgment, and situated resistance. Rather than a stable role or stance, it captures an emergent form of bounded agency enacted at the interface of institutional constraint and pedagogical integrity—offering a practical interpretive anchor for the narratives that follow.

During this phase, the civic, democratic, and community-oriented purposes of adult education were progressively reframed through an economic lens and

marginalised. Under both Conservative and New Labour governments, institutional legitimacy came to depend on measurable outputs, alignment with labour market demands, and compliance with national policy targets. Although civic rationales endured rhetorically, they were structurally subsumed within frameworks that equated educational value with economic contribution, narrowing the discursive and operational space for alternative aims.

This consolidation extended beyond formal policy, reshaping institutional cultures, professional norms, and everyday pedagogical practices. Neoliberal rationalities became sedimented in governance structures and also within the assumptions underpinning professional identity and operational practice. Practitioners navigated these transformations through forms of adaptive professionalism that blended strategic compliance with ethically grounded negotiation, sustaining fragments of civic purpose within increasingly economised institutional environments.

4.10.1 Natural Domain: Structural Realignment and Strategic Justification

- **Neoliberal embedding through statutory frameworks:** The governance shifts initiated by the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act were systematically consolidated through subsequent policy reforms under both Conservative and New Labour governments. The establishment of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), and later the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) from 2001, institutionalised performance-driven funding regimes aligned with employer priorities and economic metrics (Coffield, 1999; Fieldhouse, 1996). These developments structurally embedded marketisation as well as materially constrained the operational space for civic rationales in adult education, anchoring economic utility as the dominant governance logic.
- **Performance-based funding and institutional compliance:** Institutional survival became increasingly contingent upon compliance with centrally

prescribed performance metrics, including retention rates, achievement outcomes, and demonstrable links to employment. Coffield *et al.* (2007) illustrate how these mechanisms deepened managerial oversight, eroded local autonomy, and reoriented organisational priorities around audit-driven compliance cultures. Performance measures operated as disciplinary technologies, steering institutional behaviour through recursive cycles of surveillance and self-regulation.

- **Sector rationalisation and policy centralisation:** The creation of the LSC unified adult, further, and workplace education under a single, centrally managed funding agency. While ostensibly promoting strategic coherence, this restructuring markedly reduced institutional diversity and flexibility. Ball (2007) identifies this as a paradox of neoliberal governance: while nominal autonomy expanded, operational discretion was systematically constrained by centrally mandated performance regimes, effectively homogenising permissible educational purposes across the sector.
- **Expansion of vocational alignment under New Labour:** Policies such as the Skills for Life strategy (2001), Individual Learning Accounts (1999–2001), and the Leitch Review (2006) further entrenched economic utility as the dominant rationale for lifelong learning. Adult education was explicitly positioned as an instrument for enhancing productivity and employability, with funding mechanisms structurally tied to labour market priorities (Coffield *et al.*, 2007; Keep, 2009). This repositioning displaced broader civic and social aims, recasting adult learning as an individualised economic investment.
- **Embedding of international policy influences:** Comparative frameworks promoted by the OECD and EU further legitimised the economisation of adult learning. The Lisbon Strategy (2000) reinforced performance benchmarking, skills investment, and global competitiveness as central governance priorities, narrowing the conceptual and operational space for civic, democratic, or socially transformative educational purposes (Ecclestone, 2004; Field, 2006).

Transnational policy convergence functioned as an ideological vector, naturalising economic instrumentalism as both inevitable and universal.

- **Funding metrics and regional inequality:** Performance-based governance disproportionately disadvantaged rural and economically peripheral regions. Centrally defined funding formulas systematically favoured large urban institutions that were better aligned with national economic priorities, undermining the viability of local, community-oriented provision (Tuckett, 2017). Geographic inequalities thus became a systemic feature of the governance model, exacerbating existing social divisions and marginalising civic-focused adult education initiatives outside metropolitan centres.

4.10.2 Social and Subjective Domains: Institutional Realignment and Professional Response

The consolidation of adult education governance between 1992 and 2010 was not only structural but also cultural and professional in nature. Audit regimes, performance targets, and workforce reforms reshaped institutional logics and practitioner subjectivities, embedding market-aligned accountability as the dominant governance norm. Within this context, civic and democratic rationales were not eliminated outright but recontextualised within discourses of employability, productivity, and personal responsibility. This section synthesises the social and subjective dynamics of this transformation, tracing how educators and institutions navigated these constraints through strategic adaptation, ethical negotiation, and occasionally bounded resistance.

- **Reframing lifelong learning and the civic project:** Under New Labour, lifelong learning was discursively realigned from a focus on civic inclusion and democratic participation to emphasise individual productivity and economic contribution. Participation was reframed as a personal investment strategy aligned with labour market citizenship (Coffield, 1999; Keep, 2009). This shift

marked a semantic narrowing in which civic aims persisted rhetorically but were redefined in economic terms.

- **Audit regimes and performative accountability:** New Public Management (NPM) principles were institutionalised through metrics, targets, and inspection frameworks. Ball (2007) shows how educational quality was redefined as compliance with quantifiable outputs, marginalising pedagogies that were dialogic, critical, or relational. These systems established new institutional routines and expectations, influencing priorities and practices in ways that will be further explored through practitioner perspectives in Chapter 5.
- **Strategic centralisation through the Learning and Skills Council (LSC):** The LSC consolidated funding and planning across adult learning sectors, displacing the pluralist functions of local authorities and voluntary bodies. While framed as a mechanism of coherence, Ecclestone (2004) and Field (2006) argue that the LSC weakened civic responsiveness, narrowing provision around national economic priorities and eroding democratic oversight at the local level.
- **Discursive closure and the marginalisation of civic alternatives:** Strategic plans and policy frameworks increasingly limited the conceptual vocabulary through which adult education could be articulated. Terms such as “social inclusion” and “community learning” were preserved but subordinated to economic logic. Ball (2003) and Clarke and Newman (1997) interpret this narrowing as a deliberate hegemonic strategy — not the erasure of civic aims, but their semantic recontextualisation as subordinate to productivity and efficiency.
- **Professional identity and regulatory performativity:** Workforce reforms, including the 2007 regulatory framework, linked educator legitimacy to externally defined standards. Teachers were recast as deliverers of state-

specified outcomes, with professional judgement subordinated to inspection criteria (Avis, 2003; Coffield et al., 2007).

- **Fragmentation and the erosion of professional solidarity:** Performative governance promoted competitive individualism over collegial collaboration. Tett and Maclachlan (2007) argue that this undermined professional cohesion, weakening collective resistance and diminishing the sector's civic ethos.
- **Bounded resistance and ethical improvisation:** Sector literature suggests that some educators maintained civic intentions beneath externally compliant practices, adapting curriculum delivery to protect dialogic or ethical aims. Fieldhouse (1996) characterises these acts as institutionally precarious, while Duckworth and Smith (2019) highlight how such tactics are often rendered invisible within performative regimes. These practices reflect a tradition of tactical professionalism that responds to constraint through covert ethical adaptation rather than open defiance.

4.10.3 Meta-Level Complexity: Ideological Embedding and Governance Lock-in

From 1992 to 2010, neoliberal governance was not simply expanded but consolidated through a system-wide architecture that embedded performance metrics, regulatory professionalism, and market logic into adult education. Governance became anchored in market rationalities, performance metrics, and regulatory professionalism, redefining the scope, purpose, and daily practices of adult education. At the structural level, consolidation was affected through national mechanisms such as the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and its successor, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). These bodies institutionalised competitive funding and audit-driven accountability, reinforcing the economic logic first embedded by the 1992 FEHE Act. Ball (2003) situates this within broader patterns of public sector managerialism, where institutional legitimacy became dependent upon demonstrating quantifiable outputs and

market responsiveness, systematically marginalising provision that lacked immediate economic utility. Complexity Theory suggests that such recursive institutional embedding generates self-reinforcing governance dynamics, constraining the emergence of alternative trajectories.

Socially, the consolidation process involved a strategic reframing of educational discourse. Concepts historically associated with civic participation, such as ‘lifelong learning’ and ‘social inclusion’, were systematically reinterpreted through the lens of employability, productivity, and human capital (Jarvis, 2004; Keep, 2009). This reframing was particularly evident in shifting constructions of the purpose of education itself. Biesta’s (2015) distinction between qualification, socialisation, and subjectification highlights how civic and democratic purposes, central to earlier visions of adult education, were progressively subordinated to qualification and employability aims. Rather than fostering ethical agency or public reasoning, the governance model incentivised educational practices geared toward measurable outcomes and labour market integration. This discursive re-articulation, as documented by Coffield (1999) and Ecclestone (2004), was not superficial. They served as a powerful ideological mechanism. This reframing was explicitly advanced in the DfES’s *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances* (2006), which codified a logic in which civic and social goals were legitimate only to the extent that they aligned with economic productivity. The document reinforced the reduction of lifelong learning to a policy of workforce optimisation, asserting that participation in education must contribute directly to national competitiveness. In this sense, DfES (2006) exemplifies the semantic convergence of civic and economic vocabularies that characterises this governance phase, transforming older traditions of democratic learning into instrumental strategies for employability and growth.

At the subjective level, practitioner agency became increasingly regulated through performative accountability frameworks. Educators were expected to comply with externally defined metrics, even as some sought to preserve civic and critical pedagogies within shrinking institutional spaces (Biesta, 2006; Tett,

2014). Strategies of Pragmatic adaptation, including the embedding of participatory practices within vocational curricula, illustrate how agency persisted in bounded, negotiated forms. As Cherryholmes (1999) argues, agency under constraint emerges relationally through situated ethical inquiry, not through principled withdrawal. Educators navigated performance regimes to sustain ethical commitments, exercising professional discretion even as formal autonomy eroded.

The cumulative effect of these structural, discursive, and subjective shifts was the emergence of a governance system characterised by recursive closure and ideological saturation. Civic and democratic rationales were structurally marginalised through institutional design, discursive reframing, and operational norms. Performance metrics and regulatory professionalism entrenched a governance logic that was structurally resistant to alternative imaginaries, recasting adult learning as an economic instrument rather than a public good.

Fairclough (2000) argues that this ideological saturation was sustained through discursive strategy. New Labour's deployment of language constituted a 'synthetic discourse', one that fused social democratic signifiers with market-based rationalities to produce a superficially inclusive but fundamentally economised vision of public policy. Within adult education, this linguistic strategy enabled civic and democratic terms to persist at the rhetorical level, even as their operative meaning was redirected toward productivity, employability, and individualised responsibility. Such discursive hybridity reinforced ideological closure by preserving the appearance of pluralism while displacing its substance, effectively foreclosing the imaginative and institutional space for civic alternatives.

4.10.4 Cross-Theory Dialogue: institutional lock-in, historic bloc, and attractor states.

The consolidation of adult education governance between 1992 and 2010 can be most effectively understood through the interaction of three concepts from the Grounded Complexity Framework: institutional lock-in, historic bloc, and attractor states. Each contributes a distinct but intersecting explanatory logic: structural constraint, ideological embedding, and dynamic system behaviour. When placed into dialogue, these concepts reveal not only how economised governance became dominant, but also how it sustained itself through layered processes of entrenchment, reproduction, and adaptation.

Institutional lock-in, as conceptualised by Pierson (2004), highlights how incremental reforms- each apparently minor- can cumulatively produce path-dependent structures that resist reversal. Within adult education, successive performance metrics, funding regimes, and compliance frameworks not only shaped practice but also redefined the boundaries of institutional legitimacy. Each reform reinforced the assumptions of its predecessor, rendering alternative models not only politically unviable but structurally implausible. This compounding effect created a path-constrained governance landscape, where deviation became not merely administratively burdensome, but materially excluded from the design of policy systems.

Yet structural durability alone does not explain the normative force that came to surround these arrangements. Here, the Gramscian concept of historic bloc offers an ideological and cultural lens through which to interpret how economised governance became not only embedded but also perceived as legitimate. In Gramsci's terms, hegemonic blocs are formed through the alignment of material, institutional, and cultural forces. Filippini (2017) emphasises that these blocs do not operate through coercion alone; rather, they sustain dominance by embedding governing rationalities into everyday norms, discourses, and professional identities. During this period, principles such as efficiency, value for

money, and employability were not imposed externally; they were internalised and enacted through institutional routines, practitioner roles, and policy imaginaries. The neoliberal bloc achieved stability by naturalising its assumptions, presenting economised logic as both inevitable and ethically sound.

This appearance of inevitability is reinforced and made intelligible by the concept of attractor states, drawn from Complexity Theory. Boulton *et al.* (2015) describe attractor states as system configurations that arise through feedback processes and dynamic interaction, while Morin's (2008) notion of homeorhesis refines this to suggest that systems evolve along self-reinforcing trajectories. In the context of adult education, this dynamic stability explains how reforms continually returned to economised priorities, even when policy rhetoric gestured toward pluralism or civic renewal. Initiatives such as lifelong learning, inclusion, or widening participation appeared to challenge the dominant logic, but were repeatedly reabsorbed into performative and market-oriented frameworks. This recursive pull did not eliminate alternatives, but rendered them marginal, maintaining the bloc's coherence by absorbing dissent into economised grammars.

Placed into structured dialogue, these three concepts reveal more than a cumulative explanation; they expose the recursive logics by which dominance is stabilised and alternatives foreclosed. Institutional lock-in explains how reforms became self-reinforcing. The historic bloc demonstrates how these structures were rendered ideologically compelling. Attractor states account for the systemic patterning that gave the appearance of adaptiveness while maintaining underlying coherence. Together, they clarify that governance stability was not achieved through stasis, but rather through the patterned reproduction of constraints and selective adaptation.

This system did not exclude civic values outright. Rather, it recontextualised them within vocabularies of individual responsibility and market contribution. As a

result, civic intentions persisted in the form of pedagogical fragments and ethical orientations, but their institutional expression was increasingly improbable. The survival of these values depended on rhetorical accommodation or practitioner improvisation, rather than on a structural mandate.

Framed within this triadic interaction, the post-1992 governance formation emerges as a metastable configuration; a system capable of appearing responsive while protecting its ideological core. Structural constraint (lock-in), cultural alignment (bloc), and patterned system dynamics (attractors) worked in concert to preserve the internal logic of economised governance. By minimising the disruptive potential of contestation, this configuration allowed surface-level reforms while insulating core assumptions from meaningful challenge.

Femia's (1987) interpretation of hegemonic persistence adds explanatory clarity here. The system's durability rested as much on its capacity to render alternatives implausible as on its formal mechanisms of control. By naturalising its premises within institutional routines and professional norms, it enacted what Gramsci (1971) called the 'pedagogical' dimension of hegemony: constraint reframed as inevitability.

4.11 Counter-Hegemonic Struggles and Resistance (1997–2017)

The period between 1997 and 2017 was characterised by the progressive deepening and consolidation of neoliberal governance in adult education, accompanied by the emergence of situated, ethically motivated forms of resistance. Although successive governments varied in their rhetorical emphasis, New Labour maintained a discourse of inclusion and social partnership, while Coalition and Conservative administrations advanced more overtly austere logics. The underlying governance architecture remained consistently oriented around marketisation, performativity, and economic instrumentalism.

Across this period, civic, democratic, and community-focused purposes were increasingly marginalised within national frameworks of funding, accountability, and policy discourse. Nevertheless, these rationales were not extinguished. Instead, they persisted within localised spaces, professional relationships, and strategic adaptations. Civic learning survived, at times tenuously, through organisational brokerage, policy reinterpretation, and practitioner agency that navigated the structural constraints of performance-driven governance. These adaptive responses, shaped by recursive interaction with systemic pressures, reflected the complex emergence of alternative practices within a constrained and shifting environment.

This section examines how collective adult education actors, organisations, institutions, and practitioners began to push back and engage in what Gramsci (1971) terms a war of position: a diffuse, strategically contextual effort to preserve civic and dialogic values within systems increasingly aligned with economic rationality. It foregrounds how institutional and individual responses were shaped through recursive processes of adaptation and constraint. Strategies such as cross-sectoral collaboration, reframed pedagogical practices, and experimental governance reforms (including ungraded observation systems) are interpreted as ethically grounded enactments of professionalism under systemic pressure.

By recovering these phenomena in their historical specificity, this section lays the foundation for Chapter 5's practitioner narratives. The policies, discourses, and working conditions analysed here are not external contexts but constitute the experiential terrain from which practitioners speak. A landscape of strategic constraint, ethical negotiation, and partial resistance shapes their testimonies. Section 4.11, therefore, functions not merely as a historical conclusion but as a conceptual bridge to the lived realities of professional life under mature neoliberal governance.

4.11.1 Natural Domain: Systemic Constraints and the Structural Marginalisation of Civic Learning

- **Consolidation of market-based governance (1997–2010):** From 1997 onwards, New Labour maintained and extended the market-based governance model inherited from previous reforms. Policy developments placed increasing emphasis on institutional responsiveness, efficiency, and measurable outputs. Keep (2009) notes how adult education was aligned with national skills and employment strategies, while Coffield *et al.* (2007) document how performance indicators were embedded into contractual frameworks and inspection regimes across the sector.
- **Skills for Life and Curriculum Standardisation (2001–2010):** The Skills for Life strategy introduced a national framework for adult literacy, numeracy, and digital skills, aiming to address basic skills deficits across the population. Provision was shaped by centrally designed qualifications, prescribed delivery models, and outcome-focused funding allocations. Hamilton and Hillier (2006) describe the framework as highly prescriptive in both content and method, with curriculum design structured around the achievement of qualifications. This narrowed the pedagogical space for learner-centred, exploratory, or civic learning approaches.
- **Standardisation through the 2007 Workforce Reforms:** The 2007 Further Education Workforce Reforms introduced compulsory professional qualifications (QTLS and ATLS), mandatory registration with the Institute for Learning (IfL), and annual CPD requirements. These reforms were intended to raise the professional status of FE teachers and align them with the school sector. Lucas (2004) details the formal structures imposed by these reforms, while Orr and Simmons (2010) highlight the accompanying regulatory burden on providers and practitioners. The new standards defined practice in relation to national benchmarks and emphasised compliance with externally validated processes.

- **Metric-linked funding incentives:** Since the early 2000s, core elements of provider funding have become directly tied to learner performance indicators, including retention, achievement, and progression. These targets were included in national funding contracts, monitored through inspection regimes, and linked to institutional risk. Simmons (2010) describes how providers began to reshape their provision to maximise success against these indicators, while Boocock (2014) records examples of curriculum adaptation and learner selection strategies aimed at optimising funding returns.
- **Institutionalisation of audit culture:** A national audit infrastructure emerged across this period, encompassing Ofsted inspections, league tables, and quality assurance systems based on data reporting. These mechanisms were used to monitor teaching quality, institutional and financial effectiveness, and the relevance of the curriculum. Ball (2003) characterises this development as the embedding of a performative system, while Tett (2014) notes its impact on the structuring of adult learning provision. Quantitative performance became the dominant framework for institutional accountability.
- **Erosion of civic and community provision (2000s):** During the 2000s, community-based, liberal, and non-accredited adult education experienced growing structural vulnerability. Field (2006) traces the removal of dedicated funding streams for non-vocational education, and Tuckett (2017) records the decline in community learning opportunities outside qualification frameworks. The remaining community learning provision, not focused on qualifications, was largely delivered through local authorities, voluntary bodies, and specialist organisations; however, it also became increasingly marginalised within this funding and policy system.
- **Policy volatility and short-term project funding (2010–2017):** From 2010 onwards, adult education policy was marked by high turnover in strategic priorities, the fragmentation of funding mechanisms, and the increasing reliance on competitive, short-term project-based models. Jarvis (2004) observes how this volatility affected provision planning and stability,

particularly for organisations with civic or inclusive remits that were not easily aligned to economic outcomes. Frequent policy shifts created uncertainty for both providers and learners.

- **Deregulation following the Lingfield Review (2012):** The Lingfield Review led to the dismantling of several structural elements introduced under the 2007 reforms. It recommended that QTLS should become voluntary, abolished the statutory requirement for CPD, and led to the closure of the IfL. These changes were presented as a response to sector concerns about bureaucracy and cost. Lingfield (2012) positioned the reforms as an opportunity for organisations to exercise local discretion over standards. However, Orr (2012) and Hyland (2014) document the consequences of deregulation, including fragmentation in qualification expectations and inconsistency in professional development provision. Within the sector, it was widely rumoured that the deeper concern lay not in bureaucracy itself but in the potential financial implications of a fully professionalised, accredited, and unionised workforce. The cost of qualification, pay parity, and collective representation was seen by many as a political disincentive to maintaining mandatory standards.
- **Stratification of institutional opportunity:** During this period, adult education became increasingly stratified between FE colleges, which were better placed to deliver accredited vocational learning, and community-based providers, which often lacked the resources to meet new accountability expectations. Crowther and Martin (2010) document the narrowing of institutional diversity as colleges gained funding leverage through the delivery of national priorities while local authority and third-sector provision shrank under financial pressure.
- **Austerity and civic disinvestment (2010–2017):** The Coalition Government's austerity measures significantly reduced the Adult Skills Budget and eliminated ringfenced support for community learning. A reduction in capital investment and funding for non-accredited or enrichment programmes

accompanied these cuts. Aldridge and Tuckett (2016) link the 2016 closure of NIACE, an independent body promoting adult learning, to broader funding contractions and institutional realignments in the adult education sector. The removal of this coordinating organisation marked the fragmentation of a nationally supported civic adult education infrastructure.

- **Monopolisation of economic criteria in governance logic (by 2017):** By the end of this period, funding and policy frameworks prioritised employability, productivity, and measurable outcomes. Ecclestone (2004) describes how civic and personal development aims became marginalised within performance discourses, while Keep (2009) observes the declining visibility of non-economic rationales in central policy documentation. Provisions that could not be explicitly linked to labour market value were excluded from national funding priorities.

4.11.2 Social and Subjective Domains: Institutional and Professional Resistance to Performative Governance

This combined Social and Subjective domain analysis traces the negotiation of civic purpose and professional agency under performative governance between 1997 and 2017. It highlights how institutional advocacy, pedagogical adaptation, and practitioner networks sustained civic traditions despite increasing alignment with market-based imperatives.

- **Sustained sectoral advocacy under New Labour (1997–2010):** Throughout the New Labour period, national bodies such as NIACE and the WEA advocated for civic, democratic, and socially inclusive adult education. Their activities included policy submissions, pilot programmes, and direct engagement with policymakers. Tuckett (2017) documents their efforts to maintain non-vocational provision in national strategies, despite the growing policy emphasis on employability and skills-based outcomes.

- **Narrowing of lifelong learning to employability outcomes:** The concept of lifelong learning was reframed by policy initiatives such as *The Learning Age* (1998), which promoted education as a route to labour market integration. Field (2006) notes the shift toward functional skills and job readiness, while Olssen and Peters (2005) highlight the policy's alignment with global competitiveness and economic participation. Biesta (2006) identifies how adult education was increasingly constructed in line with OECD frameworks that prioritised adaptability and human capital accumulation.
- **Partial influence and negotiated inclusion (2000s):** While NIACE and allied bodies were regularly consulted during this period, their influence was shaped by dominant policy narratives. Civic aims were frequently expressed through concepts such as inclusion, cohesion, or well-being. Field (2006) describes this as a strategy of discursive translation, where social purposes were justified in terms of their economic or instrumental utility.
- **Policy brokerage through discursive reframing (2000s):** Local adult education providers increasingly adopted national policy language to protect civic aims. Field (2006) documents how terms such as 'community cohesion' and 'social inclusion' were used to justify dialogic pedagogy within institutional self-assessment reports and development plans. This reframing allowed some civic approaches to continue under audit conditions.
- **Target-driven structure of the Skills for Life strategy (2001–2010):** The Skills for Life programme, launched in 2001, introduced national targets for basic skills improvement and embedded funding conditions tied to qualification achievement. Field (2006) emphasises the centrality of performance-based delivery in implementing the strategy. Ecclestone (2004) observes that while the framework included references to soft skills, these components were marginalised in practice, receiving minimal funding or structural support.
- **Civic pedagogy within vocational frames:** Tuckett (2017) documents how adult educators embedded democratic participation, environmental themes,

and intergenerational inquiry into vocationally structured provision. This was achieved through narrative-based assignments, learner-led research, and local collaborative projects. These efforts recontextualised functional curricula in ways that sustained civic intent despite audit and performance management conditions which constrained variation from approved norms.

