

# Critical social theory, inclusion, and a pedagogy of hope: Considering the future of adult education and lifelong learning

*Patricia Gouthro*

Mount Saint Vincent University, Canada (patricia.gouthro@msvu.ca)

*Susan Holloway*

University of Windsor, Canada (holloway@uwindsor.ca)

## Abstract

*In recent years, issues of inclusion within the field of adult education have garnered increasing attention and have expanded to consider various equity and social justice concerns. Frequently, however, these concerns are considered in a piecemeal fashion, either with a narrower focus on a particular equity issue, or as a simplified add-on to wider debates about educational design, delivery modes, or policy structures. To deepen the discussion around inclusion in lifelong learning, it is important to draw upon critical social theory to explore not only particular circumstances and challenges faced by different groups seeking equity and inclusion, but also to consider the broader frameworks in which adult teaching and learning happens. Despite challenges such as neoliberalism, adult educators need to retain Freire's belief in the possibilities offered by a pedagogy of hope and the belief that humans have the capacity to make positive changes.*

**Keywords:** inclusion, critical social theory, adult education, pedagogy of hope, multiliteracies

## Introduction

In recent years, issues of inclusion within the field of adult education have garnered increasing attention. At the same, the parameters for what constitutes inclusion issues have expanded to consider various equity and social justice concerns. Frequently,

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however, these concerns are considered in a piecemeal fashion, either with a narrower focus on a particular equity issue, or as a simplified add-on to wider debates about educational design, delivery modes, or policy structures. In this paper we argue that to deepen the discussion around inclusion in lifelong learning, it is important to draw upon critical social theory to explore not only particular circumstances and challenges faced by different groups seeking equity and inclusion, but also to consider how theory may inform the broader frameworks in which adult teaching and learning happens.

We situate this discussion by drawing attention to the importance of Paulo Freire's work on generating a pedagogy of hope. Freire (1992/2004) argues that 'hope is an ontological need' (p. 2). The last few years have felt like an uneasy shift to a darker time, with right-wing populism taking root, wars and conflicts on the rise, and inequalities related to gender, sexuality, ability, race, and culture laid bare against the backdrop of a global pandemic and drastic climate change. Despite these challenges, it is important for adult educators to retain hope and believe that human beings have the capacity to make positive changes. Critical social theory offers a rich resource that educators can draw upon to make sense of their work and inform their teaching as they strive to create a more socially just and inclusive society.

The paper begins with a short overview on topics of inclusion and then summarizes some key contributions of critical social theory to the field of adult education/lifelong learning. It considers the impact of a neoliberal climate that shapes policies and pedagogies which constrain a more critical analysis of fundamental democratic ideals of social justice and equity that should inform debates about inclusion. The discussion builds on the critical social theory of Paulo Freire, who argues for a pedagogy of hope, and considers the UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals, which include a commitment to lifelong learning for all. The paper concludes with a couple of exemplars from the field and from our own research on multiliteracies to illustrate how critical social theory can inform discourses of inclusion in the field of adult education.

## Inclusion issues

As the Call for Papers for this special edition note, the focus on inclusion has expanded in recent decades to encapsulate conversations about a range of different topics. It is clear that 'the concept of social inclusion is a multidimensional one' (de Greef et al., 2015, p. 63). Although the Call argues that 'social justice thinking in adult education has predominantly been inspired by humanistic discourses', we would argue that particularly in the North American context, it has been informed by critical theory, which is often rooted in claims for more radical societal change. In recent years, equity-seeking groups and allies have become more vocal in asserting the need to address certain inclusion issues in adult education, particularly in Canada and the United States. Inclusion issues for sexual minorities have been explored in various contexts such as community-based learning (Grace & Wells, 2007; McAlister, 2018), organizational settings (Hill, 2006), and international development and relief work (Mizzi, 2014). Debates about ontological assumptions have evolved as Indigenous educators challenge Western paradigms of knowledge to include alternative frameworks for learning (Battiste, 2013; Weber-Pillwax, 2021) and within higher education contexts in Canada there is a shift to 'Indigenize the Academy'. Adult education researchers explore ongoing challenges of inclusion for many racialized groups (Alfred, 2015), such as African-Americans, ranging from basic literacies that inform health outcomes (Hill & Holland, 2021), to opaque and inequitable assessment practices for Black faculty members in higher education (Gnanadass et al., 2022). Within Canada and the US, discourses about inclusion often

focus on concerns regarding racism, racialization, and white supremacy (Battiste, 2013; Brookfield et al., 2019; Brookfield & Hess, 2021; Carpenter & Mojab, 2011).

