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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

M. Ed. (Adult and Community Education)

Title:

‘Rewriting the Self: From the Courtroom to the Classroom’

‘Exploring Identity and Transformation Through Autoethnography and Shared Experience’

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Student Declaration

The material presented here for examination for the award of a higher degree by research has not been incorporated into a submission for another degree.

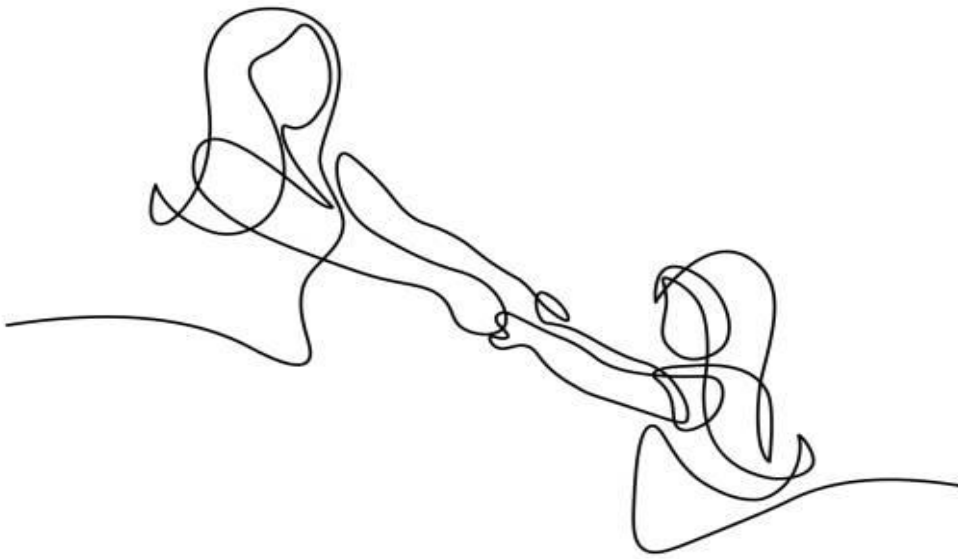
Permission is given for the thesis to be uploaded to Maynooth University Library for general access.

I am the author of this thesis, and the work described therein was carried out by myself personally.

SIGNED: Niamh Ginnell

DATE: 29/08/2025

Dedication



To my darling Doireann,
The little girl who taught me to love more and fear less.

*‘Can you remember who you were before the world told you who you
should be?’*

— Charles Bukowski (attributed)

This research is a shared journey of remembering, of listening to my own story and to the voices of others in the hope of discovering what it means to return to who we truly are.

Abstract

This thesis explores how adult identity is shaped and reshaped through experiences of transformative learning. It combines two approaches: an autoethnographic account of my own journey from law to education, and six semi-structured interviews with participants who have also navigated significant personal and professional change.

The research is grounded in an interpretivist framework, which views reality as constructed through lived experience and meaning making. Narrative inquiry was used to capture participants' stories in depth, while thematic analysis provided a systematic way of identifying patterns across the data.

The study participants, three women and three men, aged between their mid-thirties and mid-sixties, reflected varied personal backgrounds but shared experiences of negotiating identity shifts through education and professional life. Their stories revealed the challenges of self-doubt and feelings of not belonging, balanced with personal and professional roles, along with the opportunities education offered for renewal and growth.

The findings highlight that identity transformation and self-rediscovery are not a straightforward or uniform process. Instead, it is complex, fluid, and shaped by both personal history and wider cultural expectations. While some participants described disruption and uncertainty, others expressed confidence and belonging. My own reflections often resonated with their accounts but equally showed the diversity of pathways through which adults reconfigure their sense of self.

The study concludes that adult education plays a vital role not only in developing knowledge and skills but also in providing a space for reflection, rediscovery, and identity reconstruction. By situating both personal and participant narratives within wider cultural contexts, this thesis contributes to understanding how adults navigate the ongoing task of becoming and belonging.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all those who have supported me throughout the process of researching and writing this thesis.

First and foremost, I wish to thank my supervisor, Dr. Margaret Nugent, for her guidance, encouragement, and patience. Her thoughtful feedback and steady support have been invaluable in shaping this work and in helping me to grow as a researcher and writer.