- **Resistance in marginalised contexts:** Duckworth and Smith (2019) highlight how educators working in socio-economically marginalised communities employed culturally responsive, arts-based, and dialogic approaches to retain critical content beneath standardised surface structures. These educators adapted performative lesson plans to maintain emancipatory aims while appearing compliant with accountability expectations.
- **Post-2010 austerity and the erosion of civic representation:** The formation of the Coalition government led to the withdrawal of central funding streams, reductions in local learning budgets, and the closure of NIACE in 2016. Duckworth and Smith (2019) describe the resulting gap in national advocacy, noting that adult education was increasingly restructured around individual employability and social mobility objectives, with diminished reference to collective or civic purposes.
- **Discursive shift from standardisation to localised discretion (post-2012):** As noted earlier, the Lingfield Review recommended that national professional standards for teachers be withdrawn, with responsibility for defining teaching quality being devolved to organisations to self-regulate. Hyland (2014) identifies the resulting variability in expectations and practices between institutions and regions. Orr and Simmons (2010) note that ‘flexibility’ became a substitute for strategic investment, with a proportion of providers choosing to increase reliance on underqualified or transient teaching staff in response to cost pressures. In contrast to earlier periods of standardisation, this shift reframed professionalism not as a shared ethical or pedagogical commitment, but as a managerial choice shaped by institutional strategy and resourcing.

- **New institutions and the remaking of professional discourse:** From 2013 onwards, professional development and regulatory functions were absorbed by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) and the Society for Education and Training (SET). These bodies continued quality assurance processes, but Duckworth and Smith (2019) question whether they provided a viable platform for civic educational values, given their alignment with performative governance models.
- **Practitioner engagement with sector-led professional values (2000s):** Many practitioners participated in NIACE and WEA initiatives through networks, conferences, and CPD activities that foregrounded ethical pedagogy and reflective practice. These engagements often affirmed professional identities grounded in social responsibility rather than compliance. Some educators used frameworks such as the NIACE Excellence Framework to legitimise resistance to managerial pressure for performative delivery.
- **Adaptive resistance and pedagogical improvisation (2000s–2010s):** Audit cultures introduced new pressures that reshaped how practitioners related to their work, contributing to emotional and ethical tensions. In response, many practitioners engaged in strategic adaptation, embedding civic and dialogic objectives within vocational curricula. These acts of Pragmatic pedagogy (Biesta, 2006) sustained fragments of critical purpose through context-sensitive negotiation rather than overt opposition.
- **Collegial networks as emotional infrastructure (2000s–2010s):** In the absence of structural protections, many practitioners relied on informal networks to sustain ethical reflection, pedagogical integrity, and peer validation. Tett and Maclachlan (2007) and Duckworth and Smith (2019) highlight how these networks functioned as affective and professional scaffolds, enabling practitioners to maintain purpose in performative contexts.

- Praxis-led redefinition of professionalism through ungraded observation:** In response to graded lesson observation systems, some practitioner managers introduced alternative quality frameworks based on developmental dialogue and pedagogical trust. Barrell (2017) documents how the transition to ungraded observation in one large community learning organisation supported renewed engagement with professional values and encouraged reflective peer-led practice. The process involved staff adapting to unfamiliar evaluative norms and deliberately unlearning previously internalised audit expectations.
- Practitioner resistance to graded observation regimes (2000s–2010s):** Graded observations were widely perceived as performative mechanisms that distorted teaching practice; O’Leary (2014) shows how educators modified lessons to align with inspection frameworks ‘gamifying’ observations, rather than to support better teaching necessarily. Barrell (2017) details how resistance to this system, though initially met with scepticism, led to the adoption of alternative observation models in some organisations, supporting a return to collaborative, values-driven professionalism.
- Ungraded observation as institutional negotiation:** In organisations that adopted ungraded observation systems, leaders and practitioners negotiated formal compliance pressures by substituting developmentally framed alternatives. As documented in Barrell (2017) and further explored in Chapter 5, these initiatives reflected both managerial agency and practitioner trust, thereby sustaining ethical commitment within a performative context.
- Localised and often invisible forms of resistance:** Tuckett (2017) emphasises that much resistance during this period occurred through micro-practices within classrooms and community settings, often shielded from managerial surveillance. These included discretion over content emphasis, pacing, and relational framing, which enabled bounded autonomy in otherwise restrictive environments.

- **Cross-sectoral collaborations to defend civic space (2010s):** Practitioners engaged in alliances across FE colleges, voluntary organisations, and local authorities to share resources and protect civic learning spaces. Field (2006) and Crowther and Martin (2010) document how these partnerships supported the continuity of dialogic provision and mitigated some of the effects of funding withdrawal and policy volatility.

4.11.3 Meta-Level Complexity: Civil Society, War of Position, and the Reframing of Governance Possibility

Organisations such as NIACE and the WEA functioned as discursive attractors within the governance ecology, preserving civic imaginaries and sustaining system memory. From a Complexity perspective, they enabled reflexive calibration by anchoring practitioner networks amid increasing metrification. Their activity in advocacy, professional development, and public discourse constituted recursive structures that maintained rhetorical and pedagogical space for dialogic practice.

Practitioner responses to performative governance often took the form of bounded agency, characterised by selective engagement with policy tools to sustain ethical and relational teaching. One notable example was the shift toward ungraded observation systems, which functioned as recursive interventions, reinjecting Complexity into simplified inspection logics. These practices align with Cilliers (1998) and Stacey (1996), who describe how recursive feedback generates self-reinforcing adaptation. Barrell's (2017) case study illustrates this dynamic, showing how practitioners co-constructed evaluative norms through relational trust and epistemic agency. While often described as edge-of-chaos adaptation—resilient responses formed at the boundary of constraint—these practices may also be understood as emergent tipping points, with the potential to disrupt or reconfigure entrenched institutional norms.

These adaptations were not isolated acts but constituted networked responses supported by informal professional relationships and local coalitions. Tuckett (2017) demonstrates how practitioners integrated civic content, such as democratic participation and environmental justice, within vocational frameworks through locally embedded strategies. Duckworth and Smith (2019) show how educators in marginalised settings employed culturally responsive and arts-based approaches to sustain critical pedagogy beneath the surface of audit-aligned provision. Across these contexts, educators exercised discretionary judgement to maintain ethical and learner-centred practice, even as institutional pressures increasingly converged on standardisation and throughput.

The interplay between governance constraints and practitioner discretion exemplifies recursive adaptation. As audit pressures intensified, educators recalibrated strategies through ethically mediated improvisation. Deweyan Pragmatism (Dewey, 1938; Biesta, 2010) frames such action as reflective, experimental, and relational: educators operated as inquirers navigating contingency and exercising epistemic agency in situ.

By the end of this period, civic professionalism had become structurally peripheral, enacted at the margins of institutional recognition. The concept of ‘practising from the edge’ (see Chapter 5) captures this relational precariousness, where agency persisted despite ideological narrowing. Civic pedagogies survived through discretion, localised knowledge, and collegial infrastructure: not dominant logics, but affective counter currents.

At the meta-level, governance increasingly privileges audit-compatible qualification, displacing broader purposes of socialisation and subjectification. Biesta’s (2015) tripartite model reveals how measurable outputs dominate, marginalising relational and developmental aims. Yet subjectification did not vanish; it persisted within the interstices of practice, carried by trust, contextual judgement, and resistant routines. Brookfield’s (1995) model of critical reflection captures this persistence, though its emphasis on individual critique offers limited

insight into relational and affective labour. Ethical formation occurred not only through reflection but through everyday negotiations of trust and care.

Complexity Theory illuminates this further: agency under constraint becomes emergent, evolving through semantic stabilisation, recursive adaptation, and contextual experimentation.

4.11.4 Cross-Theory Dialogue: Good Sense, Situated Agency and Emergence

The governance environment that characterised adult education between 1997 and 2017 gave rise to an increasingly constrained field of action. Within this narrowing space, practitioners engaged in subtle, improvisational forms of response that cannot be fully accounted for by structural or ideological explanations alone. This CTD examines how the interaction between good sense, situated agency, and emergence illuminates the tension between ethical praxis and systemic reproduction in a performatively governed sector.

Gramsci's concept of good sense serves here as a lens through which to understand how educators internally register contradictions in policy discourse and rearticulate civic and pedagogical values despite prevailing norms. Unlike common sense, which absorbs and naturalises hegemonic logics, good sense allows for an ethical reorientation towards alternative imaginaries, often rooted in relational pedagogies and community-centred goals. However, in the highly economised climate of post-2000 adult education, the articulation of good sense rarely translated into systemic disruption. Instead, it informed micro-level judgements that were often tacit, partial, or narratively reframed in the language of compliance. As Biesta (2006) cautions, ethical resistance in such contexts risks being reabsorbed unless institutionally scaffolded.

To address this tension, the concept of situated agency, informed by Deweyan Pragmatism and further articulated through Biesta's (2015) work on the ethics of subjectification, offers a model of professional action grounded in relational

judgement, ethical attentiveness, and pedagogical discretion. Educators engage with governance frameworks from within, navigating their constraints through context-sensitive negotiation rather than external critique. Institutional parameters shape this form of agency, but it remains oriented toward sustaining civic and dialogic educational values. It involves a practice of ongoing adjustment, working within prevailing conditions to preserve space for relational teaching and democratic purposes. The practitioner-led transition to ungraded observation models, as analysed by Barrell (2017), exemplifies this dynamic: rather than resisting evaluation outright, educators reconfigured its logic to prioritise trust, dialogue, and professional judgement, thereby maintaining ethical integrity while adapting to regulatory expectations.

From a Complexity perspective, such acts of situated agency constitute *emergent* phenomena, adaptations that arise within constraint and possess the potential to reconfigure systemic dynamics over time. Complexity Theory posits that in highly coupled systems, edge-of-system actions can produce disproportionate influence, not through scale or centrality, but through their capacity to alter feedback structures. The shift to ungraded observation, when linked through professional networks and reinforced by advocacy groups such as NIACE and the WEA, became more than isolated acts of resistance; they functioned as recursive interventions that fed new pedagogical norms back into the system. However, as Morrison (2006) warns, not all emergence is progressive: the system's adaptive capacity can also reinforce performativity, particularly when tactical compliance is indistinguishable from ethical compromise.

The conceptual tension in this CTD, therefore, rests in the uncertain alignment between intention, action, and outcome. Good sense reveals the normative disquiet practitioners feel within economised regimes. Situated agency describes their contextually embedded ethical responses. Emergence captures the systemic afterlife of these responses; however, it gives no guarantee of an emancipatory effect. Together, these concepts reveal a governance ecology in

which resistance is never cleanly oppositional, and change is recursive, contingent, and always at risk of being captured. What this dialogue models, then, is a theory of ethical improvisation under constraint, where Complexity, Pragmatism, and ideology are entangled in the everyday work of educational persistence.

4.12 Meta-Level Review and Transition to Chapter 5

Stepping back from the historical particularities examined in this chapter, the evolution of adult education governance in England appears not as a series of discrete reforms but as a recursive system shaped by structural sedimentation, ideological recalibration, and agentic negotiation. The Grounded Complexity Framework enables these developments to be interpreted through interacting patterns of constraint, adaptation, and epistemic redefinition. Across the century, the civic aspirations that once animated adult education were not eradicated, but reframed; absorbed into an increasingly economised policy grammar while remaining traceable in the ethical and relational practices of educators.

The structural arc is defined by the progressive narrowing of institutional possibility. Early path dependencies privileged liberal-conforming models of provision and established legitimacy around the concept of constitutional gradualism. As these patterns accumulated, they produced conditions of institutional lock-in, whereby reforms such as output funding, audit regimes, and incorporation hardened into infrastructural preconditions. Pierson (2004) characterises this form of consolidation as recursive and path-constrained: each iteration reduces the plausibility of reversal. By the 1990s, attractor states had emerged within the governance system, creating self-reinforcing trajectories that favoured economised reforms while absorbing alternative imaginaries. As Boulton *et al.* (2015) and Morin (2008) emphasise, such systems are not static but metastable; flexible at the margins yet resistant to foundational change. The apparent adaptability of governance masked a patterned inertia that drew even pluralistic discourse into economised forms.

Ideologically, the concept of the historic bloc provides a consistent lens for understanding how hegemony was consolidated across the period. From the interwar civic consensus to the managerial realignments of the 1970s and the neoliberal bloc formation of the 1990s, bloc analysis reveals how institutional arrangements, normative assumptions, and discursive legitimacy became mutually reinforcing. Filippini (2017) and Femia (1987) argue that bloc coherence does not require consensus but operates through selective incorporation: dominant norms are stabilised by rendering dissent peripheral. Mayo (2014) strengthens this interpretation by foregrounding education as a central site of bloc maintenance, where semantic appropriation and pedagogical routines embed hegemonic logics while retaining the appearance of democratic purpose. This was visible in the discursive trajectory from the 1919 Report to the Russell Report and through to Skills for Life, where civic language persisted but its referents shifted, from democratic renewal to employability, from public good to personal responsibility. The civic project was not dismantled; it was semantically recalibrated to serve increasingly economic ends.

This ideological reframing operated in tandem with passive revolution and war of position. Rather than outright displacing civic ideals, governance logics strategically absorbed them. Morton (2003) and Donoghue (2018) interpret this as a slow reorganisation of common sense, whereby oppositional narratives are incorporated and re-signified. The Russell Report exemplified this shift: civic discourse was retained but redeployed to legitimise rational planning. What emerged was a discursive settlement in which liberal-democratic language remained visible yet increasingly functioned as a vehicle for performative metrics and technocratic legitimacy.

Against this backdrop, a second arc of epistemic and professional adaptation unfolded. Concepts such as Pragmatic adaptation, ethical agency, situated inquiry, and contingent knowledge trace how practitioners negotiated constraint through reflective and relational judgment. Cherryholmes (1999) and Biesta (2009b) offer distinct but overlapping accounts of this process: the former

emphasises experimental action within constraint, while the latter insists that educational agency is always an ethical and historically situated response to systemic framing. Vanderstraeten and Biesta (2006) add that inquiry itself is shaped by discursive systems, warning against over-romanticising professional discretion. Yet within these limitations, practitioners engaged in acts of situated negotiation, translating civic intent into vocational curricula, resisting graded observations, and embedding ethical dialogue into performative structures. These were more than merely tactical gestures; they were recursive interventions that kept civic rationales partially visible within closed systems.

Together, these arcs produce a cumulative reframing of governance as a system of recursive constraint and ethical persistence. Structural reforms narrowed policy futures; ideological recalibrations legitimated this narrowing; and practitioners responded not through wholesale resistance but through adaptive ethical labour. The concept of practising from the edge, which anchors Chapter 5, captures this condition: a form of professionalism enacted within constraints, sustained by civic purpose, and operationalised through situated ethical judgement.

Chapter 5 now shifts focus from governance as a system to governance as a lived condition. Drawing on practitioner narratives, it explores how meaning, value, and civic identity are continuously negotiated in practice. These accounts offer sites where the theoretical arcs traced here—such as bounded agency, discursive constraint, and recursive adaptation—are placed under pressure, refracted through the contingent realities of professional life. In doing so, Chapter 5 moves from the structural logic of governance to its experiential consequences.

Chapter 5: Practitioner Perspectives and Situated Agency: Navigating Governance in Practice

5.0 Introduction

Chapter 4 provided a systems-level analysis of adult education governance, tracing how structural reforms, discursive shifts, and professional norms became aligned with performative, market-driven logics. It mapped the environment within which practitioners now make decisions and act.

Chapter 5 shifts focus from structure to experience, examining how professionals working within that environment navigate its constraints, negotiate meaning, and sustain or adapt their professional values. Drawing on qualitative data from interviews and focus groups, this chapter foregrounds practitioner testimony as a site of lived engagement with the ideological and structural forces previously outlined.

Rather than merely illustrating those conditions, these accounts bring them into tension with one another. At times, they align with the policy logics and institutional cultures described in Chapter 4; at others, they challenge or rework them. Through this, the chapter reveals the layered and situated nature of practitioner agency.

Before turning to practitioner narratives, it is necessary to revisit the conceptual lens that will guide the analysis of professional experience presented throughout Chapter 5. Two critical dimensions emerge from the academic literature: the contested construction of professional identity under neoliberal governance and the reframing of education's purpose in increasingly economised institutional environments. A central conceptual focus is 'practising from the edge', first

introduced in Chapter 2 and elaborated in Section 4.11. Rooted in Gramscian, Pragmatist, and Complexity-informed traditions, the concept describes how practitioners sustain civic and ethical professionalism through adaptation, relational judgement, and situated resistance. Rather than a stable category, it denotes an emergent form of bounded agency at the interface between institutional constraint and pedagogical integrity, offering a practical interpretive anchor for the practitioner narratives that follow.

5.1 Theoretical Framing: Professional Identity and the Purpose of Education in an Era of Governance Constraint

The transformation of adult education governance from the late twentieth century onwards profoundly reshaped both professional identity and the imagined purposes of education. As outlined in Chapter 4, the redefinition aligned professionalism with regulatory frameworks, audit cultures, and performative accountability. Tummons (2011) identifies the emergence of ‘procedural professionalism’ in this context: a regime in which legitimacy derives not from practitioner expertise or relational judgement but from performatively demonstrated compliance with policy-mandated standards. Mockler (2013) extends this by arguing that professional learning itself has become subject to audit logic, transforming it from a critical and reflective endeavour into a mechanism of institutional control.

The implications of this redefinition are rendered ethically acute in Moore and Clarke’s (2016) exploration of ‘cruel optimism.’ Here, professionalism becomes a conflicted site of aspiration and disillusionment: practitioners continue to value autonomy, care, and dialogic engagement, yet must inhabit roles structured by external metrics.

From a broader institutional perspective, Gleeson et al. (2015) and Arbuckle (2015) describe professionalism as increasingly fragmented and contextually unstable, shaped by shifting managerial discourses. Arbuckle’s distinction

between the '*professional*' and the '*technician*' is particularly salient: the technician is produced by governance logics privileging delivery and compliance over relational pedagogy. Hall and McGinity (2015) extend this critique, highlighting how educators' professional expertise is recast through managerialist priorities and institutional performance targets. Yet these authors also emphasise adaptive strategies, underscoring how educators sustain pedagogical and civic values through localised negotiation rather than overt resistance, aligning with the thesis's core concern with *bounded agency*.

These adaptive strategies are not limited to professional identity; they also appear in how practitioners engage with the shifting purposes of education itself. Adult education, once associated with civic development, personal growth, and social justice, was rearticulated through an economic lens, with aims increasingly centred on employability and labour market responsiveness. As discussed in Chapter 4, this ideological narrowing intensified in the 1990s; Moon's (2006) meta-study traces this ideological narrowing across the post-war period, identifying a turning point in the 1990s, when policy began to align with outcome-oriented logics. This is particularly visible in the Leitch Review, *Skills for Life*, and New Labour's post-16 reforms.

Field (2006) and Keep (2009) detail how funding, inspection, and discourse converged to reimagine education as workforce preparation. This did not merely reshape curricula and delivery models; it also required practitioners to reimagine their own professional value through the lens of institutional productivity. Biesta (2015) diagnoses this transformation as a prioritisation of *qualification* over *socialisation* and *subjectification*, effectively displacing democratic, ethical, and relational goals with instrumental outcomes.

Holford (2024b) reinforces this critique by arguing that civic and cultural educational narratives are actively marginalised within governance discourse, displaced by a policy grammar that renders them unintelligible. For educators, this creates a double bind: tasked with enacting managerial priorities that reduce

education to outputs, they remain ethically attached to purposes now peripheral to institutional legitimacy.

Thus, professionalism in the adult education sector was not eliminated but strategically reconstructed. As shown throughout Chapter 4, this redefinition was part of a broader systemic reconfiguration under neoliberalism. Educators' identities became sites of negotiation, simultaneously shaped by governance constraints and animated by enduring ethical concerns. In navigating this contested terrain, they did not simply conform or resist; instead, they enacted a repertoire of adaptive and relational strategies — holding open spaces for meaning even within tightly managed institutional structures. These dynamics frame the practitioner testimonies that follow, and the concept of 'practising from the edge' provides the interpretive anchor through which their actions are understood.

5.2 Research Question and Methodological Approach

In Chapter 4, the Grounded Complexity Framework (GCF) was used to trace the historical evolution of adult education governance. Structural and discursive developments were mapped through Midgley's four domains of Complexity, highlighting how policy frameworks, ideological shifts, and professional agency recursively interacted over time. This historical perspective reflects a key principle of Complexity Theory: that systems generate both path dependence and conditions for emergence.

In this chapter, the GCF remains foundational but is reoriented toward the interpretation of practitioner experience. Rather than applying the domain structure directly, the analysis shifts towards relational inquiry, recognising practitioners' situated meaning-making as reflexive enactments of bounded agency within increasingly constrained governance environments. This approach aligns with Midgley's (2016) argument that systemic inquiry must be context-sensitive, ethically responsive, and attentive to emergent patterns of meaning.

Midgley describes the domains as heuristic devices rather than fixed categories. Adopting a thematic rather than domain-based structure honours this interpretive flexibility and supports systemic inquiry's relational commitments. The themes structuring Chapter 5 were derived inductively from participant concerns, each resonating with a GCF domain:

- **Theme 1**, '*Neoliberal Restructuring*', aligns with **Natural Complexity**;
- **Theme 2**, '*Professional Identity Fragmentation*', with **Social Complexity**;
- **Theme 3**, '*Navigating Marketisation*', with **Subjective Complexity**.

This relational alignment sustains the GCF's focus on recursive layering, where structural, interpersonal, and subjective dynamics co-evolve within professional life.

The analytic tools deployed, including Discourse Analysis and Cross-Theory Dialogue (CTD), examine how practitioners articulate, contest, and reframe the pressures of neoliberal governance, and bring their reflections into dialogue with theoretical constructs. Within this analytic configuration, '*practising from the edge*' functions not merely as a descriptive label but as a theoretical device for tracking how ethical agency and civic purpose endure through relational improvisation and epistemic negotiation.

The fieldwork consists of 11 interviews and four focus groups conducted between 2018 and 2020, supplemented by longitudinal reflections collected in 2024. Practitioner voices are foregrounded throughout the chapter. Each participant is identified by a pseudonym on initial reference (e.g., Jane, practitioner interview transcript, 2018), with biographical context provided in Appendix 5. The participants, predominantly senior practitioners with an average of 11 years' experience, offer richly contextualised insights into how neoliberal reforms have reshaped professional identity, agency, and pedagogical practice. Their reflections reveal a complex negotiation of compliance, ethical commitment, and relational adaptation—captured here through the concept of *practising from the edge*.

This chapter addresses the following research questions:

- How have neoliberal reforms affected the professional identities and agency of adult education practitioners in England?
- What changes in practice have emerged as a result of these governance conditions?