In this time of global migration and refugee crises, both European and North American educators explore how inclusion issues arise for migrants in workplace participation (Liu & Guo, 2021), citizenship (Fejes, 2019; Kloubert & Dickerhoff, 2020) and higher education (Webb et al., 2021). The sheer number of migrants and rapid pace of migration has greatly increased in recent years (Morrice, 2019; European Parliament, 2017). Inclusion issues for adult migrants is further complicated by low levels of digital literacies (Wångdah et al., 2014). Greater success with minoritized migrants in developing additional language skills and fostering literacy is seen in studies whereby migrants' transnational knowledge is valued (García-Barroso & Fonseca-Mora, 2023); connected literacies via social media are recognized (D'Agostino & Mocciano, 2021) and migrants' sense of belonging is prioritized (Intke-Hernández, 2021).

Age is another factor of inclusion, whether it regards unemployed youth (Warner Weil et al., 2016) or the elderly who fall into the category of being 'socially excluded' (Kulmus, 2021). Research also explores opportunities for learning engagement amongst older citizens through programs such as those offered by folk schools (Hedegaard & Hugo, 2020) or through an assessment of their social, civic, and political participation within the broader society (Alves Martins et al., 2022). The needs of learners with disabilities raise important issues of inclusion in community-based contexts (Hall, 2017) and are increasingly taken up in the post-secondary sector (Lopez-Gavira et al., 2021).

As the areas for research around inclusion in adult education continue to expand, tensions arise as the complexity of these issues becomes more evident. Entigar (2021) states that 'the term 'inclusion' has become something of an aggregate concept, which likely accounts for how it is expressed as a universal good in education' (p. 836). Most educators aspire to be inclusive in their teaching practices, but debates arise about what this entails when selecting pedagogical approaches, generating policies, or integrating various kinds of curricular strategies, assessment processes, and program designs. The development of critical social theories to explain inequality sometimes seems fragmented, with its increased focus on various identity issues. Conflict may emerge between competing interest groups regarding which issues need to be prioritized. In a neoliberal society, the values of the marketplace, competition, and a rhetoric of individual choice often inform policy-making decisions and educational program design (Eynon, 2021; Mikelatou & Arvantis, 2018; Schöni, 2022). This climate of individualization and competition may undermine more collective endeavours to work towards an ideal of 'the common good' (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2018) or the 'just society' (Brookfield & Holst, 2011; Welton, 2005).

It is challenging to address adequately all the expectations raised to fulfil to the goals of inclusion. For adult educators and educational institutions, there are pressures to maintain academic quality and standards, and balance competing demands on limited resources and time, while providing a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Given the complexity of navigating decision-making processes related to inclusion, considering the larger framework and evolution of critical social theory may help advance and centre scholarly conversations about the purpose and intent of adult education and lifelong learning. In this next section we briefly overview the range of critical social theory that adult educators can draw upon to inform their teaching practices and to develop lifelong learning policies in light of concerns regarding inclusion, social justice, and equity issues.

## Critical social theory

Over the years, a wide gamut of theories has informed educational research. Drawing on the work of a Dutch professor, Ten Have, Boeren (2016) argues that adult education can be seen to be a ‘first floor’ field of study, in that it has built its theoretical discourses on the foundational work of other ‘ground floor disciplines’ such as sociology, psychology, and philosophy. Within the realm of adult education and lifelong learning, many researchers and scholars draw upon the work of theorists from different academic disciplines such as these, as well as more recently developed interdisciplinary fields such as Women’s Studies or Cultural Studies.

We use the term ‘critical social theory’ to look at scholars whose theory is informed by more of a critical lens that acknowledges the impact of broader social, cultural, and economic structures in shaping learning experiences. Although some adult education scholars would situate critical social theory only in the realm of radical scholarship (Collard & Law, 1991), we argue critical social theory exists across a spectrum and is informed by a consideration of how societal variables impact upon different learning contexts and thus on adult learners’ experiences. In adult education, the development of critical social theory is linked to its historical roots of programs and educators informed by a social purpose orientation, such as Miles Horton and his work at Highlander or Gruntvig’s folk schools (Connolly & Finnegan, 2016). We argue that the realm of critical social theory ranges from the work of less political (but very influential) scholars such as Jack Mezirow (1997) and Peter Jarvis (1995), who emphasize the importance of critical reflection for learning, to thinkers who argue for more radical social transformation, such as Shahrzad Mojab (2015) or John Holst (2002).