I am deeply grateful to the six participants who so generously shared their time, experiences, and reflections with me. Their openness and willingness to tell their stories made this study possible and enriched it in ways that I could not have anticipated.

I would also like to acknowledge the Department of Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University, where I found not only academic inspiration but also a community of peers and colleagues who continually reminded me of the importance of learning as a shared journey.

To my family and friends, thank you for your endless patience, encouragement, and belief in me. Your support, practical, emotional, and moral, carried me through the moments of doubt and made the achievement of this thesis possible.

Finally, this work is dedicated with love to my daughter, Doireann - your curiosity, resilience, and joy remind me daily why learning and transformation matter.

Chapter 1: Introduction

At the heart of this thesis lies a personal and collective inquiry into how adults experience identity transformation and self-rediscovery through learning. Drawing on autoethnography and semi-structured interviews, this research explores the emotional and intellectual journey that unfolds when individuals return to education following significant professional and personal change. Through these deeply personal narratives including my own transition from lawyer to educator I seek to understand how adult learners navigate self-rediscovery, reconcile past and present selves, and reconnect with their authentic selves through personal and professional disruption.

The central research question guiding this work is: ***How do adult learners experience identity transformation and self-rediscovery through transformative learning, as shaped by personal narratives and shared experience?*** This question speaks not only to individual growth, but also to the wider social and cultural forces that shape who we are and who we are becoming in adult life.

What happens when the identity you have worked so hard to build no longer fits? For much of my adult life, I believed that identity was something earned, constructed through credentials, achievements, and roles others could recognise. In the courtroom, I learned to speak with certainty, to prioritise logic over intuition, and to suppress the very parts of myself that now insist on being heard. But somewhere along the way, a quiet discomfort grew. What I once saw as professional success began to feel like a mask I no longer wanted to wear. This research emerges from that tension.

1.1 Relevance to Adult and Community Education

This research is situated within the field of Adult and Community Education, with a specific focus on identity and transformation in adult learners. The work builds on key theoretical contributions from Mezirow, Illeris, and Cranton, while also engaging with sociological perspectives from Bauman and Giddens. It seeks to understand not only how identity shifts in adult learners but also how adult learning spaces create the conditions for personal and professional transformation and reconnection. This thesis is an exploration of how identity evolves across a lifetime, particularly through the lens of transformative learning. As my

thinking deepened through both reflection and reading, which led to the central research question, how is adult identity transformed and rediscovered through experiences of learning, reflection, and shared narrative? This question reflects my growing understanding that adult education is not only about knowledge acquisition but also a very powerful space for re-authoring identity, especially during moments of disruption or change.

1.2 Research Approach and Position

This thesis incorporates autoethnography. My legal background initially made this approach feel exposing and unfamiliar. Legal writing discouraged vulnerability, but in this research, I intentionally foreground reflection, emotion, and uncertainty, elements often sidelined in formal professional settings. The semi-structured interviews conducted as part of this research highlight shared narratives around identity, learning, and change.

At the heart of this research lies my understanding that identity is not fixed, but lived, constructed, and often reconstructed over the passage of time. I approach this work using autoethnography, a qualitative research method that situates the personal within the relational and societal. I have coupled this method with the qualitative research method of semi-structured interviews, allowing for the integration of personal experience with research participants shared experience and broader social theory.

As someone trained in law and shaped by the discipline and detachment it demands, the idea of placing myself at the centre of my research felt both unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Legal writing taught me to argue with distance, not disclose vulnerability. I was taught that writing should be objective, impersonal, and emotionally neutral. I questioned whether anyone would find value in my personal reflections, or whether I was merely indulging in self-narration. And yet, I now see that my own journey needs to form part of the research as the experience had fundamentally informed my interest in this research area. The more I read, the more I came to see that autoethnography is less about self-centeredness and more about self-awareness.

The research participants who took part in the series of semi-structured interviews were individuals who, like me, have navigated significant shifts in their sense of identity, particularly in professional or academic settings. Many of these participants spoke candidly about experiencing a sense of not fitting in or struggling to belong, a feeling I, too, have wrestled with. Their stories helped me to situate my own experiences within a wider context, revealing shared struggles around identity, authenticity, belonging, and the invisible weight of

expectation. These conversations allowed me to see my story not as an exception, but as part of a collective struggle to reconcile who we are with who we feel we are expected to be.