5.3 Neoliberal Restructuring and Professional Accountability

The interview schedule was shaped by the theoretical concerns outlined in Chapters 2 and 3, particularly those related to performativity, professionalism, and the recursive effects of accountability. Drawing on the work of Ball (2003) and Avis (2009), the design foregrounded how governance regimes reshape both practice and identity. These concerns now inform the interpretation of practitioner responses in this and subsequent sections.

Practitioners interviewed for this study described how neoliberalism's reliance on quantifiable outcomes created an institutional environment where metrics were positioned as neutral arbiters of educational quality. However, these metrics frequently obscured the relational, developmental, and ethical dimensions of adult education practice. Success was increasingly framed in terms of system-defined outputs, marginalising learner-centred growth, critical engagement, and civic empowerment. The presumed neutrality of data metrics functioned as a mechanism of both compliance and constraint.

The restructuring of accountability frameworks also reconfigured managerial roles within educational institutions. Newer 'administrative' managers, often recruited from commercial sectors, are aligned with governance imperatives centred on audit compliance, data monitoring, and performance management. By contrast, more traditional 'practitioner' managers, particularly those with substantive classroom experience, frequently described tensions between

institutional loyalty and pedagogical values. These tensions highlight the recursive dilemma faced by mid-level actors tasked with translating policy demands into pedagogical practice.

The discourse analysis of practitioner narratives reveals a complex recalibration of professional identity under constraint. Participants articulated the erosion of pedagogical autonomy, the intensification of output compliance pressures, and the marginalisation of relational and civic pedagogies.

Professional accountability was neither simply absorbed nor wholly rejected. Instead, this section demonstrates how a shifting conception of legitimacy has led to increasing tensions between institutional demands and professional values. This recursive navigation forms a central thread running through the themes explored in subsequent sections, where the tensions and possibilities of practising from the edge are further theorised through Cross-Theory Dialogue (CTD). The following section (5.3.1) presents a detailed analysis of practitioner narratives, exploring how these structural transformations are articulated, negotiated, and occasionally resisted in everyday professional life.

5.3.1 Analysis of Practitioner Responses to Performativity

Chapter 4 outlined how the 1992 FEHE Act embedded New Public Management principles into adult education, shifting emphasis from civic and developmental goals to employability and retention. This restructuring laid the groundwork for what Ball (2008) describes as ‘performativity’, a condition in which educational success is defined by quantifiable metrics rather than relational or ethical value. That logic is clearly reflected in how practitioners describe the dominance of targets, audits, and institutional data cultures. This section examines how both practitioners and managers respond to these performance regimes. Discourse analysis reveals that while practitioner language often signals constraint and ethical discomfort, managers tend to frame accountability mechanisms as

necessary for institutional survival, even while acknowledging the pressures they produce.

Neoliberal reforms have introduced a pervasive culture of accountability within educational institutions, tying institutional success to narrow performance metrics, such as retention, learner satisfaction, and exam results. Powell (1992) and Powell and Foster (1996) argue that these outcomes narrow the scope of education, transforming practitioners from leaders of holistic learning into agents of economic efficiency.

Practitioners frequently use terms like ‘targets,’ ‘metrics,’ and ‘pressure’ to highlight how these systems undermine professional agency, with modal verbs like ‘must’ and ‘have to’ underscoring their obligation to meet institutional targets. In contrast, managers adopt performative language such as ‘evidence,’ ‘accountability,’ and ‘compliance’ to justify reforms as necessary for funding and institutional integrity. The language of bureaucratisation ‘forms,’ ‘reports,’ ‘paperwork,’ and ‘tick boxes’ further reflects their differing institutional perspectives. For practitioners, these are ‘time-consuming’ distractions from teaching, while managers view them as ‘necessary documentation’ and ‘quality assurance’ aligned with external standards.

Performativity and Ethical Tension

Sector literature and academic analysis both highlight the challenges faced by adult education practitioners in navigating the tension between institutional and legislative demands and their own commitments to educational quality (AoC, 2014; Avis, 2005; Ball, 2003; Bathmaker, 2005; FETL, 2020; Staufenberg, 2016; Tett & Hamilton, 2019). These tensions often manifest in professional dilemmas related to target compliance, learner readiness, and the ethical implementation of teaching. Jane, an ESOL practitioner, captures this tension: ‘I just feel we are pushed to push them through... If level 1 is just scraped through, there’s no way or very long time to do a level 2’ (Interview transcript, 2018). This reflects the conflict between performance targets and maintaining standards, supporting

Avis's (2005) view that many practitioners feel pressured to compromise on holistic teaching. However, Jane's discomfort with 'pushing them through' and her refusal to send struggling learners away reflect a growing resolve to prioritise ethical standards over compliance. This progression shows how ethical responsibilities are navigated through micro-rationalisations within a constrained system.

Jane highlights pedagogical investment through moments when 'they smile' and achieve something unexpected. Her prioritisation of learners' needs over compliance underscores a deep commitment to educational values. A Focus Group 3 practitioner echoed this: 'We have to work within the system. But... I'm placing it in values and what we think is important as a teacher... it's the culture, not the methodology (which is important) (Focus Group transcript 2019).

Accountability and Surveillance

Other practitioners express frustration with how accountability mechanisms diminish professional agency. Glenda, who worked part-time across ACL and FE, describes the emotional toll of constant scrutiny: 'You cannot have everything immaculate (all the time)... it's quite pressured because you could have anyone walk in at any time' (Interview transcript, 2019). Her account reflects Ball's (2003) 'surveillance culture,' where unpredictable inspections shift focus from relational teaching to performance management.

Managerial Perspective and Pragmatism

Andy, a newly appointed FE quality manager, echoes Glenda's concerns from a managerial perspective, acknowledging that practitioners' agency has been 'squashed' by oversight. Reflecting on the Individual Learning Plan (ILP), he notes: 'We moved to an online system... it can also be a stick to beat people with' (Interview transcript, 2019). What was intended as a support tool becomes a mechanism of control.

Debbie, a community curriculum manager, also acknowledges these burdens: ‘It was always down to the funding... stacks and stacks of data, of audits, of quotas, of information’ (Interview transcript, 2018). For managers, these systems are necessary for institutional survival, but they can also be a source of frustration and stress.

The dilemmas echo Randle and Brady’s (1997) characterisation of adult education as the ‘Cinderella service,’ caught between pedagogical care and managerial compliance. Grace, a manager with 15 years’ experience, offers a Pragmatic view: ‘We are doing that to build evidence for the funding...(but) we are losing our core...What I don’t think has changed is how adult education feels about what it does in the classroom.’ (Interview transcript, 2018)

Debbie adds:

‘The changes to the funding... are catastrophic... it’s soul-destroying for teachers having to tell learners the class they have relied on as an anchor in a (complex) world is no longer available (because they passed) and some learners go so far as to deliberately fail their exam, or not turn up, just to stay.’ (Email, post-research reflection 2024).

Debbie’s observation also reveals how accountability systems can produce unintended consequences for learners themselves. The fact that some choose to fail in order to remain within the system suggests a tacit *gamification* of access—where strategic non-compliance becomes a means of safeguarding educational continuity in a regime structured around exit and throughput.

Negotiating Tension

A Focus Group 2 manager further illustrates this tension between managerial Pragmatism and practitioner frustration: ‘We’re just stuck in a numbers game. Everything is about retention and exams now, not about the learners’ actual

growth' (Transcript, 2019). The embedded focus on measurable outputs reinforces practitioner concerns about the depersonalisation of education.

While managers like Grace and Andy rationalise accountability as essential for funding and institutional continuity, practitioners like Jane and Glenda resist or subvert these systems, prioritising learner wellbeing over metrics. Avis (2005) explains that practitioners closely connected to learners are more likely to challenge neoliberal reforms, advocating for a return to holistic education rather than accepting outcome-driven governance.

5.3.2 Theoretical Framing: Neoliberalism, Professional Identity, and Civic Purpose

Anchoring the Historical Trajectory of Purpose

Participant accounts of professional purpose reflect not only sectoral shifts but also the broader ideological reconfigurations traced in Chapter 4. Many of their comments echo the values articulated in the Faure Report (1972), which envisioned lifelong learning as a democratic and humanistic project, committed to civic participation, ethical development, and collective flourishing. It positioned adult education as a pathway to emancipation, grounded in a post-war constellation of civil values, including social justice, public responsibility, and participatory citizenship. These commitments remain evident in the practitioner rationales explored in this research.

Field (2006) documents how these civic ideals were progressively rearticulated during the late twentieth century into more instrumental logics. As evidenced in Chapter, terms such as 'access' and 'lifelong learning' were recast to serve labour market flexibility and economic competitiveness. Biesta (2015) goes further to suggest that these shifts reflect the erosion of democratic educational purposes. Tett and Hamilton (2019) similarly demonstrate how terms like

'opportunity' and 'empowerment' were appropriated into a discourse of individualisation and responsabilisation.

Participants' reflections must be interpreted within the context of this trajectory of displacement. Their accounts of diminished purpose, output-oriented cultures, and the loss of civic pedagogy exemplify Biesta's concept of 'learnification': the reduction of societal aims to individual, measurable outcomes. These narratives provide situated evidence of how neoliberal rationalities have transformed the semantic and ethical foundations of adult education.

Restructuring Professional Purpose

Participant comments such as 'funding dictates everything' and 'it's outputs, not learning anymore' point to a systemic realignment that has redefined the normative core of adult education professionalism. These shifts represent a discursive displacement of purpose.

Ball's (2003, 2007) analysis of performativity is central here: governance does not merely introduce new benchmarks but reorders the meaning through which education is imagined. Participant accounts that frame education as 'targets' or 'numbers' exemplify how economic metrics have overtaken intrinsic educational values. Yet the evidence does not show total colonisation. Traces of learner-centred, civic, and relational commitments persist, albeit refracted through more cautious or tactical frames. Participant reflections complicate Biesta's (2006) typology: while qualification dominates, traces of socialisation and subjectification persist in classroom improvisations and ethical intent.

A productive tension emerges between Ball (2003, 2012) and Keep (2009). While Ball foregrounds symbolic realignment, Keep emphasises material restructuring: funding formulas, audit cultures, and labour market demands drive the economisation of education. Participants' remarks about the 'funding tail wagging the curriculum dog' as commented by one practitioner in Focus Group

2, reflect the fusion of ideological and structural forces: policy language and financial design coalesce to constrain practice.

This duality underscores Gleeson *et al.*'s (2015) point about recursive institutional feedback: metrics and expectations become mutually reinforcing, generating an environment where ethical improvisation is necessary but institutionally risky. Field's (2006) critique of lifelong learning as a hollowed civic ideal is made concrete in participant accounts. The redefinition of 'learning for its own sake' into 'work-readiness' speaks directly to Field's claim that semantic continuity can mask ideological reversal.

When practitioners report feeling that education has been 'hollowed out' or 'turned into a numbers game', these are not rhetorical flourishes but lived expressions of a paradigmatic shift in purpose (Avis, 2005; Biesta, 2015). Their ethical displacement is a manifestation of what has been structurally, discursively, and ideologically foreclosed.

Brookfield's (2005) work on critical reflection reinforces the value of what participants describe as 'small acts'; embedding critical content in vocational frameworks or safeguarding dialogic space under the radar. These improvisations do not resist structure outright; they reinterpret it. They represent bounded agency in action: strategic, relational, and attuned to local possibility.

Professional purpose, then, has not simply narrowed; it has been reconfigured through an interplay of ideological, systemic, and experiential forces. Participant narratives make visible the sedimentation of this process, how broad discursive shifts materialise in ethical dilemmas and improvisational practice.

Redefinition of Professional Identity: Regulatory Professionalism and Ethical Dislocation

The dissolution of a coherent professional identity in adult education follows the trajectory outlined in Chapter 4. Regulatory reform, initially formalised through

the Institute for Learning and later diluted under the Education and Training Foundation, was not merely procedural. As Lucas (2004) and Orr and Simmons (2010) argue, these reforms redefined professionalism through audit-compatible norms. Spours (2021) describes how legitimacy increasingly depended on alignment with productivity and market logic.

Avis (2003) characterises this shift as a movement from relational professionalism, rooted in civic pedagogy and care, towards regulatory professionalism structured around surveillance and outputs. Finn, a senior health and wellbeing community learning tutor, summarised this transformation starkly: 'They decided professionalism meant paperwork, targets, and inspections, not what we do with people in the room.' (ACL practitioner transcript, 2018).

Yet, Gleeson and Shain (1999) offer a counterpoint. Professional identities under performative regimes do not simply collapse; they fracture and reconfigure. This better reflects the dynamics revealed in participant narratives. Educators simultaneously fulfil compliance obligations and engage in quiet relational commitments. Duckworth and Smith (2019) describe this as practice within 'fragmented institutional cultures' where pedagogical discretion survives through adaptation. Similarly, Orr and Simmons (2010) document acts of subversion and reassertion within tightly managed systems.

These findings resonate with the Faure Report's (1972) ideal of educators as critical agents of democratic learning. Field (2006) shows the appropriation of lifelong learning reoriented that vision toward employability. Biesta (2015) suggests that this semantic inversion produces a 'crisis of professional subjectivity', a disjunction between ethical vocation and institutional recognition. Participants' reflections on 'losing the purpose' (Glenda) or 'numbers replacing people' (Andy) exemplify this dissonance.

Still, the evidence does not support a total foreclosure. As one participant in Focus Group 2 put it, 'We played the numbers game, but we still taught people.' This illustrates Hillier and Ecclestone's (2004) claim that relational

professionalism adapts rather than disappears. Informal practice, civic content in vocational modules, and relational commitments all reflect ethical improvisation within audit cultures. Tummons (2011) affirms this as well: improvisation becomes a key site of visible agency where formal professional definitions are tightly managed.

The data, then, reflect neither decline nor resilience alone. They demonstrate professional identity as a site of recursive negotiation, recalibrated at the interface of institutional constraints and pedagogical commitments.

Cruel Optimism and Relational Tension: Navigating Ethical Desire within Systemic Constraint

Participant reflections across this study frequently reveal attachments to civic, dialogic, and relational pedagogies—attachments that persist despite increasing systemic pressures towards performativity, output compliance, and economic instrumentalism. These patterns resonate with Berlant's (2011) theorisation of *cruel optimism*: a condition in which the very object of one's desire becomes structurally obstructive. In this context, the desire to uphold civic professionalism and relational teaching encounters is continually frustrated by institutional systems that reward standardisation, audit, and quantifiable outputs.

Moore and Clarke (2016) extend Berlant's formulation to professional education, arguing that teacher identity itself has become a site of cruel optimism. They demonstrate how practitioners remain emotionally and ethically invested in ideals of professional autonomy and pedagogical care, even as these ideals are eroded by accountability regimes. This conceptual framing aligns with the affective tensions evident in the testimonies analysed in this chapter: practitioners express commitment to learner-centred practice, democratic values, and pedagogical integrity, yet also articulate exhaustion, disillusionment, and ethical strain as they attempt to reconcile these commitments with institutional expectations.

However, the data also complicate a purely negative reading of cruel optimism. As Hillier and Ecclestone (2004) show, bounded agency can manifest through adaptive relational practices that preserve ethical intent even within constraining environments. Participants in this study described embedding civic aims discreetly within vocational curricula, cultivating trust-based classroom relationships, and using procedural compliance as a shield behind which more dialogic pedagogies could continue. These practices suggest that attachments to civic professionalism, while undoubtedly strained, may also act as sites of minor resistance and ethical resilience.

In this light, cruel optimism does not function solely as a critique of misplaced attachment but also as a lens for understanding how educators sustain value and meaning in constrained conditions. Their continued investment in ethical forms of teaching reflects not naïveté but a form of situated ethical negotiation—one that holds space for relational practice, however narrow that space may become.

5.3.3 CTD Navigating Institutional Power and Professional Identities in Adult Education

This Cross-Theory Dialogue explores how practitioner agency and professional identity are shaped within the layered constraints of neoliberal governance. Building on prior analysis of performativity and accountability, this section brings three core concepts— hegemony, path dependence, and emergence —into structured dialogue to interpret the recursive interaction between institutional power, normative internalisation, and situated professional resistance. The dialogue traces how professional identities are actively negotiated through embedded practices of ethical adaptation. The theoretical framework draws on the governance trajectories mapped in Chapter 4, while anchoring its insights in the practitioner testimony presented earlier in this chapter, particularly in the contrasting cases of managerial accommodation and classroom-based discretion.

Hegemony and Managerial Internalisation

The concept of hegemony, as outlined in the GCF, provides a critical lens for understanding how neoliberal norms have become embedded in institutional practices through processes of normative internalisation. Unlike coercion, hegemony operates through the cultivation of consent by rendering specific logics, such as audit compliance and metric-based accountability, as self-evident features of institutional life. Managers like Andy and Grace articulate a Pragmatic alignment with these norms, justifying accountability systems as essential for funding security and organisational stability. As Ball (2003) argues, this 'audit culture' reorders institutional priorities by presenting performance indicators not as ideological constructs but as rational solutions. Rizvi and Lingard (2010) similarly demonstrate how neoliberal policies are naturalised within education systems by framing them in terms of improvement and efficiency.

This is not a case of passive compliance. Instead, it exemplifies hegemonic incorporation: managers act as intermediaries who reproduce neoliberal logics while maintaining a residual commitment to educational value. Grace's observation- 'We are losing our core... but I don't think that has changed how adult education feels in the classroom...', illustrates the layered nature of this consent. It reflects a pragmatic acceptance of performativity, but one that does not fully extinguish civic pedagogical intent. Within Gramsci's terms, this is a reflexive articulation of recognising the impact of common sense: ethical imperatives persist but are articulated through institutionally sanctioned language and objectives.

Path Dependence and Institutional Inertia

While hegemony explains the normative alignment of managerial actors, path dependence accounts for the structural durability of performative systems.

Pierson's (2000) theory identifies how early institutional choices, once consolidated, create self-reinforcing mechanisms that limit future alternatives. In adult education, the post-1992 embedding of New Public Management through

mechanisms like performance targets and funding conditionality set in motion a trajectory that proved difficult to reverse. Keep and James (2012) trace how funding structures and inspection regimes became increasingly prescriptive, narrowing pedagogical discretion and privileging audit-friendly learning and teaching content.

Andy's commentary on the Individual Learning Plan system- *'it's a stick to beat people with'*- highlights how tools designed initially for developmental support became instruments of surveillance. Morrison (2006) argues that path-dependent systems do not simply replicate the past; they adapt in ways that consolidate systemic priorities. In this case, performance management systems evolved to accommodate increasingly complex metrics while simultaneously constraining innovation. What began as attempts to improve quality morphed into technologies of control, locking practitioners into repetitive cycles of compliance.

This trajectory also recalls earlier forms of ethical-social hegemony described in Chapter 4. Just as civic ideals once sedimented into institutional norms, neoliberal imperatives have now achieved similar structural depth. This entrenchment underscores the challenge practitioners face: they must navigate a system that no longer requires active enforcement to reproduce its constraints.

Emergence and Adaptive Professionalism

Against this backdrop, practitioner narratives reveal a counter current: the emergence of adaptive professionalism as a form of situated ethical agency. Complexity Theory's notion of emergence suggests that small-scale, context-sensitive interventions can recalibrate systemic dynamics, especially when they occur at the boundaries of formal constraint. Jane's refusal to 'push them through' reflects what Biesta (2014) terms the intentional embrace of uncertainty and unpredictability in service of ethical, relational, and non-instrumental educational aims. Such decisions do not conform to dominant metrics but instead foreground a form of professional judgement grounded in the moral complexities of teaching.

As discussed in Chapter 4, emergence was previously applied to describe how civic infrastructures adapted to austerity. This chapter captures how individual pedagogical actions, informed by good sense and relational ethics, create potential tipping points within performative systems. Scott (1990) refers to these practices as ‘everyday acts of resistance’ -non-confrontational, often invisible interventions that sustain alternative logics within hegemonic structures.

However, emergence is not synonymous with transformation. As Morrison (2006) cautions, emergent behaviours may be reabsorbed unless supported by institutional scaffolding. In Jane’s case, the ethical judgement she exercised remained contingent on local discretion and collegial support. Without reinforcement from leadership, policy frameworks, or peer networks, such adaptations risk isolation. This aligns with Tett and Hamilton’s (2019) warning that civic pedagogy depends on relational infrastructures: communities of practice, shared values, and institutional tolerance. In their absence, emergence may remain fragmentary and insufficiently durable to challenge path-dependent regimes.

Conceptual Synthesis and Theoretical Implications

The dialogue between hegemony, path dependence, and emergence reveals a governance ecology in which professional identity is recursively negotiated rather than static. Hegemony explains how neoliberal norms are internalised as rational practices. Path dependence reveals how those norms become institutionalised through feedback mechanisms and structural constraints. Emergence introduces a provisional, situated capacity for recalibration, suggesting that agency, while bounded, remains operative.

Yet the relationship between these concepts is not symmetrical. Hegemony and path dependence stabilise; emergence disrupts. But disruption is not self-sustaining. Without collective reinforcement, emergent practices risk becoming isolated improvisations rather than seeds of systemic change. This reaffirms the importance of supportive infrastructures and reflective professional cultures. The

presence of good sense among practitioners, as Gramsci would argue, is a necessary but insufficient condition for transformation.

Biesta's (2014) account of education as a normative and ethical risk provides a critical interpretive lens here. His conception underscores that meaningful education resists capture by managerial logic because it depends on the irreducible encounter between teacher and learner. In this sense, the practices described above are not merely technical adaptations, but expressions of a pedagogical ethic that persists even under governance constraint. The willingness to act educationally, rather than procedurally, reflects an enduring commitment to what Biesta terms 'subjectification'; the formation of persons through unpredictable, dialogic interaction. Within this CTD, such acts of educational fidelity become intelligible not as resistance in a political sense, but as ongoing ethical navigation within bounded systems.

5.4 Fragmentation of Professional Identity in Neoliberal Education: Agency and Job Insecurity

Fragmentation of professional identity highlights how neoliberal reforms, particularly NPM, have redefined professional norms, diminished agency, and intensified employment precarity.

Discourse analysis of both practitioners and managers, conducted through interviews and focus groups, reveals how tensions between personal values and institutional policy destabilise identity. It reveals how conflicting pressures fragment understanding of what it means to be a professional. The analysis focuses on three interlinked issues: fragmentation of roles, erosion of agency, and the systemic entrenchment of casualised employment. Together, these elements expose a sector increasingly dominated by external metrics and economic priorities, where professional stability and cohesion are consistently undermined.

5.4.1 Fragmentation of Professional Identity

Fragmentation of professional identity is a recurring theme for practitioners in this research. It is driven by the conflict between internalised learner-centred values and the demands made on them by NPM practices, as well as through policy acts that create and then withdraw regulatory frameworks, thereby creating uncertainty.

Efficiency and standardisation have led practitioners to reframe their relationship with learners, once interpersonal and facilitative, as one framed through the mechanics of efficiency and measurement, disrupting core aspects of their identity and leading to a fractured sense of what it means to be a professional in this field. The early drive for regulation of teaching created imposed standards across all practitioners regardless of the type of provider or learner, and its subsequent deregulation, which, rather than restoring agency, compounded the sense of dislocation by removing unified standards practitioners had already been brought to accept, therefore weakening the potential for collective professional structures to focus collective action.

Beyond the 'revolving door' of new standards, practitioners themselves hold diverse views on what constitutes professional behaviour and what makes them professionals, making professionalism a pluralistic concept. Practitioners understand their professional identity in different ways, and backgrounds, breadth of roles, and experiences shape this understanding. Nikki expresses the tension between systems, regulations, and professionalism: *'Performance management systems can be a challenge to professionalism... it's a very stressful process for the teachers.'* (Nikki, FE practitioner, interview transcript 2019). This acknowledgement of stress and critique of observation systems highlights a form of resistance to practices that undermine professional integrity.