Critical social theory emphasizes social betterment, whether this evolves from individual growth and reflection about one’s life and role in society, or a collective engagement in learning through community development, active citizenship, and/or social activism. Earlier critical theoretical work in adult education drew upon the work of Karl Marx, as well as theorists from the Frankfurt School, such as Theodore Adorno and Erich Fromm (Brookfield, 2005). Arguably, the most influential scholar in the field of adult education and lifelong learning has been Jürgen Habermas, a second-generation Frankfurt School scholar, who despite his deeply critical analysis of the evolution of modern society, offers a more hopeful stance than earlier Frankfurt theorists. As Welton (1993) writes, ‘Jürgen Habermas’s works helps us to think imaginatively about knowledge, learning and the human condition’ (p. 81). Through Habermas’s (1981; 1987) theory of communicative action, educators can draw upon the critical tradition in adult education to construct an emancipatory perspective. According to White (1988), Habermas believes language has a ‘problem-solving capacity for interaction’ (p. 35) through which people can make sense of their world and their actions within it. The usage of language offers opportunities for citizens to engage in communicative action, or what Mezirow (1997) has termed as communicative learning. Habermasian analysis has been used by critical adult educators to explore issues of social justice and concerns about democracy and citizenship (Brookfield, 2005; Newman, 1999; Welton, 2005), including scholars who have brought a feminist lens to their analysis to explore gender and other issues of inclusion in greater depth (Hart, 1992; Gouthro, 2009; 2006; 2005). Similarly, feminist scholars Sara Carpenter and Shahrzad Mojab (2011; 2020) have developed a critical framework for exploring adult education using a Marxist feminist approach.

Two well-known male scholars who have had a significant influence shaping discourses in adult education are Jack Mezirow and Peter Jarvis. Throughout his career, Mezirow (1997) wrote extensively to develop a theory of transformative learning that

helps learners ‘move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience’ (p. 5). Transformative learning has been extensively critiqued by researchers and theorists intrigued by how this analysis has been applied (with varying levels of insight) to a broad array of learning contexts (Hoggan et al., 2017; Kruselnicki, 2020; Taylor et al., 2012). The work of Peter Jarvis (2014; 2008; 1995) has also been widely taken up by adult educators, as can be seen in a special double volume edition of *The International Journal of Lifelong Education* (2017) where a variety of scholars paid tribute to extensive impact of Jarvis’s work in the field.

Both of these theorists are situated on the less radical end of the spectrum of critical social theory. Much of their analysis focuses on the capacity of human beings to learn to think and reflect more critically. For learners entering adult education classrooms or working in higher education contexts, their theories are often popular, perhaps because they are accessible and focus more on individual growth rather than radical social transformation. It may be that many practitioners are more receptive to analyses that call for greater introspection and personal reflection rather than engagement in activism.

Stephen Brookfield also fits within this category of very influential scholars in adult education. His earlier work encouraged educators to develop the capacity for critical reflection (Brookfield, 1995), but in the last couple of decades his writing has developed a more radical bent as he delved deeper into the realm of critical theory (Brookfield, 2005), and issues of racism and white supremacy (Brookfield, 2019; Brookfield & Hess, 2021).

## Postmodernism

Beginning in the late 1990s there was a postmodern turn in adult education, where questions of uncertainty and provisional knowledge were raised by educators influenced by theorists such as Michel Foucault. The ‘field’ of adult education, replaced by the concept of a ‘moorland’, was depicted a precarious terrain, characterized by hazy landmarks and a sense of fluidity (Usher et al., 1997).

In the postmodern, with fixed reference points and solid grounding becoming increasingly detached and shaky, the difficulty becomes something to be accepted rather than regretted; it becomes troublingly pleasurable in opening up possibilities for constituting identities. (Usher et al., 1997, p. 6)

Adult educators were encouraged to lean in to the uncertain. Attaining consensus to work towards shared goals was no longer an educational objective. Instead, attention was paid to the multiplicity of meanings and influences that impact upon lifelong learning, encouraging a critical questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions. Despite this provisional, at times seemingly playful or capricious approach to knowledge construction, educators were cautioned to be aware of the troubling undercurrents of power that infuse all teaching contexts. Whilst welcoming a new array of critical exploration into topics such as sexual orientation, gender and cultural identity, and other inclusion issues, the impact of power was still seen as a salient concern:

A diversity of meanings, lifestyle choices and identities still has to be seen within a network of power relations; to have difference recognised within the relations of everyday life still involves struggle and contestation against dominance and subordination. (Usher et al., 1997, p. 6).