In drawing connections between my personal reflections and these interviews, I aim to explore not only individual transformation but also the cultural narratives that shape and sometimes constrain our evolving identities. These shared narratives are explored further in the literature review, where I draw on key thinkers in transformative learning and identity theory, including Mezirow, Illeris, Cranton, Bauman, and Giddens, to understand how individuals, including myself and my participants, make meaning from experience and navigate the often-fragile process of becoming.

1.3 Background to the Study

This work is deeply personal.

Personally, this work represents a necessary risk for me to take, the act of giving voice to the quieter, evolving parts of myself that long remained silent throughout my legal training and professional experience.

It begins in the courtroom, a space that once defined my identity and tracks my growth and evolution towards the classroom. This transition prompted questions about who I was beyond the roles I had performed. It also raised questions about how others make sense of similar turning points. The literature review that follows builds on this background by exploring theories of identity, transformation, and adult learning. It examines how identity is constructed, deconstructed, and reformed through learning, particularly in moments of personal or professional change.

On reflection, I always found it odd that subjects like the 'ologies', psychology, sociology, and philosophy, were completely absent from our legal education and training. Throughout the many legal courses and programmes I've completed over the years, at various levels, the focus has always been strictly on the law itself. That might sound obvious, but what I mean is that the emphasis was entirely on legal rules, precedents, and theoretical frameworks, with no attention given to the human or societal context in which the law operates. The studies always addressed the 'what' of law but never explored the 'why'.

Studying at the Honourable Society of the King's Inns to become a barrister was a wonderful experience. The college itself is an old stone building with grand halls and old-worldly

classrooms. Attending the college felt very elite and secretive. The classes were small in size, and everyone knew everyone else. This was partly because a large cohort of the students knew each other through previous schooling and/or social networks. There were a few of us who were new to these social groups and who had less privileged backgrounds, but we were welcomed in and treated no differently. The status of being accepted by the college seemed to give us the social standing required for inclusion.

The year at King's Inns was intense, both academically and practically, especially as we prepared to move on to the Law Library. I had to find a senior barrister to train under (called a Master), travel to London to buy my court gown and wig and figure out how to manage financially for a year with no income.

On top of all the study and training, we also had to attend several formal dinners, known as 'Dining's'. These took place in the grand hall, where we wore robes, bowed, and followed formal seating rules alongside practicing barristers. Judges sat at the top table and gave speeches, and at the end of the meal, snuff was offered to anyone brave enough to try it. These traditional dinners were an important part of the year. You had to attend a certain number to pass. They were also a way of teaching us proper manners and behaviour.

Overall, we were made to feel that King's Inns was a very prestigious place, and being part of it made us feel special. Between my time at the college and the new friends I made, my confidence was higher than ever as I prepared to enter the Law Library.

My year as a "devil" in the Law Library was a real revelation. Everyone carried themselves with confidence, whether in the library or the courtrooms of the Four Courts. I often found myself just trying to look busy, hoping I seemed competent. I would hear stories of male colleagues calling reception and asking for their own names to be paged over the tannoy, just to appear important; my female peers never dared that.

I quickly realised that some older male barristers saw young women as a fun novelty, inviting us out for drinks and lunches. Since "devils" are not paid, we had to cover our own work and social expenses. But there was an unspoken rule: senior barristers would pick up the tab for juniors, whether at a working lunch or a fancy restaurant. Social life was a big part of the job, and it involved a lot of drinking. We were taken to exclusive nightclubs and private gentlemen's clubs around Dublin, where bottles of champagne we could not pronounce, or afford, flowed

freely. The key was to be gracious, thank them, and slip away before things got messy – did I mention there was a lot of drinking?

We were given small, basic court tasks by our Masters and the solicitors who normally worked with them. These were beginner assignments, not urgent or risky, meant to help us learn the ropes and let solicitors see what kind of barristers we might become. The work was hit-or-miss, and even when we did get cases, it often took a year or more to get paid because legal matters move slowly.