For some, it centres on pedagogical freedom and adaptability, while for others, it involves successfully balancing multiple responsibilities and aspects of their role. Grace captures this breadth when she says:

'I always see myself as another teacher who is sharing practice with a colleague. [...] I look at what they do, how they teach. But the most important part for me is when I talk to them afterwards to see how they see their role, what is it that they feel needs to be changed. And I'm always looking for something ethical [...] to see that their belief (in) support of the people they teach.'

For Grace, effective professionalism involves both pedagogical competence and relational engagement. This highlights the complex interplay of the skills that practitioners are expected to bring to their roles and is consistent with a broader trend identified by Clarke and Newman (1997), who argue that neoliberalism and NPM have altered the professional landscape by prioritising economic imperatives over traditional educational values, creating a tension between institutional goals and practitioners' personal commitments. Such movements also demonstrate '*creative destruction*', an assertion by Harvey (2005) that neoliberalism is a process in which established norms are dismantled and replaced by market-driven logic prioritising compliance and performance over educational integrity. These cycles of regulation and deregulation of teacher professional standards were just another demonstration of the discontinuity in professional identity, with practitioners caught between imposed standards and the erosion of their professional status when those standards are abruptly removed.

Practitioner accounts further illustrate how the shifting regulation exacerbates this struggle:

'I think things like the professional standards do a good job in helping to define and make visible what a teacher in the Further Education sector is or what they can aspire to be... it does a lot in making concrete something that

is quite difficult to capture. However, the problem is... they (new teachers) wouldn't necessarily have heard of the ETF. They wouldn't know that professional standards... they might have gone through training and gone, 'Oh yeah, ' those things.' (Andy, FE leader, interview transcript 2019).

Grace adds: *'Standards are important. And I know for some lower-performing areas and teachers, it can be beneficial to have a kind of structure that needs to be adhered to.'* (Grace, ACL leader, interview transcript 2018).

Such accounts highlight the ongoing tension as they struggle to reconcile changing responsibilities with a coherent professional identity. Regulatory standards like the 2007 Professional Standard for Teachers or the frequently revised Ofsted regimes for inspection defined and redefined what counts as good teaching and what *'professionalism'* should be, making practitioners feel more like policy subjects to standards or technical implementers of NPM mechanisms instead of professionals with agency to use professional judgement and ethics. This revisionist approach to regulation not only creates substantial churn for practitioners' work through constantly adjusting practice to respond to the latest performativity focus (e.g., ILPs, Prevent Agendas, SMART targets, attendance targeting, embedding basic skills) but also removes the mandatory professional body for practitioners. While many practitioners initially felt that the creation of a mandatory professional body was an imposition, it ultimately united a previously divided practitioner base. When removed, the emerging centralised voice of adult education practitioners was once again disrupted by the actions of hegemony. While other optional networks and advisory support structures replaced it, including the Society for Education and Training, as an optional professional network, its membership declined to less than a third of current teachers in the sector. In this environment, practitioners are left to adapt to ever-changing institutional expectations while maintaining pedagogical integrity, a balancing act that has become increasingly tenuous under NPM. The ambiguity

surrounding role and identity fragmentation is indicative of the performativity in education, which redefines what it means to be a professional (Ball, 2003).

For many practitioners, professionalism remains tied to their commitment to teaching as a vocation. Glenda speaks to the vocational aspect of her role: *'I have been in adult education for more than 20 years... it meant that I could really make a difference to adults who didn't seem to have the opportunities.'* (Glenda, practitioner transcript 2019). Similarly, Sarah reflects on this when she recalls an earlier teaching experience: *'I liked the freedom of the teaching that you could do... it seemed very free (looking back), and the focus wasn't so much on the end goal and on the ticks in boxes.'* (FE practitioner transcript 2018). This demonstrates how practitioners define their professional identity through agency and other relational rather than output-based concepts of teaching.

However, this commitment is often undercut by a sense of being undervalued within the broader educational hierarchy. Glenda points out: *'We are not paid on a proper scale... when secondary school teachers complain about pay, I kind of have to bite my tongue.'* Additionally, there is a social dimension to this undervaluation, as Glenda goes on to reflect: *'If someone has not experienced it themselves, they still seem to almost look down their noses at you that you are not teaching in a school.'*

This sentiment underscores how the fragmented professional identity goes beyond role confusion to become a systemic inequality in how adult practitioners in education are perceived, even by colleagues in other sub-sectors, and compensated. The recent NFER research in FE college pay conditions notes that a mid-point lecturer in an FE college receives 23% less pay than similar teachers in secondary education, despite at times delivering the same curriculum to the same demographic. UCU notes that the median salary of an FE lecturer in 2022 was £32,000, while in secondary schools, they would receive £41,000 for the same responsibility (Flemons *et al.*, 2024). This also, in part, explains the sense of lack of recognition that pervades the adult education sector,

complicating the already challenging dynamics of professional identity (Flemons *et al.*, 2024).

Practitioners often speak of '*wearing different hats*' or '*juggling multiple roles*', highlighting that they are expected to navigate responsibilities for pedagogy, course administration, and pastoral care. The breadth of expectations is often presented as a form of flexibility within managerial discourse. However, it signals a deeper professional disorientation for practitioners who find themselves balancing roles that increasingly conflict, for which they may not have the expertise, guidance, or resources to manage, leading to low-level, persistent tensions.

Anne, a long-standing Skills for Life (S4L) practitioner, encapsulates this: '*I don't give {my role} title because I don't believe the title of that job matches my job anymore.*' (Interview transcript 2018). This ambiguity, also reflected in Thea's and other practitioners' experiences, highlights a sense of role confusion created by the hegemonic 'commonsense' prevailing across the sector.

Avis (2005) argues that such fragmentation reflects a broader loss of professional agency, where educational roles become increasingly compartmentalised, disrupting the coherence of professional identities. Compartmentalisation of professional identities arises not only from the multiplicity of tasks but from how practitioners are pulled in conflicting ideological directions, reducing their agency and sense of collective purpose while creating a deep sense of emotional toil as they constantly negotiate what role and whose expectations they are meeting. Anne, speaking as a lead tutor, highlights the added extra practitioners are expected to bring:

'I am always looking for something that- to see that they are supporting the people that they are teaching... (that) they give pastoral care rather than sort of whether assessment criteria one two or three were met.' (Anne, practitioner interview 2018).

Despite role ambiguity, many practitioners retain their ethical core. She continues: *'To me, to be professional is that I uphold... my value set, which is primarily around the learners.'* This perspective affirms that educational integrity persists even amid structural constraint.

5.4.1.1 Erosion of Professional Agency

Practitioners and managers alike report how intensifying accountability demands have reshaped their work and curtailed their capacity to make pedagogical and organisational decisions. This erosion of professional agency has been accelerated by standardisation frameworks embedded in NPM, which increasingly subordinate practitioner judgment to policy-defined procedural compliance. Ball (2003) describes these dynamics as the 'terrors of performativity', where education is reorganised around performance metrics rather than relational or contextual judgment.

Practitioners' accounts convey a sense of constraint and loss. Nikki recalls: *'We lost the individuality... we had to do the same thing every week with everyone in each class.'* (FE practitioner transcript 2019). This reflects Biesta's (2006) concern that imposed uniformity erodes pedagogical responsiveness and diminishes the possibilities for meaningful educational engagement. Avis (2005) similarly warns that such accountability pressures undermine the conditions for critical pedagogy, prompting educators to prioritise bureaucratic compliance over professional deliberation.

The participants in Focus Group 1 further illustrate this disempowerment. One practitioner expressed frustration at the top-down imposition of behavioural strategies: *'We are now implementing policy with behaviour management issues and stuff... and it's from one consultant... one consultant has written this report, and hundreds of staff are now doing [it] because this is... trotted out.'* This view reflects resistance to externally mandated approaches perceived as disconnected from the complexities of adult learning contexts. Another practitioner noted:

'You are addressing an audience of people who have so much experience and so much knowledge... and you're getting told what to do by a consultant who isn't a practitioner in adult education.' (Focus Group transcript 2019).

These perspectives point to a reconfiguration of authority in which external consultancy, rather than practitioner expertise, drives pedagogical decisions.

These shifts reinforce a climate of surveillance and compliance. Practitioners report the imposition of rigid frameworks that marginalise their professional judgment and prioritise conformity over innovation. Cohen *et al.* (2018) and Avis (2005) argue that this dynamic not only reshapes practice but also reorients professional self-conception, displacing values rooted in learner engagement and social justice with those defined by policy logic and institutional expediency.

Glenda's reflection encapsulates this ideological displacement: *'Everything is about getting that piece of paper rather than learning for the value of learning.'* (Practitioner interview 2018). The dominance of outcome metrics, she implies, constrains decision-making and redefines educational success in ways that fragment pedagogical purpose. Osberg and Biesta (2010) argue that such shifts distort education's epistemic foundations, transforming it from a dialogic, generative process into a mechanistic exercise in data production.

5.4.1.2 Job Casualisation, Insecurity, and Impact on Professional Identity

The rise of 'labour flexibility' as a policy principle has entrenched casualisation across the adult education workforce. Short-term contracts, unpredictable workloads, and fragmented roles have become endemic, generating persistent insecurity and undermining professional identity. As Gleeson and Shain (1999) note, this shift is structural, not incidental; it reflects a deliberate move to align workforce practices with neoliberal rationalities of cost efficiency and adaptability.

Practitioner testimonies highlight the consequences of this precarisation. Jane describes her fragmented role: *'I didn't have enough hours, so... I sit in there and help with that... (but) you get paid a lower rate... Hence, I need to get these other jobs.'* (Interview transcript 2019). Her experience illustrates the economic and professional vulnerability created by flexible contracts. Avis (2005) argues that this form of labour fragmentation reduces practitioners to interchangeable units, stripping them of professional autonomy and diluting their vocational purpose.

Beyond individual stress, casualisation disrupts professional cohesion. Glenda notes: *'There is no reliability for sessional staff... Consequently, there is no cohesion within the staff quite frequently.'* (Interview transcript 2019). Evetts (2003) contends that this fragmentation serves managerial interests by weakening collective identities, making resistance less likely and institutional compliance more easily enforced. The erosion of stable employment conditions thus becomes a mechanism for consolidating managerial control.

This instability reverberates into pedagogical practice. Glenda adds: *'It's difficult enough juggling multiple teaching positions, and now there's this added pressure to meet standards that seem designed for those in more secure jobs... It's not just about the hours; it's about what it does to how we see our work.'* Her reflection reveals how precarious employment reshapes educators' relationship to their vocation, complicating their ability to invest in learners and undermining the continuity of practice.

Managerial discourse often rationalises casualisation as a financial necessity. Debbie, for instance, explains: *'We need to adapt to fluctuating funding, which means we can't always offer permanent contracts.'* While this language frames precarity as pragmatic, it belies the longer-term damage to morale, identity, and institutional capacity. Debbie later reflects: *'It's very hard to raise our eyes above the parapet... we get caught up in our own areas and fail to see the impact.'* (Interview transcript 2018). Evetts (2011) suggests such admissions reveal the

internal contradictions of 'new professionalism', where managerial efficiency comes at the cost of occupational coherence and ethical alignment.

This discursive divide- between managerial justifications and practitioner realities- underscores the ideological tensions structuring the sector. Ball (2012) argues that the language of 'efficiency' and 'flexibility', though presented as neutral, functions as a carrier of deeper neoliberal ideologies, masking structural inequities and eroding professional solidarity.

5.4.1.3 Discursive Tensions and Micro-Resistance

Micro-resistance emerges as a crucial thread in the discourse on professional identity in adult education, capturing how practitioners subtly resist and navigate the constraints imposed by NPM. While the following section addresses more overt forms of resistance, the focus here is on micro-level acts of defiance and integrity, wherein practitioners work to preserve pedagogical values within standardised and casualised environments. These acts illuminate how agency persists within constraint, and how value-led professionalism can endure beneath the surface of compliance.

As Gleeson and Knights (2006) argue, micro-resistance consists of everyday acts that challenge dominant norms without open confrontation. This enables practitioners to reclaim a sense of ethical agency even in highly regulated institutional environments. Finn's narrative illustrates this: *'While the targets were always there, we still tried to prioritise the needs of the learners.'* (ACL practitioner transcript, 2018). The deliberate use of *'we still tried'* implies an effortful prioritisation of pedagogical integrity despite institutional pressures, contrasting with performative compliance and highlighting acts of situated care.

This ethos aligns closely with the thesis's overarching concept of *practising from the edge* (Chapter 2), describing how practitioners negotiate their values within the narrow boundaries allowed by institutional control. Nikki describes a subtle yet persistent form of defiance: *'I try to include their stories and life events each*

session, even if it's just a few minutes at the start, so they don't feel like they're just here to pass a test.' Her approach demonstrates how standardised delivery can be subverted through intentional relational practices, resonating with Avis's (2005) argument that pedagogical agency is often exercised through small acts that sustain a learner-centred ethos.

Focus Group 4 reinforced this critique, with one practitioner reflecting: *'There's a danger in imposing excellence on somebody else- what is excellent?'* This rhetorical questioning captures the resistance to externally defined standards and exposes the epistemic tensions within performative education. Practitioners challenge not only the metrics imposed on them but the very assumptions underpinning those metrics, creating space for critical reflection and collective awareness.

Importantly, these tensions are also visible among managers who, while tasked with enforcing accountability systems, express ambivalence, and discomfort. Thea, who holds a dual role as a practitioner and quality observer, reflects: *'I don't like being the police... (and) it feels like I'm just ticking boxes, even though I know accountability is important.'* (Interview transcript, 2018). Her comment embodies the internal contradiction of new managerial professionalism (Anderson & Herr, 2015), wherein educators must perform both educational and compliance roles, often to their own ethical discomfort.

This interplay between micro-resistance and managerial pragmatism points to deeper systemic contradictions. The fragmentation of identity, erosion of agency, and casualisation discussed in earlier sections are not merely structural conditions but are discursively mediated through tensions in language, action, and values. Managers often adopt a vocabulary of *'balance'* and *'adaptability'*, while practitioners invoke *'integrity'*, *'purpose'*, or *'connection'* to explain their actions. This semantic divergence reflects Ball's (2012) analysis of performativity's language regimes, which obscure structural inequality beneath a veneer of technocratic neutrality.

The gap between managerial justifications and practitioner realities is further evidenced in the differing interpretations of casualisation. While managers like Debbie defend flexible labour as *'necessary to adapt to fluctuating funding'*, practitioners describe it as *'isolating'*, *'unreliable'*, and *'fragmenting'*. This contrast reveals a discursive hierarchy in which systemic reforms are rationalised from above and endured from below, producing distinctive emotional and professional consequences.

Yet even within this environment, practitioners articulate resistance through reflective critique and value-preserving improvisation. Focus Group 3 participant noted: *'We do what we can, even if it's just in small ways. You hold onto the human part.'* These expressions should not be misread as passivity. Instead, they indicate active engagement with ethical Complexity and an ongoing negotiation between what is expected and what is possible.

These micro-resistances also serve as a form of prefigurative agency- actions that anticipate and gesture towards alternative ways of practising professionalism. They are significant not merely for what they achieve in the moment, but for how they symbolically preserve and signal commitments to relational, civic, and critical pedagogies.

As this section has shown, micro-resistance is not an escape from neoliberal constraint; it is a situated engagement with it. Practitioners do not merely adapt or capitulate; they reconfigure, reinterpret, and contest the terms under which they work. This complex negotiation underscores the recursive, contingent nature of professional identity in neoliberal adult education, where integrity is preserved not through autonomy but through adaptive fidelity to ethical purpose. This dynamic will be further developed in the following section through a theoretical synthesis of agency, constraint, and relational professionalism.

5.4.2 Theoretical Framing: Professional Fragmentation, Precarity, and Micro-Resistance

The fragmentation of professional identity under neoliberal education reforms is a strategic outcome of New Public Management (NPM) rationalities. As Ball (2012) and Clarke and Newman (1997) contend, the embedding of performative metrics and audit cultures systematically redefines professionalism, privileging economic rationality over pedagogical ethics. Within this framework, relational and civic dimensions of educational practice are displaced by technical criteria of efficiency, productivity, and compliance.

This strategic redefinition operates hegemonically by embedding these norms within institutional practice, fostering their internalisation across the workforce (Filippini, 2017; Mayo, 2014). The repeated regulatory cycles, evidenced in Chapter 4 through the establishment and abrupt deregulation of a professional body, exemplify the destabilising effects of shifting standards. Rather than consolidate identity, these shifts disoriented practitioners, encouraging individualised adaptation and accommodation over collective mobilisation. Grace's account in Chapter 4 of the disappearing value of professional standards and Glenda's reference to the uncertainty caused by deregulation both confirm the erosion of stable professional anchorage.

The fragmentation is further intensified by institutional expectations that pull educators into multiple, often contradictory roles. As Evetts (2011) highlights, the performative culture of NPM normalises managerialist definitions of professionalism, where compliance and accountability take precedence over professional judgment and educational care. This renders fragmentation both a product and a mechanism of neoliberal governance: the erosion of coherent professional identity becomes a means by which governance sustains itself.

The fragmentation of identity is compounded by the casualisation of labour within the adult education sector. Shain and Gleeson (1999) identify the proliferation of

short-term, part-time, and zero-hour contracts as a central strategy of neoliberal restructuring. These conditions hinder professional continuity, erode team cohesion, and impede the development of sustained collaborative cultures. Avis (2005) extends this analysis, observing that precarity fractures the foundation upon which professional solidarity and resistance might otherwise be built.

As Chapter 4 argued, the dissolution of the regulatory body for adult education further disbanded the emerging professional unity. Practitioners such as Glenda and Anne recounted how the removal of common frameworks and the marginalisation of professional identity produced significant psychosocial costs, including isolation, loss of purpose, and emotional attrition. These impacts are not only subjective experiences, but structural consequences of a governance system designed to emphasise flexibility, competition, and performative visibility.

Harvey's (2005) concept of 'creative destruction' helps interpret this deliberate dismantling of professional norms. In the pursuit of efficiency and market responsiveness, established professional structures are undone and replaced with performance-centred, audit-friendly mechanisms. Thus, casualisation is more than an economic adaptation; it is a form of strategic institutional reorganisation that consolidates compliance by undermining collective agency.

Despite these systemic pressures, practitioner narratives reveal persistent ethical and civic commitments enacted through reflective, situated adaptation. Educators embed ethical integrity and learner-centred priorities within institutional requirements that often seem antithetical to those aims. These acts, while often individualised, constitute a pattern of micro-resistance that sustains fragments of civic professionalism. Practitioners like Sarah and Nikki consistently found ways to humanise compliance tasks, embedding moments of trust and civic engagement within data-focused regimes. This recursive interplay between fragmentation, precarity, and bounded agency forms the conceptual backdrop to the Cross-Theory Dialogue that follows.

5.4.3 CTD: Fragmented Identity, Hegemonic Reordering, and Situated Resistance

This Cross-Theory Dialogue places the GCF concepts of fragmentation, hegemony, and situated resistance into generative tension. These concepts help interpret how professional identity has been strategically destabilised under neoliberal education governance, and how bounded agency nonetheless persists through adaptive and ethical improvisation. This dialogue extends earlier CTDs by clarifying how professional dislocation operates not only as a by-product of performativity but as a hegemonically useful form of governance. It also builds on the recursive theme of *practising from the edge* by locating that practice within a field of constrained possibility rather than autonomous resistance.

As established in Sections 5.4.1–5.4.2, fragmentation manifests structurally (through deregulation, casualisation, and shifting role expectations) and affectively (through disorientation, loss of meaning, and role ambiguity). Practitioners articulate their professional identity not only through shared norms but also through contested terrain, balancing learner commitment against audit, job insecurity against vocation, or pedagogical values against bureaucratic forms. The fragmentation is not random. Rather, as Evetts (2011) and Ball (2012) suggest, it is a product of sustained policy interventions that replace collective standards with individualised performative metrics. Within the GCF, fragmentation functions as a system-level and subject-level disruption of coherence, weakening the foundation for a shared professional culture while intensifying accountability at the individual level.

Within the GCF, hegemony describes the institutionalisation of dominant norms as taken-for-granted common sense. In this context, the performative logic of New Public Management (NPM) becomes hegemonic by embedding economic rationality within the criteria of professional legitimacy. Metrics such as retention, attendance, and value-added scores are no longer external impositions but internalised expectations. Filippini (2017) and Mayo (2014) argue that such

hegemonic processes operate through normative saturation rather than explicit coercion: professional identity is redefined through daily practices of compliance that appear pragmatic, necessary, or inevitable.

This is evident in the way managers such as Grace (Section 5.3) speak of 'evidence' and 'funding' as justifications for compliance, even as they acknowledge the erosion of core values. Practitioners like Thea express discomfort with enforcing accountability frameworks yet continue to do so, as well as continue to teach future teachers within this same restrictive framework. Here, hegemony is not simply ideological but procedural: the dismantling of the professional body and the normalisation of standardisation both serve to make fragmentation appear as a natural feature of professional life.

Despite this hegemonic saturation, resistance persists- not as direct opposition, but as *situated, micro-level*, and often affectively driven improvisation. Brookfield's (2005) conception of reflective practice under constraint and Duckworth and Smith's (2019) notion of adaptive professionalism both capture how educators in their studies insert civic and relational values into performative spaces. Examples such as Nikki's use of learner stories or Anne's prioritisation of pastoral care reveal that ethical commitments are not extinguished but recontextualised. These acts are not marginal embellishments. They are embedded ethical orientations that inform how practitioners navigate role fragmentation and identity threat.

When read together, fragmentation, hegemony, and situated resistance reveal a professional terrain marked by dissonance and navigation. Fragmentation destabilises shared identity. Hegemony reorganises this dislocation into functional compliance. Situated resistance carves provisional spaces for ethical agency within that reordering. This dynamic does not result in systemic transformation, but neither is it wholly subsumed. Instead, professional identity is continually reconstituted through recursive acts of adaptation, ethical reflection, and relational insistence.

This CTD, therefore, extends the agential arc developed in Chapter 5 by refining the conditions under which practising from the edge becomes visible: not so much as dissent, but as continuous negotiation within hegemonically saturated and structurally fragmented institutions. The following section explores how this negotiation continues in response to marketisation pressures and the shifting civic–economic nexus.

5.5: Navigating Marketisation: Ethical Praxis, Resistance, and Compliance

Chapter 4 outlined how NPM and broader neoliberal restructuring reshaped the institutional and pedagogical logics of adult education, compelling practitioners to navigate a terrain increasingly defined by economised metrics. In earlier themes, this chapter connected those shifts to practitioners' experiences of identity fragmentation and precarious employment. This theme develops those insights further by exploring how practitioners negotiate the embedded tensions between structural compliance and pedagogical values. It traces strategies ranging from pragmatic accommodation to ethically inflected resistance- what this thesis conceptualises as practising from the edge (Brookfield, 1995).

While neoliberal reforms have rendered adult education increasingly responsive to market imperatives, the response from practitioners is not simply one of capitulation. Instead, many engage in situated, often tacit, recalibrations of practice that reflect an ongoing ethical orientation toward learners. These actions do not outright reject NPM frameworks, nor do they wholly endorse them. Instead, they reflect recursive negotiations through which practitioners modulate, reinterpret, and at times subtly subvert institutional expectations to preserve the pedagogical values that remain central to their professional ethos. Ball (2012) characterises this as a form of ethical negotiation within performative regimes, while Clarke and Newman (1997) highlight the contradictory demands that such

regimes place on public sector professionals- a contradiction that practitioners must manage within, not resolve.