Some feminist adult educators, such as Tisdell (2000) and English (2006; 2003) also drew on poststructural and postmodern discourses to inform their own analyses of women's learning experiences and feminist approaches to teaching, inclusion, and community engagement.

A consistent thread through evolving critical discourses in adult education has been how power impacts on social justice issues although postmodernism and poststructuralism raised doubts about the ability to aim for social consensus. The often fierce debates between postmodernists and traditional critical theorists at the turn of the century reflected concerns that accepting the idea that knowledge was always provisional could result in the loss of collective will to advocate for a path forward, thus generating a sense of unease amongst many critical scholars.

## Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality recognizes interlinking, overlapping categories of identity, that can serve as both characteristics of belonging and points of exclusion, which shape the experiences of many learners. The 'formulation of intersectionality posits that experiences emerge because of the interaction among social categories (race, gender, and class) and their relation to each other' (Kamisli, 2021, p. 105). Kaushnik and Walsch (2018) note a number of key issues are raised by the concept of intersectionality to explore 'interlocking systemic inequalities due to social structures' (p. 29). Intersectionality developed as a response to counter oppression and address social justice concerns, and considers how variables such as race and gender are 'mutually constituted and are not experienced separately' (p. 29). An acknowledgement of intersectionality points to the complex systems of power that exist within societal structures.

While early critical social theory focused primarily on social class, in recent years theoretical debates have expanded in a variety of areas such as feminism, critical race theory, post-colonialism, and Queer theory. Ongoing questions of epistemology and explorations of systemic barriers related to racism, homophobia, sexism, and ableism, all pose challenging issues for educators committed to social justice. These theoretical analyses often bridge into other disciplines within the social sciences, connecting with other professional fields outside of education such as social work or medicine, and examine issues of inclusion in workplaces, homeplaces, higher education, and community-based contexts. Critical social theory is evolving. It illuminates how power permeates discourses and often reveals deep structural incongruencies through ideological critique. Theory deepens and extends the analyses of how social structural factors generate and reinforce inequalities for different groups of adult learners.

The realm of critical social theory is indeed broad. Acknowledging the critical part of education, however, is key because it raises the specter of power, and asks important questions about how societal contexts and social variables permeate and shape adult teaching and learning experiences. This recognition of power can be troubling, as it highlights inequities and inclusion issues. To successfully address issues of inclusion, it is important to consider how neoliberal values shape current educational discourses to gloss over and ignore power differentials and social structural factors that impact on learners differentially.

## Neoliberalism

In recent years, critical adult educators have noted the pervasive and detrimental influence of neoliberalism as the ‘common sense’ of our times (Torres, 2013; Holford, 2016), which has shifted the focus away from education for social purpose. David Harvey (2006) talks about the ‘naturalization’ of neoliberalism, noting that ‘for any system of thought to become hegemonic requires the articulation of fundamental concepts that become so deeply embedded in common-sense understandings that they become taken for granted’ (p. 146). With its emphasis on competition and individual choice, regardless of social, cultural, or economic circumstances, neoliberalism articulates a framework for lifelong learning that negates a social justice orientation. Critical social theory has been at the front of offering ideological critique of neoliberalism, and thus challenging its dominant co-opting of liberal language for subversive purposes.

Olssen (2016) draws upon Foucault (2008) to summarize key aspects of neoliberalism which he explains ‘has come to represent a positive conception of the state’s role in creating the appropriate market by providing the conditions, laws and institutions necessary for its operation’ and strives to ‘create an individual that is an enterprising and competitive entrepreneur’ (p. 130). In this context, individuals are responsible for retraining and reskilling to adapt to changing economic needs. Yet at the same time, as Jackson (2011) points out, ‘there remains little recognition that workers (and apparent non-workers) are constructed through gender, social class, ‘race’, and more’ (p. 105). Social structural variables of inequality are screened out of consideration as successfully adapting to the changing demands of the marketplace is deemed to be a personal responsibility. This focus on individualism is presented as offering ‘freedom of choice,’ yet *exclusion rather than inclusion* through systemic and often invisible barriers means that individuals are left with no voice nor real decision-making power.