Because I did not have strong connections in the Law Library, I struggled to know which Masters to approach and how to find one. I ended up “deviling” for a senior junior barrister who worked mainly in family and criminal law. She was kind and skilled, but she was near the end of her career, so I did not gain much varied experience. In my second year at the Bar, she “took silk” (became a senior counsel), which meant she moved on to higher-profile work, and I saw even less of her.

Even so, I loved my first year “deviling” at the Law Library. I met many interesting people and got to work on civil, criminal, and family law cases, researching, preparing documents, and making court applications at different stages. I travelled around Ireland’s midlands and up to Sligo, attending hearings in courthouses from Birr to Mullingar, Boyle to Manorhamilton. It felt like a real adventure. Fresh out of King’s Inns and fully immersed in Law Library life, I felt more capable and confident than ever. I never doubted my ability to handle whatever was asked of me.

My first time speaking in court in my hometown of Mullingar was my best performance yet. I spoke with confidence and authority. I was not afraid. As a new barrister, I had arrived ready to take my place among the local legal experts...

Unfortunately, that period marked the peak of my career, and things gradually declined from there. The professional trajectory I had envisioned did not unfold as I had hoped. Work was slow to arrive, and my Master's promotion to Senior Counsel, something I had been led to believe would result in a significant increase in referrals my way, did not materialise. It was then that I came to understand the importance of taking a long-term view when choosing a Master. At the time, however, I was simply so appreciative of being offered the position that I accepted it eagerly and without hesitation.

While being part of an elite professional group brought with it a certain camaraderie, the reality was that it is ultimately quite a solitary profession. As a self-employed barrister, you are solely responsible for securing and sustaining your own work, effectively placing you in competition with every other barrister. As a result, the sense of collegiality had its limits. Not having any family or close contacts in the legal profession became increasingly noticeable. I really felt the absence of a reliable, trusted source for guidance and insight.

As the flow of work remained sluggish, I began internalising it, interpreting the lack of opportunity as evidence that, despite all my efforts, I did not truly belong. I convinced myself that others had seen through me, that my perceived inadequacy was apparent to everyone. I started to believe that, while I might be good company on a social level, I was not being taken seriously as a professional. This internal narrative took root and continued to grow to the point where I was constantly scanning my daily interactions for confirmation of these beliefs.

To support my training and the initial year of practice, I had taken out a substantial personal loan, guaranteed by my mother, who, like me, had little understanding of just how limited my earning potential would be in the early stages of my legal career. Over time, this loan became a significant burden, forcing me to take on multiple part-time jobs in order to manage the repayments. One of those jobs involved writing for Family Law Magazine, a magazine that has since evolved into what is now known as the Child Law Project, still led by Dr Carol Coulter.

I recall one particular instance during this period when I was summoned into the judge's chambers after observing an in-camera family hearing I was reporting on. Judge Kennedy, whom I knew as the Midlands Circuit Court judge, wanted to discuss the aims and potential of the project at that time. He then went on to share his view that it was disheartening to see so many intelligent, capable young barristers sitting at the back of courtrooms, hoping to catch the attention of a solicitor in need of immediate assistance. He expressed how unfortunate and wasteful it was to see such talent and time go underutilised.

Those words remained with me ...

After several years working in an advisory capacity within the public sector, I started on a fertility journey with my husband, which was to take me to huge highs and to the lowest of lows. Ultimately, we were blessed to have our daughter Doireann, who is a constant source of joy. We had hoped to give her a sibling, but unfortunately, it was not to be, and the journey came to a conclusion in a consultant's office off Baggot Street in Dublin, when the female

consultant, slightly older than I, looked at me with pity and told me there was nothing more they could do for me.

A part of me died that day.

COVID came and went, and I retrained and took a job locally as a general practice solicitor. This suited family life with a young child, and for a time, I thought it was where I belonged. Back in my hometown, mixing in the local legal circles again, I really hoped that this 'type' of law was my 'type' of law and that I would settle and establish my career. I remained in this role for 4 years, and if asked during that time if I enjoyed my work, I would have said it was ok, must not complain, etc., but on reflection, I can see now that I was miserable. Again, I found myself working hard at a job and a lifestyle that I thought should suit me and to 'fit in' to a professional community that I thought I should belong to.