These adaptations vary across institutional settings, influenced by organisational cultures, leadership dispositions, and the relative autonomy afforded to practitioners. As such, this theme does not idealise resistance but situates it within a spectrum of ethical praxis shaped by structural constraints. The data reveal instances of curriculum adaptation, discursive reframing, and selective engagement with compliance mechanisms. These are framed here not as acts of heroism but as forms of professional survival.

Acts of resistance in this context are heterogeneous. Some practitioners insert content that exceeds qualification specifications- emphasising critical thinking, relational learning, or social relevance. Donoghue (2018) foregrounds this as a form of transformative curriculum practice that disrupts instrumentalist learning aims. Others reflect critically on managerial protocols, at times performing compliance symbolically while quietly preserving older pedagogical practices. In both cases, resistance becomes a form of ethical deliberation: a space where practitioners weigh fidelity to educational purpose against the demands of institutional viability. Mayo (2014), drawing on Gramsci, suggests that such deliberation is a form of political labour, in which pedagogues maintain civic intent even under ideological constraint.

Importantly, resistance here is not always readable as oppositional. Rather, it is often expressed through discursive or behavioural recalibrations that embed educational values within performative logics. Brookfield (1995) suggests that such acts may preserve integrity by 'practising from the edge'-remaining within systems while resisting their totalizing ambitions. Yet Filippini (2017) complicates this optimism by arguing that adaptive resistance can itself be captured by hegemonic discourse. What appears as agency may, in retrospect, reinforce the logics of flexibility and innovation prized by neoliberal regimes.

This precarious ambiguity is central to the conceptual terrain of this theme. While ethical praxis may sustain pedagogical purpose, it also operates under the shadow of passive revolution, wherein counter-hegemonic practices are absorbed into dominant frameworks. Gramsci's conception of this absorption, as interpreted by Mayo (2014), reveals the ambivalence of agency under neoliberalism: practitioners may indeed reassert civic and relational priorities within technocratic systems, but in doing so, they may inadvertently contribute to the adaptive resilience of those systems. The capacity of neoliberal governance to accommodate dissent without transformation is not a failure of resistance, but a structural feature of its hegemonic durability.

5.5.1 Ethical Praxis as Negotiation: Balancing Compliance and Resistance

Practitioners' language frequently reflects a hybrid orientation: they speak the lexicon of targets, accountability, and compliance, but inflect it with the relational vocabulary of care, purpose, and learner agency. It is in this linguistic hybridity that one begins to observe ethical praxis in action.

Sarah, a language tutor, articulates this tension:

'If you have too much accountability, you start to impact what the learners are getting from it, you know, that is where you are moving a long way away from what the learner wanted... We spend the first lesson, particularly for a brand-new class, an hour doing all the paperwork, learner welfare forms, planning their end destination even before they get started. All of those compliance and data things. Learners are sitting there going, 'I'm paying to come and learn German or French, I'm not coming to do paperwork.' So, they experience blocks... immediately, and as a professional, I try to engage them and try to explain there are valid reasons for all of these things, but not all tutors will do that... I think we have moved from pretty much no

accountability to too much accountability, and somewhere we have the balance slightly off.'

Sarah's reflections are not merely complaints. They reveal a double movement: an awareness of institutional imperatives and an effort to humanise their delivery. She bridges rather than dissolves the contradiction. Yet this very act raises a paradox: by softening the impact of compliance, such efforts may help institutional systems appear responsive without changing their core logics.

Focus Group 1 echoes this adaptive ambivalence. Practitioners reflect on the disconnect between state-mandated narratives and learners' lived experiences:

'Learners see through it, don't they? We are imposing narrative... You have to find a different way to convince them.' (Focus Group 1 transcript, 2019).

Here, resistance takes the form of reframing, retranslating institutional scripts to align with pedagogical aims. In Focus Group 2, another practitioner reinterprets functional skills delivery:

'This maths teacher says it's problem-solving, I just play games... whereas others say, 'get it done so you don't have to do it anymore,' which is (just) demotivating.' (Focus Group 2 transcript, 2019).

These examples do not signify evasion. They embody ethical agency; contextual judgement exercised within constraint. Yet, as previously noted, their ambiguity is politically consequential. When organisations absorb such adaptations, they risk misreading ethical negotiation as evidence of system flexibility, thereby muting calls for deeper reform.

Grace, a manager, exemplifies how ethical praxis can persist even within leadership roles:

'The first session is full of paperwork... Individual Learning Plans, British Values, Prevent...but I use it as an opportunity to really personally engage

the learners... to assess if they are on the right course and get to know them.'

Grace does not reject compliance, but she reconfigures it. What appears to be a bureaucratic obligation becomes a moment of relational assessment. This is neither pure resistance nor acquiescence; it is a situated recalibration, expressive of the ambivalence that defines ethical praxis under neoliberal governance.

Compliance as Strategic Resistance

Practitioners' discourse often overlays performative compliance with affective commitment. Words such as '*support*', '*care*', and '*connection*' signal an alternative value schema coexisting within NPM regimes. Compliance becomes a site of contestation; simultaneously enabling institutional navigation and sustaining pedagogical ethics.

In Focus Group 3, one practitioner challenges mandated phonics approaches:

'Just because the system dictates that we use certain phonics methods does not mean it's going to work for adults... we have to engage critically and see how it really applies.' (Focus Group transcript, 2019).

This is not outright defiance but reflective adaptation. Practitioners maintain system alignment while asserting the contextual limitations of its dictates. This mirrors Glenda's reconfiguration of ILPs:

'I said, 'Okay, I'll do this, but for higher levels.' I pushed back on it for lower levels because it would stress them out more than it would benefit them. So I decided that I would only do it for the higher learners because they could handle it better, but for the beginners, I explained to the management that it just wasn't feasible, and they agreed.'

Such narratives exemplify *practising from the edge*: an approach that neither romanticises resistance nor underplays constraint. It emphasises ethical discernment within the bounds of professional discretion.

Evolving Praxis Under NPM

Practitioner agency under neoliberalism is not static; it evolves. It reconstitutes itself in response to shifting institutional logics, policy scripts, and lived pedagogical dilemmas. Sarah observes:

'It's just about targets... it's not about teaching anymore... I still think you could make it a good fun experience depending on who you are and who your group is and there is always there that individualism a teacher brings. There will also always be some that just come in working on stuff hand it in... (but) where's the interaction? Where's the teaching? Where's the... the sense of community?'

These acts are not overtly oppositional, but they are not neutral. They are gestures of ethical continuity; small and deliberate interventions that sustain professional meaning within economised systems.

Such accounts resist simplistic binaries. Instead, they point to an evolving praxis that is recursive, context-sensitive, and grounded in professional ethics. Practising from the edge, in this frame, is less a tactic than a stance: a sustained orientation toward civic, dialogic, and learner-centred purpose, enacted within the contradictions of neoliberal governance.

5.5.2 Theoretical Framing: Ethical Praxis, Strategic Compliance, and the Dynamics of Resistance

Ethical Praxis as Situated Adaptation

Practitioners' engagement with neoliberal governance regimes is best theorised through the lens of ethical praxis: situated, reflective action aimed at sustaining pedagogical purpose within structurally constrained environments. Brookfield (1995) frames critical reflection as inherently political, a tool through which educators expose the ideological content of managerial demands and respond with integrity. Participant narratives, such as those of Sarah and Grace, demonstrate the relevance of this framing through their efforts to humanise bureaucratic processes. These are not mere adaptations but ethical manoeuvres that reinterpret institutional tasks through relational and learner-centred logics.

Biesta (2006) similarly insists on preserving subjectification within education, even as qualification and socialisation functions dominate. His call to protect space for the formation of autonomous learners resonates with practitioner strategies that use compliance mechanisms, such as Individual Learning Plans (ILPs), to foster voice and agency. Yet Cherryholmes (1999) reminds us that such agency is always entangled: shaped by and shaping the very systems it seeks to resist. Ethical praxis is not exercised in a vacuum but forged in the midst of constraint, ambiguity, and institutional surveillance.

Recent contributions, such as Stevenson (2024), extend this logic by positioning educators as 'organic intellectuals' whose practice enacts ideological contestation. For Stevenson, authentic educational leadership requires a commitment to collective democratic agency, not merely individualised ethics. This argument reframes ethical praxis as a form of political labour, one that both reflects and reshapes the structural terrain of neoliberal education.

Strategic Compliance and the Risk of Co-option

While ethical praxis may embody subtle resistance, it also carries the risk of assimilation. Filippini (2017) draws on Gramsci to argue that hegemonic systems maintain dominance by incorporating and neutralising counter-hegemonic impulses. Practitioners who creatively reinterpret compliance demands may improve learner experience, but they may also inadvertently legitimise the very regimes they oppose. This dynamic is evident in narratives like Grace's, where bureaucratic tasks are transformed into pedagogical encounters —acts of care that institutions may reframe as evidence of policy success.

Morton (2007) similarly warns that resistance lacking structural critique is easily co-opted. Donoghue (2018) extends this argument, suggesting that managerial discourses often present adaptive teaching strategies as markers of innovation, thereby masking their origins in pedagogical resistance. Here, the system is not challenged but fortified.

This risk underscores Stevenson's critique of 'new professionalism,' where performative frameworks redefine educational practice through technocratic criteria. Stevenson (2015) emphasises the role of collective autonomy and union-based mobilisation. More recently, Stevenson (2024) deepens this position through a Gramscian analysis of leadership, arguing that while ethical praxis may resist, only organised infrastructures can effectively challenge systemic hegemony. Instead, he advocates for 'democratic professionalism,' which is rooted in collegiality and collective agency, particularly through trade union engagement. This shift- from adaptation to collective mobilisation- marks a key theoretical distinction: ethical praxis alone may resist, but only organised infrastructures can challenge systemic hegemony.

Limits and Potentials of Relational Resistance

The Gramscian concept of the war of position provides a framework for interpreting practitioners' dispersed acts of resistance. Practitioners embed civic

and relational commitments into compliance-driven settings, enacting slow, accumulative challenge to neoliberal norms. As Mayo (2014) argues, such practices, when networked and reflexively cultivated, may constitute the groundwork for counter-hegemonic formations.

Yet, Complexity Theory, particularly as articulated by Boulton *et al.* (2015), introduces critical caution. Systems governed by Complexity do not respond predictably. Micro-resistances may catalyse emergence, but they may also dissipate or be absorbed. The transformative potential of ethical praxis is contingent and fragile, and its impact depends on accumulation, solidarity, and institutional permeability.

Therefore, ethical praxis, strategic compliance, and relational resistance must be theorised as recursive, ethically fraught negotiations. They do not offer a linear path to transformation; nevertheless, they illuminate how pedagogical integrity endures under duress. This conceptual framing sets the stage for the final Cross-Theory Dialogue, where the interplay between good sense, reflective agency, and emergent counter-hegemony is explored.

5.5.3 CTD Ethical Praxis: A Theoretical Analysis

This Cross-Theory Dialogue examines the interaction of good sense, practising from the edge, and organic intellectualism, in relation to hegemony, path dependence, and emergence. Together, these concepts illuminate how practitioners navigate- and potentially transform- neoliberal educational structures.

Practitioners' good sense, in Gramscian terms, enables them to identify the contradictions embedded in institutional discourse. Sarah's dismissal of performative teaching for inspections- 'It's just about targets, just about data'- reveals an intuitive grasp of the ideological framing of audit culture. Her decision to engage students in poetry and discussion instead exemplifies practising from the edge (Brookfield, 1995): a refusal to collapse pedagogy into compliance.

Sarah's approach models what Schön (1983) and Brookfield (1995) frame as critically reflective practice. It also aligns with Stevenson's (2024) depiction of educators as organic intellectuals. Her actions, while local and modest, represent a war of position: a gradual, values-based contestation of neoliberal norms.

Nikki's account introduces the concept of strategic compliance. She enacts required practices- British Values, Prevent, but reframes them around learner autonomy. Her statement, 'You wonder if you're teaching for them or for the numbers,' signals ethical discomfort, but also perceptive agency. Filippini (2017) suggests that this duality marks her practice as both resistant and vulnerable to co-option. By presenting compliance in humanised terms, Nikki potentially stabilises the system's legitimacy even as she softens its impact.

Joe's narrative introduces further Complexity. As a manager, he describes a workplace culture of tacitly accepting data manipulation: '*These pressures chip away at our morals... it's okay if we fudge the system.*' This blurs the boundary between ethical adaptation and complicity. Morton's (2007) framework of passive revolution clarifies how such rationalisations risk transforming good sense into consent.

The CTD reveals ethical praxis as neither fixed nor uniformly emancipatory. Rather, it unfolds within a recursive interplay of values, strategy, and institutional constraint. Path dependence explains how past governance arrangements limit the scope of professional agency. Yet emergence, as theorised by Boulton *et al.* (2015), invites attention to the ways in which local acts, when shared, reinforced, and made visible, can become vectors of systemic transformation.

In this framing, good sense is not merely critical perception but a precondition for ethical action. Practising from the edge represents its tactical expression. Organic intellectualism connects these practices to broader ideological struggle. The CTD thus reframes ethical praxis as a generative space of tension, where pedagogy, power, and resistance intersect.

5.6 Recent Developments and Practitioner Responses

This final section contextualises the practitioner narratives and adaptive strategies discussed throughout Chapter 5 by examining recent structural developments that have reshaped the adult education landscape. Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and successive policy reforms- particularly funding realignments and the implementation of Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) -have intensified an already precarious governance environment. These developments have continued to redefine institutional conditions and policy logics, further constraining the possibilities for civic pedagogies and ethical professionalism.

5.6.1 Brexit and Its Immediate Impact on Adult Education

The withdrawal of European Social Fund (ESF) support following Brexit marked a significant reduction in financial resources for community-based adult education, continuing a long-term trend of deprioritising non-skills-based provision. ESF funding had previously enabled providers to sustain educational programmes targeting long-term unemployment, youth engagement, and community learning. These initiatives, although often excluded from narrow economic metrics, align with a civic tradition of adult education articulated in the Faure Report (1972) and reaffirmed by the University Association for Lifelong Learning (2017), which continues to advocate for education as a democratic and public good.

In response to the loss of ESF investment, the UK government introduced the Multiply programme in 2022 as part of its new domestic funding framework, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), which was positioned as the formal replacement for the European Structural and Investment Funds. Multiply received £560 million over three years and focused exclusively on improving adult numeracy. However, this narrow remit bypassed broader forms of adult learning, particularly in areas such as digital literacy, civic engagement, and

community development. Its emphasis on measurable functional skills reflected a significant contraction in scope, and the programme was scheduled to end in March 2025. The UKSPF's broader allocations have also been criticised for falling short of the ESF's previous funding levels, raising concerns about the adequacy and sustainability of support for community-based adult education. With no confirmed successor to Multiply, the continuity of such provision remains uncertain.

According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, real-terms spending on adult education fell by 38% between 2010 and 2022, with classroom-based learning declining by 50% over the same period. Provision for adults working at Level 2 or below experienced the sharpest reductions, reflecting a policy emphasis on apprenticeships and in-work training.

The Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL), a UK-based membership organisation representing university adult education providers, holds no formal policy authority. However, its interventions serve as a discursive counterweight to prevailing instrumentalist logics. Though structurally distinct from the nineteenth-century university extension movement, UALL may be viewed as a contemporary inheritor of that civic ethos. Both have sought to position universities as agents of public engagement and critical learning, despite operating in fundamentally different political economies. In this context, UALL's advocacy reflects the ongoing struggle to preserve a tradition of adult education grounded in citizenship, collective advancement, and democratic participation.

As shown in Chapters 4.4 and 4.5, these civic framings were progressively recoded in neoliberal discourse as employability strategies. The loss of ESF and the narrowing scope of its replacement illustrate the systemic displacement of adult education from its civic and democratic roots.

5.6.2 The COVID-19 Pandemic and Digital Transformation

The pandemic rapidly accelerated the digitalisation of adult education. Providers adopted online platforms at scale, yet this shift revealed longstanding disparities in infrastructure and digital literacy, particularly in disadvantaged areas (Boeren, Roumell & Roessger, 2020). These disparities were symptomatic of prior underinvestment and policy environments shaped by efficiency logics (Hodgson & Spours, 2018).

Historically, adult education initiatives, such as Open Learn and community learning schemes, have sought to widen participation. However, digital expansion in the 1990s often benefited better-resourced learners. By 2020, this unevenness had become entrenched. During lockdowns, vulnerable learners were doubly marginalised; excluded from face-to-face learning and unable to access or navigate digital provision due to a lack of digital tools, ability, and confidence.

Practitioners were central to navigating this upheaval. Many assumed additional roles in digital support and emotional care, often without adequate resources.

As one FE manager noted: *‘The pandemic really laid bare the gaps. Suddenly, it wasn’t just about teaching anymore...navigating technology, supporting learners’ emotional well-being, and...doing it all under constant uncertainty’* (Andy, post-interview reflection, 2024).

Remote learning has largely persisted, but unresolved tensions remain.

Practitioners report that the relational aspects of learning have been eroded, and that economic imperatives increasingly drive pedagogical decisions, which favour more financially efficient online learning with corresponding economies of scale over face-to-face learning, which costs more per student. Williamson, Eynon & Potter (2020) describe this shift as ‘platform governance’; a form of provision shaped by commercial infrastructures and algorithmic logic. Far from addressing systemic inequality, the digital turn risks amplifying exclusion.

5.6.3 Policy Reforms and Their Long-Term Impact

Recent policy initiatives have consolidated employer-led models of adult education. The devolution of the Adult Education Budget to Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) between 2015 and 2019 and the introduction of LSIPs reflect an emphasis on economic responsiveness and labour market alignment. Keep (2021b) argues that such devolution is often rhetorical, with central government retaining strategic control through funding conditions and performance metrics.

The Education Select Committee (2020) called for a ‘lifelong learning revolution’ based on civic participation and social inclusion, urging renewed investment in community learning. However, such proposals remained aspirational, offering rhetorical contrast to the dominant policy logics traced throughout this thesis. The 2021 *Skills for Jobs* White Paper did not initiate but consolidated a policy trajectory that reframed adult education around economic productivity. This trajectory is particularly evident in regional variation: while some Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) have sought to retain civic aims, others adopt narrowly economised interpretations. Hodgson and Spours (2018) argue that decentralisation under neoliberal governance often reinforces rather than mitigates regional inequalities, especially where funding mechanisms restrict access to civic or basic education. The introduction of Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) further exemplifies this trend. Although framed as tools for local responsiveness, LSIPs are primarily driven by employer-defined priorities, with limited consideration of learner needs or democratic participation. Their statutory function is to determine the strategic direction of local post-16 technical provision, embedding labour market metrics as the organising principle for curriculum design. As noted in Chapter 4.10.1, this development extends the ‘consolidated metric infrastructure’ introduced by the Further and Higher Education Act (1992).

This trajectory builds on earlier policy artefacts, such as *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances* (DfES, 2006), which prioritised

employability while retaining only rhetorical reference to inclusion. As discussed in Chapter 4, these reforms gradually displaced LEA oversight in favour of national performance oversight, culminating in the centralisation now represented by the planned closure of the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) in 2025.

This represents what may be termed 'layered marketisation': decentralisation framed as local empowerment, but realised through centralised instruments like LSIPs, which narrow educational aims to those aligned with immediate market relevance. The broader consequence has been the marginalisation of community-based, civic learning, particularly in historically rooted programmes such as the Right to Read campaign and initiatives developed through the Adult Basic Education and Skills for Life Strategy.

The narrowing of access to civic education, especially in disadvantaged areas, mirrors earlier effects of NPM reforms. Ball (2012) contends that such reforms embed inequality by naturalising performativity as commonsense, displacing broader educational purposes with technocratic imperatives.

5.7 Conclusion: Navigating Shame, Survival and Situated Praxis under Late Neoliberalism

This chapter has traced the intensifying pressures on adult education practitioners across successive phases of neoliberal reform, culminating in the technocratic recalibration of sector purpose in the post-2017 period. The introduction of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) exemplifies a governance imaginary that privileges employer voice, instrumental outcomes, and policy-led accountability. Framed as solutions to spatial inequalities and productivity deficits, these initiatives operationalise a narrow economic utilitarianism that largely excludes practitioner insight, student diversity, and the civic purposes of education. For many educators, the result is a professional

terrain structured by ontological insecurity and performative metrics, in which ethical agency is simultaneously constrained and demanded.

Across the testimonies presented in this chapter, these dynamics emerge not as abstract or distant forces but as recurring ethical and affective tensions.

Practitioners described navigating audit cultures that displaced relational teaching, experiencing institutional surveillance as a source of constant professional anxiety, and witnessing the erosion of classroom autonomy. Yet they also found ways to adapt bureaucratic demands into moments of connection, reframing compliance requirements in the service of pedagogical care. These responses resonate strongly with the leadership commentaries offered by Robin Webber-Jones and Lisa Capper. Where Webber-Jones (2024) invokes Dewey to advocate for colleges as civic spaces of democratic life, and Capper (2024) calls for institutional alignment with local social cohesion, both reinforce the civic values already embedded in practitioner adaptations. Although articulated from formal leadership positions, these commentaries do not simply prescribe civic purpose from above. Rather, they reflect and amplify practices long embedded within the moral and relational grammar of everyday teaching.

In doing so, these leaders amplify a practitioner-led vision that policy discourse has largely marginalised. The statements made by tutors and managers across this research, including frustration with surveillance, emotional exhaustion from accountability pressures, and deliberate ethical improvisation to support learners, are mirrored in recent sector publications. Capper's emphasis on place-based responsiveness directly reflects practitioner accounts of resisting standardisation by recontextualising practice around learner circumstances. Webber-Jones' framing of democracy as lived educational practice aligns with narratives that describe relational teaching as the last remaining site of civic purpose within the system. These continuities affirm that what is currently positioned as strategic vision in policy-facing texts has, in fact, been sustained in practice by educators working under duress.

The emotional weight of these conditions is further illuminated by FETL's (2020) *Voices of the Shamed* report, which names and situates the affective cost of performativity regimes. Experiences of shame, reputational vulnerability, and moral injury described by participants in this study are not isolated anecdotes. They are emblematic of a system-wide condition. These affective registers demand interpretation not as individual failings but as institutional effects. As FETL argues, such experiences signal a misalignment between system metrics and educational purpose. This misalignment, already noted in the practitioner testimonies explored earlier in the chapter, becomes increasingly visible when placed in dialogue with published commentaries that seek to reassert civic and humanistic values.

In this light, agency must be understood as relational and situated rather than oppositional. The adaptations described —selective compliance, pedagogical discretion, informal collaboration —reveal a recursive negotiation of purpose under constraint. These practices are ethically charged not because they oppose the system in absolute terms but because they carve out spaces within it in which civic values endure. The civic orientations described by practitioners are not nostalgic residues; they are active refusals to internalise market logics as normative. Such adaptations reflect the core propositions of this thesis: that practitioner agency is recursive, contextual, and expressed through situated acts of ethical improvisation.

The Centenary Commission on Adult Education (2019) reinforces this argument not only by recovering the foundational civic aims of adult education but by asserting their continued necessity in contemporary governance. Its reaffirmation of adult learning as 'a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship' offers a rare counterpoint to prevailing policy discourse. While largely sidelined in national reforms, the Commission's recommendations remain aligned with the everyday commitments voiced by practitioners in this study. In this sense, the Commission does not provide an external blueprint to be imposed

on practice; it articulates a vision that educators have, against considerable odds, continued to live out over the past 120 years.