Within the European context, this shift to a more technical-instrumental approach to education is evident in recent policy discourses. Antunes (2020) states that ‘increased centrality is clearly defined by the perspective that education, training and learning are processes for the acquisition of labour market competences and skills and for the provision of human capital for the economy’ (p. 306). Mikelatou and Arvantis (2018) argue that the effect of neoliberalism on lifelong learning discourses is that it ‘seeks to organize all policy areas according to the logic of the markets’ (p. 500). Because of the focus on employability, citizens ‘can rarely engage in civic activities that would influence the political and social developments, which would lead to the creation of an inclusive society that embraces diversity’ (p. 501). A narrower policy agenda constrains the work of adult educators and learners who might otherwise be guided by a social purpose tradition that attends to the broader benefits of education as a ‘social good’. As the responsibility for provision of adult and higher education learning opportunities shifts from the state to the individual, the values of the marketplace become evident across academic discourses in terms like ‘academic CEOs’ for leaders in higher education, ‘deliverables’ for assignments, and notions of ‘productivity’ assessed by ranked scholarly outputs (Giroux, 2014; Gouthro, 2002). In this context, learners are encouraged to develop a flexible skill set to compete for economic success and the role of the educator is to deliver and then measure whether pre-determined outcomes have been achieved. Such checklists are particularly problematic in addressing concerns such as equity, diversity, and inclusion. Deeper philosophical questions about civic rights and responsibilities, and considerations about inclusive citizenship, democracy, and social justice are relegated to the margins of debate, rather than acting as fundamental guiding concerns for educators.

## Recognition, redistribution, and inclusion

To challenge the impact of neoliberalism, critical educators raise questions about underlying value assumptions shaping policies and programs in adult and higher education. Critical social theory draws attention to how adult learning experiences are connected to broader social contexts as well as individual identity. If we look at intercultural capacities when considering how to integrate alternative perspectives, such as, for example, an Indigenous perspective in higher education contexts, we also need to include ‘an analysis of systems of power’ (Harrison & Clarke, 2022, p. 187). The discourses of critical theory have expanded in recent decades to consider what Nancy Fraser (2003) speaks of as ‘recognition’ issues, such as identity concerns pertaining to gender, race, sexuality, and differences in ability, along with ‘redistribution’ issues, such as equity concerns in access, opportunity, and distribution of resources. Guo (2015) explains that Fraser’s approach argues that ‘change must redress socioeconomic injustice as well as cultural or symbolic injustice’ (p. 493). For inclusion to be authentic, there needs to be genuine shifts in policies and programmes that lead to material changes in equitable access to opportunities for socially and historically marginalized groups of adults.

Educational goals, programs and policies are never neutral. They always represent a selection of values, beliefs and ideas that inform decision-making processes regarding curriculum, pedagogy, funding, assessment practices, and program design. Through the processes of critical reflection, which may involve individual transformation of perspectives (Mezirow, 1997; Brookfield, 1995), or through collective learning experiences that may entail greater citizen engagement and social action (Newman, 2006; Ramdeholl, 2019), critical social theory provides insights into how learning occurs within a range of adult education contexts.

## Hope as an ontological need

The concept of ‘hope’ has been explored by various researchers in adult education, many of whom have been influenced by the radical literacy educator, Paulo Freire (Dubin & Prins, 2011; Fenwick, 2006). Fenwick explains that ‘educators, through their struggles, continue to hope – for social justice and equality, for active global citizens, for learning that can make a difference’ (p. 16). She explores how debates about pedagogies within the field of adult education are advanced at different levels, with various types of focus and intent, critically questioning the premises of alternative approaches to teaching and learning. ‘Hope is an ontological need, wrote Freire (1992/2004), that must be *anchored in practice*, that must be historically concrete’ (Fenwick, 2006, p. 16).

Freire (1992/2004) explains that to have a pedagogy of hope, there must be an opportunity for people to envision alternatives that could precipitate change:

Imagination and conjuncture about a different world than the one of oppression, are as necessary to the praxis of historical ‘subjects’ (agents) in the process of transforming reality as it necessarily belongs to human toil that the worker or artisan first have in his or her head a design, a ‘conjuncture’, of what he or she is to make (p. 30).

Dubin and Prins (2011) draw upon Freire’s work to explore ‘the important role imagination plays in conceptualizing hope’ (p. 27). Barriers to hope exist when life conditions are overwhelmingly dismal and restrictive, and people lose their ability to imagine anything beyond basic survival. Freire (1992/2004) argues that when one’s



personal living conditions are too dire, the possibility of anything better seems impossible to even dream about.

Another dampening effect on hope that Freire (1992/2004) alludes to is when there is a ‘bureaucratization’ of the mind. The willingness of learners to consider different possibilities is shut off when individuals become habituated to education that is delivered in a narrow, close-minded way, ticking off the boxes by providing the expected responses, rather than thinking deeply or questioning take-for-granted assumptions. Under the influence of neoliberalism, where educational policies are increasingly connected to a scientific understanding which uses a narrow interpretation of what constitutes evidence-based learning, there are mounting expectations for adult educators to adapt a more bureaucratic approach in their teaching practices. ‘Educators are under pressure to abandon their vision for a more just and equitable world and to consider themselves technicians whose role is to train individuals to attain predictable, instrumental outcomes’ (Atkinson, 2013, p. 6).