Very sadly, two years ago, my family endured some significant losses, one very tragically. These losses really impacted and resonated with me, not least because they were all family members I loved, but also because they had the effect of smacking me right in the face with the fragility and preciousness of life. It woke me up from the stupor of mundanity that I was existing in. It lit a fire in my belly to really reflect and take stock of who I was and what I was about.

Not long afterwards, I found the courage to say stop and to step off the legal merry-go-round. I returned to full-time education to pursue a long-held dream of teaching in adult and community education. I thought stepping away from my job was the hard part, but I was soon to learn that it was only the beginning of the hard work.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

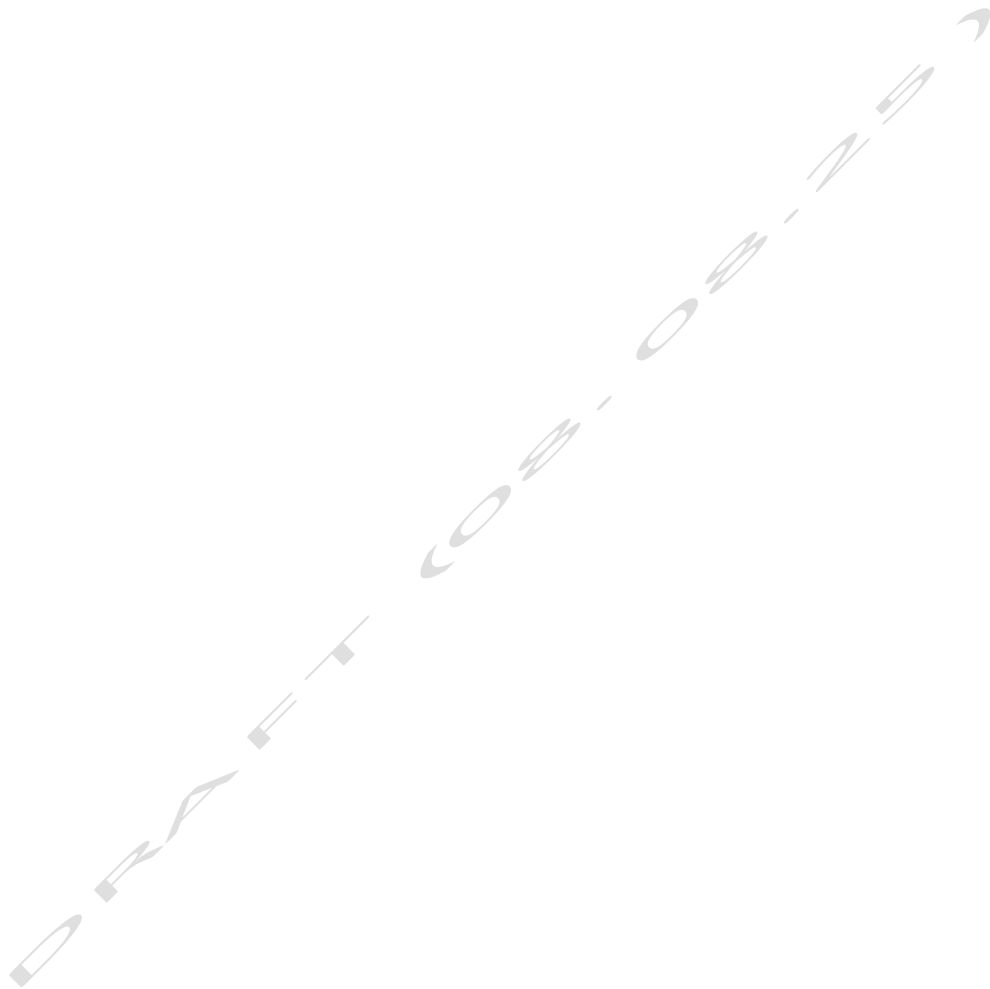
Chapter 2: Literature Review - explores the theoretical and conceptual foundations that underpin this research. It covers identity theory, transformative learning, and the emotional dimensions of adult learning.

Chapter 3: Methodology - outlines the research design and methodological rationale. It explains why autoethnography and semi-structured interviews were chosen and how they were implemented.

Chapter 4: - Findings and Analysis presents themes that emerged from the data, weaving together my own reflections with participants' voices.

Chapter 5: Discussion - brings the findings into conversation with theory, highlighting points of similarity and points of difference.