This counterfoil matters. It affirms that despite the psychic and institutional toll of managerialist reform, the civic imaginary has not vanished from the sector. Practitioners continue to make space for it, however incrementally. The practices described in this chapter, quietly reframing compliance, building solidarity through relational labour, and resisting shame through pedagogical care, are not vestiges of a past era. They are the living infrastructure of a professional culture that remains oriented towards social justice, mutuality, and democratic learning. The Centenary Commission's vision gives renewed language to these practices, suggesting that they are foundational to any educational future worth pursuing.

This conclusion does not idealise resilience. It acknowledges the toll that such labour exacts and the contradictions within which it is sustained. Yet the civic and relational commitments narrated here remain critical. They are not epilogues to policy but the materials from which alternative futures may yet be constructed. This enduring infrastructure of civic professionalism remains not only a repository of educational memory but a foundation upon which more democratic futures may yet be configured.

Chapter 6: From Jewel to Commodity?

6.0 Introduction

Building directly on the comparative analysis of governance imaginaries in Chapter 4, particularly the ideological displacement traced between the 1919 and 1973 Reports, this final chapter synthesises the thesis's core findings and reframes them within a contemporary theoretical and conceptual landscape. Where Chapter 4 mapped structural and discursive transformations in adult education governance, and Chapter 5 examined how these shifts have been interpreted and negotiated in practice, this chapter draws the thesis together through the lens of the GCF, illuminating how these dynamics continue to shape the sector in the present day.

As highlighted in the opening chapter, adult education in England was defined as a 'permanent national necessity' (Ministry of Reconstruction, 1919, p. 5), at its most visionary, grounded in ideals of civic participation, personal development, and social justice. Throughout much of the twentieth century, it promoted liberal, vocational, and civic learning, upholding a broad ethical commitment to inclusion, community engagement, and democratic renewal.

However, as this thesis traces, by 2022, adult education had undergone a profound ideological transformation. The shift from a pluralistic civic mission to a market-aligned sector reflected a wholesale redefinition of educational value, enacted through financial levers. Neoliberal logics, operationalised through New Public Management (NPM), reshaped adult education into a field governed by metrics and accountability frameworks. The 2022 article 'The Dismantling of a Sector: Adult Education in Crisis' captured this reorientation with stark clarity, illustrating not only the erosion of public investment but the structural marginalisation of civic purpose under a commodified policy regime.

This thesis has interrogated this timeframe by applying the GCF to analyse the interplay between historical legacies, structural reforms, discursive shifts, and practitioner agency. Rather than narrating a simple decline, it has exposed a recursive governance dynamic in which economistic pressures co-evolve alongside acts of ethical resistance and pedagogical adaptation within the stakeholders in the sector.

Midgley's four domains of Complexity continue to provide the organising framework for concluding this synthesis. Through them, we facilitate a nuanced understanding of adult education as a multifaceted, recursive, and ideologically complex field. This chapter revisits the core conceptual dialogues that have animated the thesis, offering a Complexity-informed interpretation of the present condition of adult education. It addresses the research questions, articulates the thesis's contributions, and reflects on future directions for policy and practice.

6.1 Resolving the Research Questions

The three research questions that guided this thesis are now revisited in light of the cumulative findings presented across Chapters 4 to 6. Rather than restating earlier analysis, the following responses integrate structural, historical, and agentive insights into a final synthesis that demonstrates how the GCF offers a coherent lens through which to interpret the redefinition of adult education in England as both a systemic process and a lived ethical struggle.

Research Question 1: How have historical and contemporary socio-political factors and ideologies shaped the policies and purposes of adult education in England, and what tensions emerge from these influences?

This thesis has demonstrated that adult education in England is characterised by a persistent and layered tension between the civil values rooted in its foundational mission and the systemic encroachments of neoliberalism. Rather than viewing these influences as sequential or oppositional, the analysis has revealed how civic and economistic logics coexist, clash, and recombine.

Historical commitments to equity, participation, and collective well-being, as codified in the 1919 Final Report, continue to inform educational practices, even as they are reframed through market imperatives.

These tensions become particularly visible in periods of disruption, such as the aftermath of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, which momentarily re-centred community, care, and social cohesion. Such events underscore the fragility of neoliberal policy scaffolding and the resilience of civil values embedded in institutional memory and professional practice. The GCF enables a reading of these moments as sites of contingent rearticulation, where legacy ideals resurface not despite systemic constraints but through them. Path dependence emerges then as a mechanism of ethical recursion: an ongoing reactivation of civic purpose in the face of ideological closure.

Research Question 2: How has the emergence of New Public Management (NPM) ideologies transformed the structures, practices, and values within the adult education sector in England?

New Public Management has restructured the sector's priorities through logics of efficiency, quantification, and output accountability. Yet the thesis has shown that its effects are not uniformly assimilative. Instead, NPM is absorbed and reinterpreted in diverse institutional contexts, producing divergent organisational responses. Institutions such as HOLEX and the WEA have selectively aligned with performative requirements while simultaneously embedding civic aims—using economistic structures to sustain learner-centred provision, community outreach, and democratic engagement.

The GCF reveals how these tensions are structurally recursive. Social Complexity is evident in the ways institutional cultures mediate external pressures, curating ethical intent within constraints. The fragmentation introduced by NPM has paradoxically created pockets of organisational autonomy, particularly in under-regulated or residual spaces, where relational pedagogies and democratic aims persist. By positioning NPM not as a monolith

but as a field of negotiation, the thesis identifies it as both a limiting force and a terrain of contestation.

Research Question 3: How have neoliberal reforms affected the professional identities and agency of adult education practitioners in England, and what changes have occurred in practices as a result?

Neoliberal reform has recast professional identity through the lens of surveillance, compliance, and individual responsibility. Nevertheless, the thesis demonstrates that practitioner agency has not been extinguished, but rather reconfigured. Through acts of situated resistance — often subtle, collective, and relational — educators reassert civic and ethical purposes within marketised environments. These practices, explored in depth in Chapter 5, are not residual but generative: they constitute a form of embedded critique that reshapes meaning from within the system.

By conceptualising agency as a recursive ‘war of position,’ the thesis foregrounds how subjectivity itself becomes a site of ideological struggle. Relational professionalism, ethical improvisation, and collaborative networks constitute not only coping mechanisms but also alternative governance logics enacted at the practitioner level. These findings reframe resistance as emergent, distributed, and historically informed. The GCF foregrounds agency as a process of continual negotiation within systemic constraints, locating hope in the small openings and tensions that persist within neoliberal contradictions.

The following sections apply the Grounded Complexity Framework to synthesise these findings across natural, organisational, and subjective dimensions. Rather than revisit earlier analyses, they distil the patterned logics by which governance structures, institutional cultures, and professional agency have evolved together.

6.2 Civil Values in Contested Terrain: Hegemony, Emergence, and Ethical Praxis in the GCF Domains

This section synthesises key theoretical strands explored throughout the thesis, including hegemony, path dependence, emergence, war of position, commonsense, praxis, and organic intellectuals, to provide a comprehensive reading of the sector's ideological evolution. These concepts are not presented as static definitions but are developed recursively throughout the thesis within what can be best understood as an *entangled conceptual framework*. Introduced through distinct theoretical traditions in Chapters 1 and 2, they are taken up interpretively across Chapters 4 to 6, allowing their meanings to evolve in response to historical analysis and practitioner testimony. Their interactions generate conceptual arcs that weave through the Grounded Complexity Framework's four domains.

For instance, the trajectory from *professionalism* to *ethical praxis* and ultimately *relational ethics* (2.6.3 → 5.3.2, 5.5.2, 6.5) illuminates how agency is enacted through situated moral negotiation under constraint. Similarly, the arc from *emergence* to *historic bloc* to *war of position* (2.4.1 → 2.7.2 → CTDs 4.3.4, 4.6.5, 5.5.3) frames resistance as an iterative, strategically embedded process within civil society.

This entangled conceptual method reflects the recursive nature of governance in adult education, where structural constraint, institutional logic, and professional agency continually reconfigure one another. The analysis that follows traces a cumulative arc of change, showing how adult education has unfolded through distinct phases, initial conditions, institutional tipping points, and moments of systemic reorganisation, while remaining shaped by feedback, resistance, and historical layering.

This trajectory highlights the sector's recursive nature and its ongoing reconfiguration in response to intersecting pressures of Complexity, ethics, and

power. The tension between market-driven reform and civic commitment is not cast in binary terms but as a fluctuating configuration through which governance, organisational practice, and professional agency remain open to rearticulation. This configuration is examined through the three domains of Natural, Social, and Subjective Complexity, which have structured the thesis's analysis from 1903 to 2022.

Appendix 7 presents a cross-domain reference table tracing the ideological evolution of adult education across five key phases. It summarises changes in governance architecture, organisational dynamics, and practitioner experience, offering a conceptual map based on the analysis completed in Chapters 4 and 5.

6.3 Natural Domain: From Civic Foundations to Audit Metrics

The natural domain in Midgley's schema maps the architecture of adult education, including its statutes, funding flows, policy instruments, technological changes, and macroeconomic shocks. Over the long view from 1903 to 2022, this architecture reveals a path-dependent trajectory: civic-liberal foundations give way to Keynesian expansion, then tip at key crises (early 1980s, early 1990s, post-2008) into progressively tighter market metrics. Each crisis inserts new feedback loops, yet neoliberal consolidation is partial. Earlier layers, such as funding processes, reliance on community institutes, and rhetorical tropes like 'lifelong learning', are rarely fully erased. Instead, they become the materials through which alternative purposes are sustained, or policy strategies are re-legitimised. This layering supports a long war of position, in which market logics seek dominance but never achieve complete closure.

- 1903–1944: Local authorities assume responsibility for adult education but lack dedicated infrastructure; civic provision relies on local alliances, ad hoc funding, and emerging partnerships.

- 1945–mid-1970s: LEA-based funding, grant-aid, and residential colleges embed adult education in the post-war welfare state; structural coordination improves without standardisation.
- 1979–1992: Competitive commissioning and cost-efficiency logics begin to reshape governance; policymakers reframe adult education as a labour-market tool.
- 1992–2008: The FE/HE Act triggers structural reorganisation, with tariff funding, audit systems, and centralised oversight standardising provision and reducing local autonomy.
- 2008–2022: Austerity deepens financial precarity; devolved planning instruments (LSIPs, AEB) introduce new asymmetries, while civic provision fragments or survives in residual form.

Synthesis:

The Natural domain reveals a long arc of structural reorganisation shaped by policy drift, funding realignment, and crisis-led recalibration. Earlier civic infrastructures, while diminished, continue to influence system behaviour.

Tipping points mark shifts in trajectory rather than moments of disjuncture. Civic intent reappears intermittently through adaptive practices, residual provisions, and the reappropriation of rhetorical forms. These ambiguities reflect a contested architecture in which civic and economistic logics continue to cohabit uneasily.

6.4 Social Domain: Institutional Cultures, Relational Logics, and Organisational Adaptation

The Social domain concerns institutional cultures, professional associations, relational dynamics, and governance structures. It reveals how understandings of inclusion, accountability, and legitimacy are operationalised across diverse organisations and intermediary networks. These frictions constitute the organisational substrate through which governance logics take form.

Across the arc from 1903 to 2022, adult education remained structurally heterogeneous and institutionally porous. LEAs, voluntary bodies, colleges, and third-sector consortia collaborated, competed, and adapted to changing regimes. Chapter 4 traced how the field shifted from liberal-civic pluralism to Keynesian coordination and into neoliberal stratification. At each stage, organisations interpreted policy through institutional memory and relational practice.

- 1903–1944: Civic associationism underpins a pluralist landscape of voluntary and LEA-led provision, with relational trust and local legitimacy guiding coordination.
- 1945–mid-1970s: National coherence strengthens through grant-aided structures and formalised partnerships; civic purpose becomes partially embedded in state infrastructure.
- 1979–1992: Competitive funding and policy drift destabilise horizontal coordination; advisory bodies are weakened, and relational logics are displaced.
- 1992–2008: Tariff-based governance narrows organisational autonomy; collaboration persists through informal networks and consortia.
- 2008–2022: Localised commissioning and austerity introduce institutional precarity; fragmented infrastructures are partially reassembled through digital consortia and civic alliances.

Synthesis:

Social Complexity reflects a pattern of adaptive response under intensifying constraint. Organisations reinterpreted governance logics through informal cultures, strategic alliances, and civic memory. Institutional ambiguity became a space of manoeuvre, where relational ethics and civic commitments could be sustained even as formal structures aligned with market logic.

6.5 Subjective Domain: Ethical Agency, Professional Identity, and the Struggle for Meaning

The Subjective domain concerns how meaning is constructed and contested by individuals operating within complex systems. Here, the thesis demonstrates that adult educators serve as moral interpreters of governance, forming professional identities through civic, relational, and managerial rationalities that often conflict with one another.

- 1903–1944: Civic educators operate without formal status or professional identity; their work is driven by relational commitment and adaptive judgement.
- 1945–mid-1970s: some practitioners gain stability and recognition; for others it remains unstructured. The role of ‘tutor’ is framed as community-oriented and participatory.
- 1979–1992: Managerial incursions fragment professional norms; practitioners reassert civic intent through pedagogical discretion.
- 1992–2008: Bounded agency emerges; practitioners navigate surveillance, metrics, and ethical compromise.
- 2008–2022: Precarity and digitalisation intensify subjective strain; yet relational professionalism persists in counter-spaces.

Synthesis:

Subjective Complexity reframes agency as a historically shaped and ethically mediated practice. Emergent professional identity does not merely absorb policy pressures but recasts them through relational care, resistance, or improvisation. Chapter 5 illustrated how practitioners enact value not through open defiance but through situated reconfiguration. These micro-political acts sustain civic purpose within systems that increasingly marginalise it.

6.6 Meta-Level Complexity – Ideological Recursion and the Patterned Struggle for Civil Values (1903–2022)

This synthesis reframes the long arc of adult education governance through the interaction of hegemony, path dependence, emergence, commonsense, praxis, and ethical agency. These concepts, previously explored across Chapters 2, 4 and 5, are now integrated to make visible the patterned, recursive dynamics of ideological contestation.

The thesis argues that adult education has not transitioned neatly from civic to neoliberal logics, but has evolved as a field of coexistence, interpenetration, and reconfiguration. This process unfolds through a series of layered reforms, institutional interpretations, and situated professional actions.

- Path dependence functions as a condition of bounded ethical possibility. Civic infrastructures are rarely abolished. They become latent scaffolding for new policy frames. They persist across domains: Natural (funding architectures), Social (institutional logic), and Subjective (pedagogical dispositions).
- Hegemony, in Gramsci's terms, is sedimented over time through iterative alignment rather than imposed through sudden dislocation. Market rationalities gain ground via gradual consolidation, yet civic intent continues to surface in the ways organisations and practitioners reinterpret policy in practice.
- Emergence describes how counter-logics surface unexpectedly. Informal alliances, digital pedagogies, and institutional workarounds reflect a system that evolves through feedback and situated judgment.
- Common sense and good sense illustrate how dominant narratives are both internalised and contested. Practitioners recode co-opted language through reflective praxis, surfacing alternatives within the terms of compliance.

- Praxis is the recursive ethical labour of navigating contradiction. It links relational judgement to institutional adaptation, sustaining purpose through reinterpretation rather than resistance alone. Practitioners demonstrate praxis within ‘practising from the edge’.

Together, these concepts show how structure and agency co-constitute the ideological field. The GCF renders these tensions intelligible without resolving them. In this framing, adult education is not a sector in decline but a site of ongoing negotiation, in which civic values persist through adaptation, improvisation, and institutional memory.

6.7 Contributions to Knowledge and Theoretical Advancements

This thesis makes an original contribution to the field of adult education by introducing the Grounded Complexity Framework (GCF), a novel synthesis of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, Complexity Theory, and Pragmatism. The GCF enables a multi-level, relational analysis of adult education as an ideologically contested and historically layered space. It offers both a conceptual architecture and a methodological approach for examining how systemic pressures, institutional dynamics, and practitioner agency interact within shifting governance regimes.

A central contribution lies in the application of the GCF to practitioner testimony, especially in Chapter 5. Here, practitioner agency is reconceptualised as a form of emergent, relational, and ethically mediated action. This moves beyond reductive models of compliance or defiance by showing how educators adaptively rearticulate civic values through everyday negotiation with structural constraint.

The GCF extends existing theoretical work by reframing practitioner resistance as structurally entangled and systemically emergent. Whereas Ball (2012)

emphasises discursive resistance within policy enactment, and Biesta (2014, 2015) foregrounds subjectification and educational judgement as forms of professional agency, the GCF brings a Complexity-informed lens to the recursive interplay between policy, institutional culture, and ethical practice. It advances theoretical understanding of how civic intent persists under constraint, not through opposition alone, but through adaptive, relational, and contextually embedded forms of professional action.

Methodologically, the thesis operationalises the GCF through a Bricolage approach (Kincheloe, 2007), combining policy archaeology, critical discourse analysis, and narrative inquiry. This non-linear, multi-layered method reveals how neoliberal logics have been embedded, negotiated, and subverted across governance levels. The resulting analysis reveals that the commodification of adult education is incomplete and contested, characterised by embedded values and sites of generative ambiguity.

Empirically, the thesis enriches the literature by foregrounding underrepresented institutional contexts, such as community learning and adult basic skills, where civil values are actively sustained through micropolitical practices. These spaces are often excluded from policy discourse, yet the thesis demonstrates that they are key sites of ideological resilience.

This Complexity-led approach reframes adult education not as a sector in linear decline, but as a dynamic, ideological, and contested system. Path dependence is shown to operate as both a constraint and an ethical resource, preserving reformist vocabularies even within performance-driven regimes. Resistance emerges not as structural defiance, but as adaptive practice.

Finally, the thesis contributes actionable insight by aligning theoretical critique with practitioner testimony. The GCF offers a bridge between structural diagnosis and practical possibility, enabling policymakers, institutions, and educators to recognise the conditions under which civic values might be revived. In doing so, the thesis reimagines adult education as a site of ongoing civic renewal.

6.8 Actionable Recommendations

6.8.1 For Policy Makers

- **Adopt Complexity-Informed Policy Frameworks:**

Replace linear, target-based models with frameworks that recognise systemic interdependencies, contextual variation, and emergent practitioner responses. Pilot schemes should incorporate recursive feedback loops, such as adaptive evaluation cycles, allowing policies to evolve responsively in response to changing practice conditions.

- **Re-centre Civic and Democratic Values in Policy Design:**

Accountability metrics should be balanced with indicators of ethical and democratic purpose, such as broader societal impact, learner motivation, contributions to community well-being, and increased social cohesion. Inclusive consultation mechanisms must integrate practitioner perspectives into national reviews as situated, organic intellectuals.

- **Institutionalise Participatory Policymaking:**

Standing advisory boards comprising FE, community learning, and third-sector educators should play a formal role in shaping and reviewing curriculum, policy design and implementation. Their inclusion will help surface unintended consequences and foster iterative policy learning.

- **Re-establish a unified professional body for adult educators:**

The absence of a cohesive, cross-sector professional organisation has exacerbated the fragmentation and de-professionalisation of adult education. A renewed national body representing educators across FE, community learning, and third-sector provision should be empowered to articulate a shared professional voice, lobbying for civic and pedagogical priorities, and contributing to sector-wide strategy. Such a body would provide essential infrastructure for rebuilding collective identity, defending practitioner agency,

and promoting adult education as a civic good rather than a sectoral instrument.

6.8.2 For Practitioners

Practitioners negotiate structural constraint through ethical judgement and situated pedagogy in everyday practice. The following recommendations support their civic agency, relational professionalism, and adaptive capacity within policy-saturated environments.

- **Cultivate Practitioner Networks of Reflective Praxis:**

Practitioners should continue forming peer-led communities to share adaptive strategies, challenge restrictive policy frames, and co-create civic pedagogies. These networks sustain collective agency and professional integrity.

- **Reclaim Educational Language for Civic Purposes:**

Terms like ‘lifelong learning’ and ‘inclusion’ can be rearticulated through practitioner narratives and case studies that foreground democratic aims. This linguistic reframing counters managerial co-option and renews civic meaning.

6.8.3 For Education Leaders and Institutions

Leaders operate at the junction of governance and pedagogy. These recommendations outline how institutional cultures and leadership practices can foster ethical adaptation and safeguard civic purpose within increasingly complex and constrained systems.

- **Foster Ethical Leadership within Complex Systems:**

Leaders should create space for deliberative ethical praxis, embedding reflexivity and civic purpose within professional development. As shown in Chapter 5, relational ethics are crucial to navigating system tension.

- **Enable and Protect Practitioner-Led Innovation:**

Protected spaces, such as inquiry groups and critical forums, should be institutionalised to support pedagogical experimentation without sanction.

These forums legitimise adaptive responses to structural constraint.

- **Create Responsive Feedback Systems:**

Organisations should implement practitioner-led review cycles and reflective audits to assess both intended and unintended impacts of institutional policy.

Such mechanisms support responsiveness and ensure that ethical consequences are identified and addressed.

6.8.4 For Researchers

This thesis models the interaction between complexity, history, and practitioner agency across governance levels. The recommendations below suggest future directions for extending this framework and developing usable tools to support critical practice.

- **Expand Complexity-Informed Educational Research:**

Investigate how pedagogical improvisation and institutional adaptation co-evolve in response to systemic constraints. Longitudinal and participatory methods are particularly well-suited for capturing recursive emergence and resistance.

- **Develop Practitioner-Facing Frameworks for Ethical Agency:**

Build co-produced tools, such as dialogic models or reflective protocols, that enable educators to diagnose constraint, articulate civic values, and design situated responses. These frameworks should translate theory into usable practice.

6.9 Final Reflections

This thesis opened with a cautious invitation to consider the adult education sector in England through the lens of a grand narrative, not as a totalising account, but as a framework attentive to ambiguity and contradiction (Lyotard, 1984; Usher & Edwards, 1994). That narrative heuristic has now fulfilled its function. It has brought together the sector's multiple traditions, philanthropic, liberal, vocational, civic, and traced how these have been reconfigured under successive governance regimes.

The resulting analysis does not present a linear trajectory. Instead, it reveals a recursive struggle over meaning and purpose, shaped by layered policy, institutional cultures, and professional action. The GCF has helped render these dynamics intelligible. It highlighted how civil values endure not through romantic preservation, but through active reframing, situated compromise, and ethical reappropriation.

The findings reaffirm the ideological Complexity of the field. Neoliberal governance dominates policy discourse and funding mechanisms, yet organisational and practitioner-level spaces remain permeable to civic intent. Educators such as Sarah, Andy, and Grace, and institutions like HOLEX, exemplify how these values persist, even when marginalised.

These neoliberal tensions, traced across the GCF's four domains, extend beyond England. They resonate with 21st-century international trends in adult education policy, such as the OECD's and UNESCO's shifts toward employability-driven lifelong learning, as outlined in the Faure Report. Yet the thesis also identifies counter currents to this economisation. One example is the 2019 Centenary Commission on Adult Education, which explicitly revived the civic purposes articulated in the early twentieth century, framing adult education as a public good, a foundation for democracy, and a space for social solidarity. Similarly, the December 2020 UK House of Commons Education Select

Committee report, titled *A Plan for an Adult Skills and Lifelong Learning Revolution*, called for a transformative approach to adult education, emphasising the reintroduction of civic values and the cultivation of a lifelong learning culture. These initiatives reveal the persistence of alternative imaginaries in which education is still framed as a democratic right and social necessity.