## Democracy and learning for all

Elfert (2019) provides a sharp assessment of the UNESCO’s policies over the decades, critically noting the shift from a more humanistic and inclusive vision to one that aligns with an economic agenda. Although the recent report, *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development* (2015), articulates lifelong learning for all as Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, she argues that ‘if education were truly a human right, it would include all people, especially the poorest and most marginalised. The right to an education means *education for all*’ (p. 551). Lifelong learning is not meant to be a privilege for a few select citizens but should rather be supported for all members of all societies. Critical social theory helps to articulate the argument for inclusion as an integral aspect of sustaining democracy amidst a climate of hope.

In his exploration of UNESCO policies and the need to retain this focus for adult education, Stanistreet (2020) argues:

As most educators will recognize, a sense of hope for the future can be critical in engaging learners, particularly those who are most vulnerable and disadvantaged. The job of education is to offer ‘resources of hope’ in Raymond Williams’ glorious phrase. (p. 6).

Williams’ book (1989) [titled with the same phrase] ruminates on concepts such as culture and social class and delves into the importance of theory to help make sense of how societies are structured and how people learn and communicate with one another. He argues that theory not only supports critical analysis, but also ‘new seeing’, as people are able to imagine alternatives frameworks for living and learning.

## Impact of critical social theory on the field

Brookfield (2005) argues that critical theory can help educators articulate a rationale that informs their teaching practices and to argue for curriculum changes and resources to support their work. In this next section we examine two research studies that draw upon different strands of critical social theory to examine the experiences of adult learners from marginalized backgrounds to consider issues of inclusion. We then provide an example of how critical social theory informs our research on multiliteracies using a Freire’s work on a pedagogy of hope.

Finnegan et al. (2019) share five case studies of graduates, defined as non-traditional learners, a category that includes individuals ‘with disabilities, mature students, and students from working class and particular ethnic backgrounds’ (p. 157). They delve into the impact of neoliberal perspectives that shape both government policies and participants’ experiences to develop their analysis, which was informed by a critical realist approach that involved working ‘between grounded empirical research and systematic theoretical investigation of the socio-historical context’ (p. 162). Using this lens to review data involved paying attention to ‘sensitizing concepts’ – in this case, the idea of *precarity*:

Following Bourdieu (1998), we [the researchers] use the term precarity to denote the increased level of social vulnerability, insecurity and instability created by the long-term effects of neo-liberal globalisation. (p. 159)

The research team observed that most of the non-traditional students ‘assumed a [university] degree would lead to greater security but after graduation experienced a high level of precarity in the labour market’ (p. 157). The authors note the prevalent belief amongst both policy-makers and the broader society is that in and of itself, the attainment of higher education should be sufficient to ‘enhance career prospects and living conditions of non-traditional graduates’ (p. 157). This perspective (aligned with human capital theory) ignores well-documented evidence that education often reinforces and reproduces existing inequities, to assert that ‘besides maintaining competitiveness and facilitating individual social mobility it is argued that HE [Higher Education] can *also* overcome longstanding social and educational inequalities’ (p. 159). At the same time, with the massification of higher education leading to widespread credentialism and changing work conditions in a post-Fordist society where there are fewer ‘good’ jobs available, increasingly non-traditional graduates find that a university degree may not lead to the types of careers and lifestyles that they envisioned. Working at jobs that do not pay well, lack benefits, job security, and a clear pathway to advancement, often leads to a sense of anxiety, powerlessness, and a lack of confidence over one’s future. Finnegan et al. (2019) note that in a neoliberal context, this failure to attain permanent, well-paid employment is attributed to individual success (or lack thereof) rather than the broader socio-economic conditions, so that ‘the ‘responsibilised subject’ is tasked with resolving social problems and overcoming risks on their own’ (p. 160).

Critical social theory makes linkages between individual biographies and broader social structures to highlight existing inequalities and question current educational policies. The authors note that although ‘HE was seen as the path to more solid ground and to accrue cultural and social capital’ (Finnegan et al., 2019, p. 163) many of the participants became disenchanted with their lack of success. These non-traditional learners, mostly coming from marginalized backgrounds, struggled to retain their hopes and dreams for a better future, harkening back to Elfert’s (2019) question of whether current policies in lifelong learning are really designed to be shared by all.