In this vein, Tuckett (2024) argues that adult education must be reclaimed from the grip of productivity metrics and re-established as a space for political literacy, critical consciousness, and civic belonging. His work does not simply lament the loss of democratic intent; it demands a redirection of institutional and policy energies towards inclusive, dialogic, and socially embedded education. These claims resonate deeply with the findings of this thesis. Where this research foregrounds situated ethical agency, relational professionalism, and recursive civic adaptation, Tuckett's analysis offers a parallel call to renew adult education's public mandate as a cornerstone of democratic life. Taken together, they reassert the field's ideological significance and underscore the urgency of its societal and political recovery.

Synthesising these insights, the GCF provides a theoretical lens and practical compass. Its value lies in recognising not only how civil values are contested, but how they are recursively enacted through institutional adaptation and pedagogical negotiation. While policy continues to prioritise economic efficiency, this thesis offers evidence that such framings can be resisted, imaginatively, relationally, and reflexively.

The final reflections offered here do not mark closure but continuation. Tuckett (2024) reminds us that adult education remains 'an indispensable part of the democratic infrastructure'; not a marginal supplement, but a central condition of civic agency. This thesis has demonstrated that, although the infrastructure is eroded, it is not beyond repair. Through the collective praxis of educators, the ethical imagination of institutional leaders, and the political insistence of advocates and scholars, the civic dimension of adult education is continually

reasserted. The Grounded Complexity Framework provides a lens through which these dynamics become visible, not as remnants of a lost golden age, but as active and contingent forms of democratic renewal. In this framing, adult education is not simply a site of delivery but a domain of struggle, memory, and possibility. Its future, like its past, will be made not through policy alone but through the ethical work of those who refuse to cede the civic to the instrumental. It remains, always, in the making.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

This interview guide has been designed to explore the professional identities and values of leaders and practitioners in the FE sector in England and demonstrates the questions and question types. The guide focuses on the participants' perceptions of identity change, the influence of organisational cultures, and the impact of sector-wide developments, particularly performative cultures. The questions are designed to be indicative and flexible, allowing for exploration of emergent themes as they arise during the interview process.

Opening Statement

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research, and I appreciate you giving me some of your time. As I have shared with you on the participant information sheet, I am interested in gathering the perspectives of practitioners and leaders in the adult education Sector as they think about how the sector has changed in the past 20 years and how this has altered their working experiences and ways they think about themselves, and the values which guide their working actions and relationships.

Our conversation today will be audio-recorded to help me capture your views accurately. Once I have transcribed the audio recording, I would like to send the transcription back to you via email for review to ensure accuracy and to determine if you would like to add any additional information to what was said. The audio recording will then be destroyed.

All data collected is anonymised, including any direct quotes, but if you have any concerns, please speak with me. You will also be able to withdraw from

participation in this research until the data you contribute is analysed, at which point it will not be easy to extract your anonymised data. I need you to know that analysis will be taking place throughout the research period, so it is important to raise concerns early so that we can work together to ensure you are happy with how the research reflects your contribution. Do you have any questions?

Are you happy with me audio recording this interview?

Opening Question

So, tell me a little bit about yourself and your experience as a (Practitioner/leader/role title) in the adult education sector.

Question 2- Thinking about organisations you have worked for, how would you describe them in terms of their culture and expectations?

- In a few words, can you describe the management and teaching cultures of organisations that you currently work for?
- What sorts of expectations are there?
- What are the expectations based on?
- Have they changed over time?
- In your experience, are there different expectations and cultures in different organisations, or have expectations changed over time? Why is that, do you think?

Question 3- Thinking about your own role in these / this organisation, do you think that what you are expected to do has changed over time?

- Can you pinpoint any particular reason why the expectations for your role may have changed?

- Do you think that others in a similar role have also experienced a change in the expectations of their role? If there is a difference, why do you think this is?
- Over what period do you think changes in expectations have occurred?
- In your perception, are there any challenges or improvements in what you are expected to do in your role now compared to when you first started?
- Are there any periods you feel have been stable in the expectations for your role?

Question 4: What have been the consequences of changes in leaders' / organisational expectations for your role?

- (to you personally, to how you think about your job, your relationships with others, how you meet the aims of your organisation, etc.).

Question 5- Thinking about the FES sector, what do you think are the values of the sector / your organisation/leaders/colleagues and are they different to your own?

- Most organisations have a set of values on their mission or vision statement. What sorts of values are listed for your current or previous organisation?
- What are common values in your experience? (May need to agree definition of values.)
- If I asked you to define the top 5 values people in similar roles hold (or you hold), what would they be?
- Have they changed over time?
- Why might that be?
- Are there any values which have not changed?

- Are these different values from what you think are FE sector or organisational values?
- Do you think there are other values which should be more universally held in your sector / organisation / by colleagues?
- Are there FES sector or organisational values which you do not share? Why is that?

Question 6- Do you think that these changes in expectations discussed previously are linked to any changes to the values of the sector? If so, how?

- Can you give some examples?
- What does this mean in terms of how you perform your role?
- Do you have any examples of changes in expectations which have indicated a change in the values of the sector, the organisation or even just your team, and if so, how did you react?

Question 7- What does a 'professional identity' mean to you? / Can you give me your personal definition of it?

- In your mind, what makes up a professional identity for (your role) in FES?
- Does this align with what seems to be expected of your role and the values you are expected to hold? How so?
- Do you think this is different now than it was, say, 10 years ago? Or when you first entered the sector? Why is that?
- If you were to create a collage of a teacher/leader in FES, what elements would you include? (picture elicitation or co-production question-)
- How does your professional identity align with the 'official' versions, for instance, the Professional Standards for teachers and trainers?

- Are there areas in which you disagree with the Standards?

Question 8- Describe to me a practical, policy or organisational change you have experienced over the past year which have particularly stuck with you for whatever reason.

- Did the change continue to align with what you see as your existing role, values and professional identity
- Did the change described effect how you thought about yourself as a professional, or how you think others see you as a professional?
- Did the change create conflict or make it easier to reconcile your own values with those of your colleagues, / leaders /, organisations / and the sector?

Question 9 -Given our discussion today, how might you describe your role to a graduate who is thinking of becoming a (teacher / leader) in FE?

- What do you tell them that is important about the role, and is there anything you would warn them about?
- How do you introduce yourself to others, and if they ask you to tell them what is great about your job, what do you say? What do you say if they ask about what is challenging?

Question 10-Who do you see as key working relationships within your role/organisation? How would you characterise them? Are they positive or negative relationships?

- Tell me about a colleague who empowered you in your experience in FES. What qualities do they exhibit? What do they do which is empowering?

- Tell me about a colleague who has inhibited you in your experience in FES. What makes you say so? What do they do?
- Do you think that relationships between teachers or teachers and managers have changed in your experience? How so?
- If so, why do you think relationships may have changed, and over what time scale do you think this has happened?
- What impact has this had on how you view your role and your professional identity?
- The way you view other roles and professional identities.

Question 11- You said (XX-drawn from previous interviews) at our last interview, what would need to happen to improve (XX)

- Is there such a thing as a universal set of values for the sector, or for a profession? Is this important?
- Does it matter if the teacher/leader's professional identity is changing?
- How have changes in culture and values altered professional relationships in the sector, and is this a good thing? Is this problematic in any way, and if so, what would be the solution?
- What voices are being heard or not heard in the FES sector or in your organisation? What needs to happen to change this?

Appendix 2 : Focus Group Schedule

The focus groups are designed to collect collective insights from practitioners and leaders within the FE sector. The primary aim is to explore how professional identities have evolved, how organisational values align or conflict with personal values, and how performative cultures impact professional roles and relationships.

Introduction and Objectives

At the start of each focus group, the facilitator welcomes the participants, providing a brief overview of the research project. Participants are reminded that the session will be audio-recorded, with their prior consent, and that transcripts will be used for analysis. Confidentiality is assured, and participants are encouraged to speak freely, knowing their contributions will remain anonymous. Participants will also be introduced to the structure of the session and given a brief opportunity to introduce themselves, stating their roles in the FE sector.

Ground Rules

Ground rules are established to ensure a respectful and productive discussion environment. Participants are asked to respect differing opinions, allow others to speak without interruption, and maintain the confidentiality of what is discussed during the session. Participation is voluntary, and participants are free to refrain from answering any questions they are uncomfortable with.

Key Themes and Questions for Discussion

The discussion will be structured around five central themes, which are aligned with the research objectives outlined in the methodology:

Professional Identity Evolution: The facilitator begins by asking participants how they perceive the evolution of their professional identity in the context of the FE

sector. Participants are invited to reflect on changes in their roles, particularly in response to policy reforms under NPM. Additional questions will prompt participants to consider the impact of specific policies or organisational adjustments that have influenced their sense of professional identity.

Organisational Values and Personal Alignment: Next, the group discusses the alignment (or lack thereof) between personal values and the values promoted by their organisations. Participants are encouraged to share examples of situations where their personal values conflicted with organisational expectations and to discuss how they navigated such conflicts. The conversation may expand to explore how these conflicts affect professional satisfaction and role performance.

Impact of Performative Cultures: The facilitator will guide the discussion toward examining the impact of performative cultures, including performance metrics and accountability frameworks, on participants' work. The group is asked to reflect on how these pressures influence their daily tasks, relationships with colleagues, and overall professional identity. Participants may be asked to share specific examples of how they have responded to these performative pressures, whether through adaptation or resistance.

Collaborative Dynamics and Adaptation: Participants will then discuss how sectoral changes have influenced their relationships and collaboration with colleagues. This theme explores whether performative pressures have fostered more collaboration or competition within organisations and how these dynamics shape day-to-day interactions.

Future of Professional Identity in the FE Sector: The session will close by asking participants to look ahead and consider what changes are necessary to better support professional identities within the FE sector. They will be invited to discuss potential strategies that policymakers, leaders, and practitioners could adopt to create a more supportive environment for practitioners.

Time Management

The focus group will run for approximately 90 minutes. The introduction and setting of ground rules will take 10 minutes, followed by the main discussion, which will be divided across the five themes. Each theme will be explored for 12–15 minutes, depending on participant engagement. The session will conclude with a 10–15-minute wrap-up, where the facilitator summarises the key points and invites final thoughts from participants.

Data Collection and Transcription

All focus group sessions are audio-recorded with the consent of participants. These recordings are transcribed for analysis, with transcripts anonymised to ensure confidentiality. The transcripts form the basis of the thematic analysis conducted as part of the research.

Facilitator's Role

The facilitator's role is to guide the discussion while allowing participants to speak freely and explore the themes in-depth. Where necessary, the facilitator will ask probing questions to deepen the conversation or clarify points made by participants. The facilitator will also ensure that all participants have an opportunity to contribute, managing the flow of the discussion to prevent any individual from dominating.

Appendix 3: Schedule for Document Analysis

Objective

The objective of this document analysis was to examine key policy documents and parliamentary debates, applying the principles of Discourse Analysis, to uncover how neoliberal discourses and ideologies were embedded in policies governing adult education. The analysis focused on tracing the reorientation from state-led welfare models to market-driven educational frameworks characterised by accountability and marketisation, with an emphasis on how these policies promoted NPM. The principles of Fairclough's CDA were applied selectively, based on the relevance of each document to the research's focus on FE rather than HE in the documentation.

Document Selection

The following documents were selected due to their pivotal roles in shaping adult education policy within a neoliberal framework:

Chapter 4 Analysis Rationale:

- 1919 Final Report on Adult Education (Ministry of Reconstruction)
- 1973 Russell Report (Adult Education: A Plan for Development)

These foundational documents illustrate the evolution from educational goals driven by social justice to an emphasis on economic imperatives and market-focused reforms.

Chapter 4 Analysis Rationale:

- 1988 Education Reform Act
- 1991 White Paper: Education and Training for the 21st Century

- Hansard Debates (1991–1992) surrounding the Further and Higher Education Act 1992

These documents reflect the institutionalisation of neoliberalism and NPM, transforming adult education through discourses of efficiency, human capital, and performance metrics. Analysis of the Hansard debates provided insight into the rhetoric and political arguments that promoted these reforms, particularly concerning adult education.

Step-by-Step Schedule

1. Document Collection

Date: Various periods

Action: Key policy documents and parliamentary debates were collected from public archives, government sources, and Hansard records.

Rationale: Collecting a range of documents from different time periods allowed for a detailed examination of how neoliberal discourse evolved and became embedded in adult education policy.

2. Initial Reading and Contextualisation

Date: Various periods

Action: Each document was read thoroughly to understand its historical and political context, with notes taken on key arguments and discursive themes.

Rationale: This provided the necessary socio-political backdrop for contextualising policy discourses and understanding institutional dynamics.

3. Coding for Neoliberal Discourses

Date: January to March 2024

Action: Documents were systematically coded for neoliberal concepts such as 'marketisation,' 'efficiency,' 'human capital,' and 'accountability.' Specific attention was paid to recurring language reflecting economic imperatives and how educational reforms were framed.

Rationale: The coding process allowed for the systematic identification of neoliberal ideologies across documents, providing the foundation for consistent discourse analysis.

4. Discourse Analysis Application

Date: March to September 2024

Action: Principles from Fairclough's CDA framework were applied selectively across the key policy documents. The analysis emphasised the broader discursive formations and power dynamics rather than conducting micro-linguistic scrutiny. This approach aligned with the GCF (GCF) and Bricolage, which support the flexible adaptation of tools to suit the research's broader aims.

Focus Areas:

Language and Rhetorical Strategies: The analysis examined how educational reforms were framed through problem-solution narratives that supported neoliberal policies, particularly in relation to marketisation and accountability.

Discursive Formations and Power Dynamics: The selective use of principles of discourse analysis allowed the research to focus on how power dynamics were reflected in the discourse, revealing which voices were positioned as authoritative and how alternative or counter-discourses were marginalised.

Hegemony and Resistance: The study also explored hegemonic neoliberal discourses, identifying points of resistance or tension within the discourse, particularly in debates surrounding the Further and Higher Education Act 1992.

Rationale:

The selective application of discourse analysis principles was necessary to capture the broader socio-political dynamics without overemphasising fine-grained textual details. This approach enabled a focused analysis of how neoliberal discourse shaped adult education policy and how these policies contributed to institutional transformations, while remaining adaptable to the complexity of the sector. The principles of discourse analysis enabled a textual discursive focus to explore the shifting power relations and discursive strategies that promoted market-driven frameworks in adult education.

5. Cross-Document Thematic Comparison

Date: September 2024

Action: A thematic comparison was conducted across documents to identify common discursive strategies and evolving themes, such as the increased focus on marketisation, measurement and management over time.

Rationale: This cross-comparison illustrated the systematic integration of neoliberal ideologies in adult education policies, providing a comprehensive view of policy evolution.

6. Integration with Broader Research Themes

Date: September 2024

Action: The findings from the document analysis were integrated into the broader themes of the thesis, particularly the impact of neoliberal reforms on professional identities in adult education.

Rationale: This ensured that the document analysis contributed directly to the thesis's objectives by linking policy discourses to their effects on the everyday experiences of practitioners within the FE sector.

7. Data Management and Ethical Considerations

Data Storage: All coded data and transcripts were securely stored in line with data protection protocols. Publicly available government documents did not require anonymisation.

Ethical Considerations: The use of public government records adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring respectful and accurate representation of the material.

Appendix 4 Participant Information Sheet and Examples of Consent Forms

Emily Barrell
PGR Doctoral Student
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
15 September 2018

Faculty of Social Sciences
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

Personal Identities and Values in the Adult Education Sector **Teachers and leaders making sense of their experiences.**

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT (Form 1)

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about your experiences as a professional in the adult education sector in England. I am interested in your reflections on how your role has changed and developed over the past 20 years. I would like to understand how such a change may have affected the way you see yourself as a professional, how you connect with your colleagues, and whether, in your view, the values that underpin the work of teachers and leaders have altered over time.

This Participant Information Statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about. Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study, you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ Give permission for the reproduction of any visual or creative material created as part of this research in dissemination materials.

This research study follows the guidelines of the British Education Research Association 2018 and is designed around the principles of 1) informed consent and right to withdraw, 2) anonymity, 3) transparency and integrity, and 4) 'do no harm'.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by Emily Barrell, PGR Doctoral Student, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia.

(3) What will the study involve for me?

This study is designed like an extended conversation to ensure that you have plenty of opportunities to develop your thinking about professionalism and the adult education Sector. I would like to assure you that whatever you choose to share will be anonymised fully, including your details, the name of your institution and any possible colleagues you may mention, unless you indicate otherwise.

Interviews

The core of the study is a series of 2-3 interviews over a period of about a year. These will take place at a time and location that is most convenient for you and may, if you prefer, be done some of the time by Skype or telephone. Interviews are audio-recorded. The audio recordings will be destroyed as soon as the transcription is completed. The transcript of the interview will be shared with you via email within a few days of the interview. I want you to feel that I have captured what you have said accurately before I begin to combine it with other data, and I welcome any additional comments or requests for revision. Because of this, I would like your permission to contact you by email for the whole period of research fieldwork, as well as permission for our email conversations to be used as a data source in my research. You may withdraw this permission at any point, provide alternative email addresses, or choose to communicate by telephone or post instead.

Interviews will last between 30 and 45 minutes. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to. Questions will be focused on gathering the perspectives of teachers and leaders in the adult education Sector as they think about how the sector has changed in the past 20 years, how this has altered their working experiences, and the ways they think about themselves and the values which guide their working actions and relationships.

In addition to interviews, I would also like to offer you the opportunity to take part in other ways of discussing these topics, both with me as the researcher and with other research participants. All of these are optional.

Focus groups

During the period of this research, I would like to hold two small focus groups, which would give participants an opportunity to work together on identifying the challenges to professional identity in your working lives and how the sector expectations have changed over time. These will be held at a mutually agreed-upon venue and will last approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes. You can choose which parts of the focus group you participate in, and you will be able to see a revision of my field notes and the focus group outcome materials via email following the event. You will be able to withdraw from having your own contributions at the focus group up to the analysis of data, but not from the collaborative group outcome materials, since these are co-produced, and it would not be possible to identify your specific contribution.

Padlet

Because of the exploratory and interpretivist nature of this research, I fully expect participants may develop their thinking between interviews, and I would like to offer a collaborative 'Padlet' space. Participation in the Padlet is entirely voluntary, but it is also a rich and valuable way to capture what is important to you through the things that you select to share on the Padlet.

If you are not familiar with Padlet, it is a very easy-to-use online noticeboard that you can access from a link I will send you. You can sign up for Padlet for free using only an email address, and you can control your username so you can self-anonymise your contributions to the Padlet space. Only participants will be allowed to access this space. You will be able to collaboratively develop the idea of professional identity and values in adult education through the sharing of information you may have found through the internet, personal reflections, pictures and diary entries, and engaging with others in discussion. Padlets are fully revisable and deletable by participants. Data from Padlets will be captured periodically by the researcher to develop a rich picture of participants' thinking and the types of information essential to teachers and leaders in FES throughout the entire research period, up to November 2019.

Work Shadowing

For a very few participants, the researcher may be able to shadow them for a day in their working life to gather evidence of what it is like to be a teacher or leader in adult education and the day-to-day challenges and successes they experience. Because it is important to ensure transparency within the research process for participants, organisations and anyone with whom the researcher may come into contact, this research activity is covered by a

separate Participant Information Statement and consent form. However, if you were interested in allowing me to shadow you, please let me know.

How much of my time will the study take?

- Interviews will take between 30 and 45 minutes. This may be all that you choose to engage with.
- A Focus group will take up to 1 hour and 30 minutes
- Padlet contributions and emails will be variable depending on how much you choose to engage with it.

(4) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I've started?

Being in this study is entirely voluntary, and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researcher or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or within your organisation. If you decide to take part in the study and then change your mind later, you are free to withdraw at any time up to the point that your data has been analysed and included within the study. Because analysis will take place and continue throughout the fieldwork period, which is expected to end in October 2019, it will be important to take opportunities offered after each interview and focus group to ask any questions or request any revisions. You can do this by letting me know by email.

It is important that if you decide that you no longer wish to take part that you speak to me as early as possible so that we can discuss whether a) you want to stop participating but are happy with the data already gathered to remain in the study (with or without revisions) or b) that you want to be removed altogether from the study including all of contributions you have made. If this were the case, I would work with you to remove everything possible that has not been integrated into the analysis and delete any personal data I hold.

(5) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study.

(6) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

I hope that talking about your experiences will allow you to reflect on how you see yourself as a professional within FES and to recognise and perhaps find a voice in suggesting how the FES sector can work in the future. Your reflections may prove helpful to you if you are undertaking professional development activities such as ILM certification for leaders, or QTLS or ATS Professional Formation for teachers.

(7) What will happen to information about me that is collected during the study?

By providing your consent, you agree to me collecting personal information about you for the purposes of this research study. Your information will only be used for the purposes outlined in this Participant Information Statement unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the 1998 Data Protection Act and the University of East Anglia Research Data Management Policy (2013). Your information will be stored securely, and your identity/information will only be disclosed with your permission, except as required by law. The data gathered will be used in study findings and may appear in various dissemination forms, including but not limited to conference papers, articles and the dissertation publication, but you will not be identified in these publications unless you agree to this by using the tick box on the consent form. In this instance, data will be stored for a period of 10 years and then destroyed.

(8) What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, I will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. You can contact me at

(9) Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study, and I think it is essential that you are able to comment on study findings before publication to help me ensure that I am capturing your perspectives accurately. I will ensure that you are given opportunities to review the summary of the research findings before final conclusions are drawn, which are planned for Spring 2020. You can also tell me that you wish to receive a final research summary by providing contact details in the consent section of this information statement. You will receive this feedback after the study is finished. I will also share with you a link to the final dissertation publication due in 2021.

(10) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved under the regulations of the University of East Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee.

However, if there is a problem, please let me know. You can contact me at the address on this Participant Information Statement.

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact my supervisor, Agnieszka Bates, who is Director of PGR studies, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, agnieszka.bates@uea.ac.uk.

(11) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and bring it with you to the first interview with Emily. Please keep the letter, information Statement and the second copy of the consent form for your information.

This Information Statement is for you to keep

(page break here)

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (1st Copy to Researcher)

Personal Identities and Values in the Adult Education Sector

Teachers and leaders are making sense of their experiences.

I, [PRINT NAME] agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent, I state that:

- ✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- ✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researcher if I wished to do so.
- ✓ Permit the reproduction of any visual or creative material created as part of this research, solely or in collaboration with others, in published research dissemination materials.

✓ The researcher has answered any questions that I had about the study, and I am happy with the answers.

✓ I understand that being in this study is entirely voluntary, and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.

✓ I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise, any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.

✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be shared with others with my permission, except as required by law.

✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published, but these publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me unless I consent to being identified using the 'Yes' checkbox below.

☐ Yes, I am happy to be identified.

☐ No, I don't want to be identified. Please keep my identity anonymous.