Fejes (2019) draws upon the work of Foucault to point out the shaping of subjectivity and fluid power dynamics in a government funded program using study circles called *Swedish from Day One*. In Sweden, he notes ‘much trust has been put into adult education as a means of supporting migrants on the path to “full” citizenship’ (p. 235). He draws upon the work of Foucault (1998) to examine how ‘power is understood as acting everywhere’ (p. 239). Through power, subjectivity emerges, determining whose voices and perspectives will be attended to. Therefore, ‘through the discourse of citizenship, power operates and shapes the possible field of action’ (p. 239). The goal of the program is to help migrants become ‘good’ citizens – which are defined as those who participate

in broader society, understand democratic norms and conventions, participate in the labour force, and acquiring fluency in the Swedish language. ‘Therefore, the formation of citizens is a question of drawing boundaries, making inclusion and exclusion possible’ (p. 239).

Critical questions are raised in Fejes’ (2019) analysis about how prioritizing “the Swedish language” and “knowledge about Swedish society” are positioned as the most important tools for migrants in order to be included in the labour market and society more widely’ (p. 241). He argues that this stance diminishes acknowledgement of the language skills that migrants already possess and teaches normative values that contributes to ‘homogenising the Swedish social space’ (p. 247). The emphasis on existing cultural traditions ‘in specific limited ways, *excludes* as it *includes*” (p. 248). He questions the intent of adult education programs targeting migrants, noting ‘the exclusion-inclusion dichotomy is the effect of the exercise of power’ – and as Foucault points out, ‘power is dangerous’ (p. 248). Although the program is intended to benefit migrants, the theoretical analysis raises questions about its design and purpose, and what this means in fulfilling the UNESCO (SDG) 4, to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ (UN, 2015, cited in Fejes, 2019, p. 234).

In our own research profiled at [www.multiliteraciesproject.com](http://www.multiliteraciesproject.com), a study funded through a Social Sciences and Humanities Research (SSHRC) Insight grant called *The Multiliteracies Project*, we examine an exhibit developed by the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21. Drawing upon Freire’s concept of conscientização and problem posing, we analyze Pier 21’s Refugee Canada to illustrate how critical social theory can offer a way to interpret learning experiences connected to bringing about social change. The translator’s note in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1970/2021) explains that ‘the term conscientização refers to learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality’ (p. 35). Critical consciousness can be developed through a dialogical and reflective examination of one’s own life experiences, such as living in poverty, where learners may also become aware of the societal factors that impact upon their day-to-day existence and determine to take action to challenge the structural inequities that exist within society. Experiences of migration may include racism, alienation, and despair. But they may also demonstrate resiliencies of communities that have faced adversity, and hope for a better future. Through its programming and exhibits, Pier 21 explores these various elements of the newcomer experience.

Refugee Canada was an exhibition that invited museum visitors into the experience of becoming a refugee and did so in a way that potentially would raise the consciousness of visitors to think more deeply and critically about what it means to be a refugee. In terms of Freire’s problem posing, the multimodal exhibit acts as a code to prompt visitors to problematize stereotypes of refugees. The exhibit consisted of a typical, generic living room with a television running in the background with unsettling news stories. Museum visitors go through a door, and on the other side is the exact same living room, but now it is bombed out, and the tv shows the event that led to this destruction. Kristine Kovacevic, Interpretation and Visitor Experience Manager at Pier 21 noted in her interview, ‘we wanted to get this idea across that nobody wants to be a refugee and that anyone can become a refugee.’ The curators engaged in problem posing by asking visitors to ‘just for a second step into the footsteps or into the shoes of a refugee and try to understand the choices that you have to make when you are a refugee.’ At the same time, they show how systemic transnational displacements of whole populations are ubiquitous, and historically trace how negative tropes about refugees, and arguments about why it is

never the right time for countries to take them in, have been recycled since prior to the Irish Potato Famine.

Granted, we recognize that any museum experience is not the same as the visceral experiences of actually experiencing war, displacement, hunger, or fear for one's life. In Freire's writings, he is talking about people experiencing the ongoing realities of oppressive conditions. What a museum can do is offer an indirect representation of these experiences that may mimic or symbolize certain dimensions of the lived experience to foster insights and empathy on the part of the learner. Learning through the arts and within community-based spaces such as museums or art galleries can spark dialogue, critique, and understanding (Sanford et al., 2020; Jarvis & Gouthro, 2019).