I consent to:

Audio Recording	<input type="checkbox"/> YES	<input type="checkbox"/> NO
Review transcripts	<input type="checkbox"/> YES	<input type="checkbox"/> NO
Taking part in interviews	<input type="checkbox"/> YES	<input type="checkbox"/> NO
I am happy to be contacted by email for the duration of this research study (Oct 2019)	<input type="checkbox"/> YES	<input type="checkbox"/> NO

Email address to use:

I would also be willing to take part in a focus group	<input type="checkbox"/> YES	<input type="checkbox"/> NO
I would also be willing to take part in a work shadowing.	<input type="checkbox"/> YES	<input type="checkbox"/> NO
I would be willing to contribute to a collaborative Padlet	<input type="checkbox"/> YES	<input type="checkbox"/> NO

I would like to receive a summary of the research. ☐ YES ☐ NO

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

☐ Email: _____

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Signature	PRINT name	Date
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Appendix 5: Participant Details

No.	Pseudonym	Role	Service history	Provider Type	Profile	First Interview Date	Permission form, interview, email and Padlet	Completed?
	Leaders							
	Practitioners							
	FG Participants							
1	Grace L1	Manager	15	Community Learning	Senior leader with 15 years' experience in ACL, quality background	10/2018	y	y
2	Debbie L3	Manager	6	Community Learning	Community Learning curriculum manager, plus post-interview email	10/2018	y	y
3	Joe L4	Manager	12	FE College	Plus, post-interview email Senior manager, FE college, IT and CPD geek, 12 years' experience in the sector.	01/2019	y	Y (post email 23/7/24)
4	Weston L5	Consultant	40	Sector Org.	Now retired, FE consultant focuses on quality, functional skills and CPD. Prev FE leader	02/2019	y	Y
5	Andy L2	FE manager	9 pract 2 leader	FE College	FE Manager, Quality and CPD	02/2019	y	y
1	Sarah P1	tutor	12	FE College	FE college department lead,	10/2018	y	y

No.	Pseudonym	Role	Service history	Provider Type	Profile	First Interview Date	Permission form, interview, email and Padlet	Completed?
	Leaders							
	Practitioners							
	FG Participants							
2	Anne P1	Senior tutor	15	Community Learning	Senior tutor, S4L	11/2018	y	Y (post email 12/8/24)
3	Thea P3	Tutor	15	Community Learning	Tutor, community learning, teacher training	12/2018	y	y
4	Jane P4	Senior tutor	15	Community Learning	ESOL tutor in community learning-	10/2018	y	y
5	Glenda P2	Senior tutor	20	FE College	part-time – worked in FE, ACL and offender learning concurrently	01/2019	y	y
6	Nikki P5	Senior tutor	5	FE college	S4L tutor in FE College	01/2019	y	y
7	Finn P6	Senior tutor	10	Community Learning	Community learning, wellbeing tutor	11/2018	y	y

(All names and organisations have been redacted.)

Focus Group Details						Interview Date	Permissi on form	Comple ted?
<p><i>Group 1: Organisational CPD Event</i></p> <p>This focus group, held during an after-hours Continuing Professional Development (CPD) event, included four practitioners and managers from a single organisation. They discussed how they navigate evolving demands and performance metrics under Neoliberal and NPM policies. An internal peer facilitated the discussion to minimise bias, with the researcher not present.</p>						8/03/19		
1	1FG	redacted	redacted	Leader	Community Learning	8/03/19	y	y
2	1FG	redacted	redacted	Practitioner	Community Learning	8/03/19	y	y
3	1FG	redacted	redacted	consultant	FE College	8/03/19	y	y
4	1FG	redacted	redacted	Practitioner	?	8/03/19	y	y
<p><i>Group 2</i></p> <p>This focus group included five senior leaders, managers, and policymakers from various organisations gathered at a sector network event. The discussion focused on the evolution of adult education's values and strategies since the 1919 Final Report, especially regarding NPM influences. The researcher observed without participating to minimise bias and ensure authentic insights.</p>						12/7/19		
5	2FG	redacted	redacted	Leader	FE College	12/7/19	y	y
6	2FG	redacted	redacted	consultant	Sector Org	12/7/19	y	y
7	2FG	redacted	redacted	Leader	Community Learning	12/7/19	y	y
8	2FG	redacted	redacted	Leader	FE College	12/7/19	y	y
9	2FG	redacted	redacted	Leader	FE College	12/7/19	y	y
<p><i>Group 3: Serendipitous Colleague Conversations</i></p> <p>This focus group arose spontaneously when an existing participant invited</p>						18/09/19		

four colleagues to discuss their experiences with adult education under NPM. With no researcher present, a participant facilitated the discussion and provided an organic setting to explore perspectives on professionalism in adult education.								
10	3FG	<i>redacted</i>	<i>redacted</i>	Practitioner	Community Learning	18/09/19	y	y
11	3FG	<i>redacted</i>	<i>redacted</i>	Practitioner	Community Learning	18/09/19	y	y
12	3FG	<i>redacted</i>	<i>redacted</i>	Practitioner	Community Learning	18/09/19	y	y
13	3 FG	<i>redacted</i>	<i>redacted</i>	Practitioner	Community Learning	18/09/19	y	y
<i>Group 4: Peer-Led Discussion</i> Comprising four colleagues from the same organisation, this group discussed their response to a new national funding policy. The peer-led format encouraged natural dialogue, offering insights into the practical impacts of policy changes on their work in education without the researcher influencing the conversation.						28/11/19		
14	4FG	<i>redacted</i>	<i>redacted</i>	Practitioner	FE College	28/11/19	y	y
15	4FG	<i>redacted</i>	<i>redacted</i>	Practitioner	FE College	28/11/19	y	y
16	4FG	<i>redacted</i>	<i>redacted</i>	Practitioner	FE College	28/11/19	y	y
16	4FG	<i>redacted</i>	<i>redacted</i>	Practitioner	FE College	28/11/19	y	y

Appendix 6: Illustrative Analytical Materials and Theoretical Mapping.

This example accompanies Section 3.3.3 and demonstrates how policy archaeology was operationalised through coding and interpretive questioning. It shows how the 1919 Report constructed adult education as both a civic tool and an ideologically situated intervention.

Example A1.1: Policy Archaeology – Coded Extract and Q-Analysis of the 1919 Report

Example Passage from the 1919 Report (Page 35)	(Colour was used in the original coding but removed for clarity here.)
<i>‘Adult education, then, has developed not per saltum, but as the natural concomitant of other educational and social developments.</i>	Problem Framing: Adult education is presented as an organic response to societal and educational needs.
<i>It is the native, and often struggling, growth of a fruitful soil, not a hot-house plant.</i>	Legacy: The metaphor suggests that adult education should be nurtured systematically, but is often neglected.
<i>Children leave school with faculties heightened by an improved system of elementary education.</i>	Socio-Political Context: Reflects improvements in elementary education as a foundation for lifelong learning.
<i>Though many are dulled by premature and excessive labour, many retain the germs of intellectual interests implanted in the schools, and in still more their interests expand when adolescence is over.</i>	Problem Framing: Barriers such as child labour limit the potential of education, but intellectual curiosity persists.

<i>Young men and women read, and criticize and discuss. They seek for something to appease their curiosity, to resolve their doubts, or to feed their aspirations.</i>	Embedded Ideology: Education is framed as a means of personal and intellectual fulfilment, reflecting humanist values.
<i>They communicate their interest to others. They meet to satisfy it by exchanging opinions or to seek light on the problems which press upon their minds.</i>	Power Dynamics: Highlights grassroots, community-driven educational efforts but lacks systemic support.
<i>They find that one problem leads to another, and that simple issues are unintelligible without some knowledge of their background. From discussing practical questions of industry, they turn to pure science. Surprise or indignation at social conditions leads them to social history, or political science, or economics.</i>	Socio-Political Context: Education connects directly to societal challenges, including industrial and social inequities.
<i>The convulsion of a European war turns their minds to European history, or geography, or foreign languages.</i>	Socio-Political Context: Post-WWI reconstruction shapes the focus of education as a tool for understanding and stabilising society.
<i>Some poets have laid their spell upon them, and they wish to read more widely in English literature.</i>	Problem Framing: Adult education is presented as an organic response to societal and educational needs.
<i>As they achieve all that can be achieved by desultory reading and discussion, many drop off. But some remain, and those who remain desire something more deliberate and systematic.'</i>	Problem Framing and Legacy: The lack of systematic educational opportunities limits the full potential of grassroots learning, reinforcing the need for structured adult education.

Explanation of Coding Categories

1. **Problem Framing:** Focuses on how barriers (e.g., labour, lack of structure) and aspirations (e.g., intellectual curiosity) define the need for adult education.
2. **Socio-Political Context:** Highlights historical influences, such as post-war reconstruction and industrialisation, shaping educational needs.
3. **Embedded Ideology:** Reflects humanist and reformist values underpinning the recommendations.
4. **Power Dynamics:** Suggests grassroots efforts are insufficient without systemic support, reinforcing state-led solutions.
5. **Legacy:** Frames adult education as an organic yet neglected area, requiring systemic attention to realise its potential.

Structured Interpretation: Policy Archaeology Questions

Analysis Notes for the above passage using Policy Archaeology

Q1. How were specific policy problems framed?

- The passage frames the need for adult education as an *organic response* to societal and educational developments rather than a top-down initiative.
- It identifies barriers such as premature labour, limited access to systematic education, and fragmented learning opportunities, framing these issues as impediments to intellectual growth and civic engagement.

Key Finding: Adult education is presented as a *natural and necessary progression* for individuals seeking intellectual and social fulfilment, but it struggles against structural barriers such as economic pressures and inadequate systemic support.

Q2. By whom were these problems framed, and for what purpose?

- The problems were framed by reformist policymakers and educational thinkers who viewed education as central to societal reconstruction and civic responsibility.
- The purpose was to advocate for a systematic and deliberate approach to adult education that would address societal inequalities while fostering individual intellectual growth and social cohesion.

Key Finding: The authors aimed to legitimise adult education as a critical component of democratic stability and post-war reconstruction by appealing to both moral and practical imperatives.

Q3. How did the socio-political context shape the framing?

- Post-World War I reconstruction shaped the emphasis on education as a means of addressing societal fragmentation and rebuilding democratic engagement.
- The industrialisation and urbanisation of the early 20th century created a demand for more educated workers and citizens capable of participating in increasingly complex social and political systems.

Key Finding: The socio-political context positioned adult education as both a response to and a tool for mitigating the challenges of modernisation, labour demands, and democratic stability.

Q4. What ideologies underpin the recommendations?

- **Humanist Ideals:** Education is valued for fostering intellectual and personal growth.
- **Social Reformist Ideals:** Education is framed as a means to achieve societal equity and cohesion.
- **Paternalism:** The passage reflects a top-down view of education, positioning policymakers as the arbiters of what constitutes 'systematic' and 'deliberate' learning.

Key Finding: The ideologies balance a humanist vision of lifelong learning with a paternalistic approach that assumes state responsibility for guiding intellectual and civic development.

Q5. How does the passage reflect or challenge power dynamics?

- The passage reinforces the state's authority as the primary driver of educational reform, implicitly sidelining grassroots or community-led initiatives.
- It challenges economic systems that prematurely dull intellectual development through excessive labour, calling for systemic change to unlock individuals' potential.

Key Finding: While the passage critiques societal barriers, it does so within a framework that prioritises state-led interventions, maintaining traditional power hierarchies.

Q6. What legacy or path dependence does this document create?

- The emphasis on lifelong learning and the systematic provision of education influenced subsequent policy frameworks, embedding adult education as a civic responsibility.
- However, the paternalistic tone limited the agency of learners and communities in shaping their own educational journeys, a tension that persists in modern policy debates.

Key Finding: This framing of adult education established a legacy of balancing individual empowerment with state-led control, influencing both the opportunities and constraints of subsequent reforms.

Example A1.2: Critical Discourse Analysis – Micro-Linguistic Analysis of the 1919 Report

This example complements Section 3.3.4 and applies techniques of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to the same passage. It demonstrates how linguistic and rhetorical choices in the 1919 Report contributed to the reinforcement of hegemonic structures.

Step 1. Analysing Linguistic Features

Example:

‘Adult education, then, has developed not per saltum, but as the natural concomitant of other educational and social developments. It is the native, and often struggling, growth of a fruitful soil, not a hot-house plant.’

- **Linguistic Strategy: Metaphor**

- The metaphor of **‘fruitful soil’** versus **‘hot-house plant’** presents adult education as an organic, natural process that thrives under the right conditions. This language reinforces a paternalistic ideology, implying that systemic intervention (by the state) is needed to cultivate education effectively.
- The phrase **‘not per saltum’** (not by leaps) subtly dismisses the idea of radical or abrupt change, favouring gradual reform, which aligns with social reformist ideologies.

- **Power Implication:**

- The language positions the state as the gardener, subtly framing its authority as essential to nurturing educational progress while sidelining grassroots or community-driven initiatives.

Step 2. Examining Discursive Practices

Example:

‘Though many are dulled by premature and excessive labour, many retain the germs of intellectual interests implanted in the schools, and in still more, their interests expand when adolescence is over.’

- **Discursive Strategy: Moralising Language**

- The phrase ‘**dulled by premature and excessive labour**’ evokes sympathy while critiquing social inequities. By moralising the plight of the working class, the report frames education as a solution to structural injustices.
- The term ‘**germs of intellectual interests**’ frames intellectual curiosity as innate but fragile, reinforcing the need for structured education to cultivate these ‘germs.’

- **Power Implication:**

- While the discourse acknowledges systemic barriers (e.g., child labour), it implicitly places responsibility for intellectual development on the individual, perpetuating a paternalistic narrative.

Step 3. Framing of Adult Education’s Purpose

Example:

‘They find that one problem leads to another, and that simple issues are unintelligible without some knowledge of their background.’

- **Linguistic Strategy: Complexity and Interconnection**

- The use of ‘**one problem leads to another**’ and ‘**simple issues are unintelligible**’ constructs adult education as a means of understanding interconnected societal challenges.
- This framing aligns adult education with the intellectual and civic responsibilities required in a democratic society, supporting its dual purpose as both a **civic duty** and an **economic tool**.

- **Power Implication:**

- The focus on '**background knowledge**' reinforces hierarchical knowledge structures, suggesting that education must follow prescribed pathways to address societal issues.

Step 4. Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony

Example:

'The convulsion of a European war turns their minds to European history, or geography, or foreign languages.'

- **Discursive Strategy: Linking Crisis to Education**

- The phrase '**convulsion of a European war**' draws on the socio-political upheaval of World War I to justify the expansion of adult education.
- The language suggests that education plays a stabilising role, embedding hegemonic structures that prioritise national unity and reconstruction over transformative social justice.

- **Power Implication:**

- By linking education to national stability, the discourse reinforces hegemonic structures while marginalising alternative or radical approaches to education that might challenge existing power dynamics.

Step 5. Revealing Ideological Tensions

Example:

'As they achieve all that can be achieved by desultory reading and discussion many drop off. But some remain, and those who remain desire something more deliberate and systematic.'

- **Linguistic Strategy: Binary Framing**

- The juxtaposition of '**desultory reading and discussion**' versus '**something more deliberate and systematic**' constructs informal, community-driven education as inadequate.

- The report valorises systematic, state-led education, reflecting a reformist ideology while marginalising grassroots educational initiatives.
- **Power Implication:**
 - This binary framing sustains the narrative that state intervention is necessary for educational effectiveness, subtly dismissing community-led efforts as incomplete.

Final Summary of CDA Insights

CDA revealed the following about the **1919 Report's** language and power dynamics:

1. **Moralising Language:** Frames education as both a moral and civic duty, positioning the state as the primary enabler of progress.
2. **Hegemonic Discourses:** Reinforce national unity and stability over transformative change, aligning with post-war reconstruction goals.
3. **Embedded Ideologies:** Reflects paternalistic and reformist ideologies, favouring gradual reform and systemic control.
4. **Marginalisation of Alternatives:** Dismisses informal or grassroots education, perpetuating hierarchical knowledge structures and state-led authority.

This application of CDA complements the findings from thematic analysis and policy archaeology by interrogating the micro-level discursive practices that reinforce macro-level social and ideological structures.

Example A1.3: CTD–GCF Alignment Table – Mapping Cross-Theory Dialogue Across the Thesis

This table complements Section 3.3.6 by mapping how each Cross-Theory Dialogue (CTD) instance operates within the Grounded Complexity Framework (GCF). It identifies the analytical location, the theoretical concepts placed in dialogue, and the thematic contribution of each CTD. The table serves as a meta-analytic scaffold for the thesis’s conceptual development, evidencing how theoretical dialogue enables recursive integration across domains and chapters.

CTD Section	Main Section Title	Core Theoretical Concepts in Dialogue	Thematic/Analytical Focus
4.1.3 Cross-Theory Dialogue: Path Dependence, Civil-State Relations, and Pragmatic Adaptation	4.1 Before 1919: Reform Pressures and the Emergence of Governance	<i>Path Dependence, Civil-State Relations, and Pragmatic Adaptation</i>	Proto-governance formation, civil-professional negotiation, and path alignment
4.3.4 Cross-Theory Dialogue: Emergence, Bloc Formation, and Situated Ethical Agency	4.3 Adult Education Governance in the Interwar Period (1919–1939)	<i>Emergence, Historic Bloc Formation, and Situated Ethical Agency</i>	Ideological alignment, institutional shaping, and practitioner adaptation
4.4.4 Cross-Theory Dialogue: Path Dependence,	4.4 Post-War (1939–1973): Expansion, Regulation, and	<i>path dependence, passive revolution, and ethical agency</i>	Recursive narrowing of civic aims, ideological absorption, and adaptive professionalism

CTD Section	Main Section Title	Core Theoretical Concepts in Dialogue	Thematic/Analytical Focus
Passive Revolution, Ethical Agency	Emerging Economic Priorities		
4.6.5 Cross-Theory Dialogue (CTD): Path Dependence, War of Position, and Situated Enquiry	4.6 A Comparative Analysis of the 1919 and 1973 Reports	<i>path dependence, war of position, and situated inquiry</i>	Discursive repositioning, ideological incorporation, and pedagogical flexibility
4.7.5 Cross-Theory Dialogue: Hegemonic Reordering, Systemic Emergence, and Pragmatic Adaptation	4.7 Governance Shifts (1973–1992) and the Road to Marketisation	<i>4.7.5 Cross-Theory Dialogue: Historic Block, Systemic Emergence, and Pragmatic Adaptation</i>	Recursive hegemony, audit stabilisation, and practitioner adaptation
4.8.3 Cross-Theory Dialogue: Institutional Lock-In, Historic Bloc Formation, and Contingent Knowledge	4.8 The 1992 FEHE Policy Period: Structural Consolidation and the Reframing of Adult Education Governance	<i>Path Dependence, Institutional Lock-In, and Contingent Knowledge.</i>	Governance entrenchment, ideological closure, and epistemic narrowing
4.10.5 Cross-Theory Dialogue: institutional lock-	4.10: Governance Consolidation (1992–2010)	<i>institutional lock-in, historic bloc,</i>	Stabilisation of neoliberal logic, bloc cohesion, and institutional inertia

CTD Section	Main Section Title	Core Theoretical Concepts in Dialogue	Thematic/Analytical Focus
in, historic bloc, and attractor states.		<i>and attractor states.</i>	
4.11.5 Cross-Theory Dialogue: Good Sense, Situated Agency and Emergence	4.11 Counter-Hegemonic Struggles and Resistance (1997–2017)	<i>good sense, situated agency, and emergence</i>	Reactivation of civic values, agentic persistence, and emergent contestation
5.3.3 CTD Navigating Institutional Power and Professional Identities in Adult Education	5.3 Neoliberal Restructuring and Professional Accountability	<i>Hegemony, path dependence, and emergence</i>	Sectoral restructuring, governance entrenchment, and relational adaptation
5.4.3 CTD Fragmentation of Professional Identity: A Cross-Theory Dialogue	5.4 Fragmentation of Professional Identity in Neoliberal Education: Agency and Job Insecurity	War of position, reflective adaptation, bounded agency	Erosion of collective identity, negotiated purpose, and professional contingency
5.5.3 CTD Ethical Praxis: A Theoretical Analysis	5.5: Navigating Marketisation: Ethical Praxis, Resistance, and Compliance	<i>good sense, practising from the edge, and organic intellectuals</i>	Ethical resistance, civic purpose preservation, and identity transformation

Appendix 7: The Developmental Arcs Across the Domains of Complexity

This table synthesises the historical development of adult education governance in England across the four domains of Complexity used throughout this thesis: Natural, Social, Subjective, and Meta-Level (via the Practitioner Arc). It supports the integrative analyses presented in Chapter 6 by tracing how dominant historic blocs and policy imaginaries have interacted with institutional structures, relational infrastructures, professional identities, and ethical agency from 1903 to 2022. Each row corresponds to a distinct governance period explored in Chapters 4 and 5, allowing for comparative interpretation across domain logics.

This appendix should be read alongside the domain-specific syntheses in Sections 6.1 to 6.3, and in conjunction with example A1.3, which maps the Cross-Theory Dialogues (CTDs) that underpin the thesis's meta-level conceptual development.

Dominant Historic Bloc / Governing 'Common Sense'	Natural Factors	Social Factors	Subjective Factors	Practitioner Arc
Initial conditions 1903-1944 Liberal / social-reform Education a 'permanent	1903 WEA Act; University Extension; 1919 Final Report; LEA duty (1921); formation of civic infrastructure	Partnership-based provision across LEAs, WEA, universities; relational trust and civic coordination;	Practitioners often volunteer, and semi-formal, civic intent is central to identity; pedagogical approaches	Volunteer tutors & settlement workers act as civic educators; emergence of a role but not a profession; shaped by necessity,

Dominant Historic Bloc / Governing 'Common Sense'	Natural Factors	Social Factors	Subjective Factors	Practitioner Arc
national necessity'	rooted in voluntary and philanthropic traditions; path-dependent funding and governance frameworks begin	fragmented yet pluralistic ecology of provision	rooted in local responsiveness	improvisation, and civic intent
Consolidation 1945-mid-1970s Social-democratic / Keynesian Collective welfare, citizenship, lifelong learning as a right	LEA grant lines consolidated; ACE subventions normalised; expansion of residential colleges (e.g. Northern); statutory responsibilities stabilised across local governance structures	National coordination expands; NIACE and local planning forums consolidate civic mission; institutional thickness increases through formal advisory structures	Emergence of adult education as vocation; tutors identify as community educators; relational professionalism embedded in institutional norms	Full-time adult education staff grow; tutors are seen as community developers; qualifications are secondary to participation and relational work
First tipping 1979-1992	Manpower Services	Funding conditionality	Practitioners face rising	Onset of audit paperwork; shift

Dominant Historic Bloc / Governing 'Common Sense'	Natural Factors	Social Factors	Subjective Factors	Practitioner Arc
Proto-neoliberal drift Skills = employability = growth	Commission; YTS schemes; 1988 Education Reform Act introduced formula funding and cost centres; early erosion of civic infrastructure through economised criteria	introduced; performance begins to shape inter-organisational dynamics; growing instability and differentiation in provider roles	administrative pressures; relational work persists beneath compliance frameworks.	to competence-based curricula; many maintain relational pedagogy under the radar
Reorganisation 1992-2008 Market managerialism Audit, choice, and provider competition	FE/HE Act 1992 decouples colleges from LEAs; FEFC tariffs and LSC oversight; institutional architecture restructured around KPIs, metrics, and audit compliance.	Centralised agencies (FEFC, LSC); institutional disembedding; tariff funding undermines horizontal collaboration; compliance-with-integrity emerges	Subjective dissonance intensifies; professionals split between metric conformity and civic commitment; emergence of practising from the edge.	Dual identity: surface compliance / deep civic work; metrics dominate workloads; practitioner networks share subversive tactics.

Dominant Historic Bloc / Governing 'Common Sense'	Natural Factors	Social Factors	Subjective Factors	Practitioner Arc
Second tipping 2008-2022 Austerity- financialised neoliberalism 'Value for money', local skills 'needs'	SFA ESFA; >50% ACE cuts; ESF funding removed post- Brexit; AEB devolution and LSIPs; Multiply scheme reframes basic skills as economic functionality	Regional planning weakened; LSIPs and AEB introduce local variability without resourcing; collaborative infrastructures fragment.	Widening equity gaps; digital delivery introduces new ethical tensions; fragmentation of professional identity under austerity.	Precarious contracts; pandemic digital pivot widens equity gaps; micro-resistance via community consortia & digital inclusion initiatives

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