The exhibit also promotes reflection on inclusion by having visitors write post-it notes answering the question 'How have refugees contributed to your community?' and then sticking these notes on a visual depiction of a community (for example, a note written about a refugee-teacher is posted onto the school). In this way, the exhibit invites refugees to be seen as valuable citizens in their new country. As a part of problem posing, visitors reflect on the power of discourses that run through societies that shape simplistic or more nuanced understandings of people identified as refugees. Another interesting aspect of creating these kinds of dialogical and reflective learning spaces is that they may help staff and visitors to the museum, many of whom themselves have either been immigrants or refugees, or who have had parents or grandparents who have gone through this experience, to make sense of their individual biographies while gaining insights into how structural issues, such immigration policies and programs, may be designed to either include or exclude newcomers to Canada.

In *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire (1992/2004) reflects on the concept of multiculturalism. In Canada, multiculturalism is a central tenet of government policy and programming, but rarely have we heard the basis for this approach summarized in such thoughtful manner. It is worth quoting at length:

Multiculturality is a phenomenon involving the coexistence of different cultures in one and the same space is not something natural and spontaneous. It is a historical creation, involving decision, political determination, mobilization and organization, on the part of each cultural group, in view of common purposes. Thus, it calls for a certain educative practice, one that will be consistent with these objectives. It calls for a new ethics, founded on respect for differences (p. 137).

Fostering a truly multicultural society in Canada requires a commitment to social change to create a more inclusive society for all citizens. Freire (1992/2004) states that the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2021), still resonates with educators with 'its relish for the ongoing struggle, which generates hope, and without which the struggle withers and dies' (p. 158).

## Analysis and implications

These three examples illustrate how critical social theory can change the work of adult educators. Attention to social structural issues raises hard questions about the purpose of teaching and learning. The contributions of different theorists working within the realm of critical social theory provides insight into how pedagogy in everyday practice may contribute or not to inclusion and equitable circumstances for adults coming from a range of backgrounds. Educators who are interested in developing a critical exploration of how power shapes different learning contexts may be able to offer deeper, more insightful analyses if they draw upon the work of theorists to consider how their research connects

to policies that reflect broader social and political frameworks. Part of what critical social theory does is uncover the ways that neoliberalism co-opts everyday institutional discourses to its own benefit.

Support for adult education is often linked to the potentially ameliorative effects for learning for adults as citizens and workers. Critical social theory enhances the level of analysis of the concept of hope, to go beyond facile neoliberal solutions of the individual making wise choices to improve their personal circumstances, which will ultimately then benefit the larger economy and nation-state. Instead hope needs to be tethered to broader notions of education for social purpose.

In the exemplars provided in this paper, it is evident that the application of critical social theory enhances the ability of scholars to analyze their research. In the study by Finnegan et al. (2019), both participants and policymakers were aligned with a neoliberal discourse of individualisation, whereby HE is perceived to be a simplistic solution to addressing the societal inequities. In and of itself, obtaining a post-secondary degree is insufficient to generate broader structural changes for inclusion. In the study by Fejes, there is a recognition that for migrants to participate in Swedish society as full citizens, they may need new knowledge, skills, and capabilities. However, there is not necessarily an openness to acknowledging that migrants already possess certain kinds of knowledge, such as language skills, and recognition that Swedish society is not static – that normative traditions and expectations, including what a democracy might ultimately look like, will change with the integration of new citizens coming from different cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. In both instances, critical social theory offers insights, in the first article by drawing upon Bourdieu's analysis of social structures to examine in more depth the notion of precarity, and in the second example, to draw upon Foucault's analysis of power and subjectivity to consider notions of full citizenship and how 'the exclusion-inclusion dichotomy is the effect of the exercise of power' (Fejes, 2019, p. 248). In the final example drawing upon our current research, Freire's (1992/2004) work is used to consider how a multiliteracies framework may engage learners in considering the experiences of refugees. Although the multimodal exhibit at Pier 21 is designed to evoke empathy in acknowledging the horror and terror that many refugees have gone through in fleeing war, death, and the destruction of their homes, it finishes with a note of hope – a reflection on human resiliency, courage, and strength, by posing the simple question, 'what have refugees contributed to their new country?' Asking questions such as these challenges learners to reflect upon what it means to live in an inclusive, multicultural society, where citizens come from a range of different backgrounds and experiences, with the hope that they can create a better life for themselves and their families. Adult educators working in a variety of contexts may benefit from drawing upon critical social theory to help them explore the purpose their work, what inclusion means, and how indeed adult education can fulfil the UNESCO Sustainable Development goal of 'lifelong learning for all'.

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The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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