Chapter 6: Conclusion - reflects on the significance of the research, its limitations, and the possibilities it opens up for further work in Adult and Community Education.



Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

My central research question is: How is adult identity transformed and rediscovered through experiences of learning, reflection, and shared narrative? The research is rooted in the belief that learning in adulthood can be a significant catalyst for identity transformation and self-discovery. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991; Illeris, 2014), reflexive self-construction (Giddens, 1991), and the fluidity of identity in late modernity (Bauman, 2000), this study explores how personal meaning-making, identity transformation, self-discovery and educational experience can interact to reshape the adult self.

This central research question emerged from my own experience of professional transition from lawyer to educator and from a profound realisation that adult learning very often happens alongside other emotional, social, or personal life changes. I am interested in exploring the concept of identity and the definition of self, and how they can evolve over the course of a lifetime through the process of transformative learning. In particular, I'm curious about our adult search for meaning, how, over time, we may come to challenge and change parts of ourselves that once felt fixed.

Steger and Kashdan (2007) define the search for meaning in life as the human desire to make sense of one's personal existence and to feel that it is significant and purposeful. Their definition speaks directly to my own experience of returning to education as an adult and beginning to question not only what I know, but who I am and who I want to be. Adult education, in this sense, has not only offered me knowledge but a means of re-evaluating my identity.

Because my research is rooted in personal experience, I have chosen to work through autoethnography as my methodological approach. Autoethnography combines autobiography and ethnographic analysis to explore how personal stories can illuminate broader cultural, political, and social meanings (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). It lets the researcher look closely at their own experiences in a thoughtful, careful way while still staying true to their real feelings. Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner, who have been central to the development of this method, describe autoethnography as 'research, writing, and storytelling that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural' (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.

739). This approach feels particularly important for me as I try to make sense of my own journey through learning, identity, and change.

My research is profoundly personal and emerged from a place of real-life investigation. I have experienced first-hand the powerful shifts that adult education can bring about, shifts not only in how we think, but in how we see ourselves and relate to the world around us. I am aware that, for many adult learners, research topics are not simply academic but deeply intertwined with personal meaning.

This is certainly the case for me.

As a starting point, I engaged with the book *Transformative Learning and Identity* by Knud Illeris (2014), which gave me a strong starting point for understanding how identity and deep learning are connected. The book was a turning point for me; it helped me understand learning not just as the acquisition of knowledge, but as something much more personal and fundamental. It allowed me to see where and how my own life story could be situated within the research.

Illeris makes a compelling argument that transformative learning is about more than gaining new skills; it is about how we come to understand ourselves in new ways. He writes that learning can be ‘something more than and different to the acquisition of new knowledge and skills’ (Illeris, 2014, p. 5). That ‘something more’ really landed with me. It speaks to the inner shifts that occur, the questions, the doubts, and the realisations that happen when we confront parts of ourselves, we once took for granted. This idea helped me realise that my journey through adult education has not just been about upskilling, but about personal evolution. It gave me the language to reflect on how my identity has changed, not only through what I have learned but through the meaning I’ve made from those experiences.

I subsequently began exploring the theoretical roots of transformative learning, particularly through the work of Jack Mezirow, who first introduced the concept in 1978. His ideas have formed the backbone of much adult education theory, particularly around how adults revise their sense of self through critical reflection. Mezirow’s work and later developments by scholars like Illeris (2014) and Cranton (2006) offer a useful lens for thinking about identity as an evolutionary process shaped by both personal and social factors.

2.2: Transformative Learning and the Fluidity of Identity

Jack Mezirow's theory of transformative learning is widely regarded as foundational within the field of adult education. At its core, his theory describes how adults revise previously held assumptions, beliefs, and perspectives through critical reflection. He proposed that learning is most impactful when it involves a shift in how the individual makes sense of their experiences, a change, he called a 'perspective transformation' (Mezirow, 1991). This transformation often begins in response to what Mezirow referred to as a 'disorienting dilemma' an experience that disturbs a person's world and compels them to question and re-evaluate their understanding of self and society.

I was very drawn to this concept.

My own professional turning point was the moment I realised that being a lawyer no longer fitted who I really was. This was my dilemma. At the time, this did not feel like an academic experience, it felt like a very lonely personal experience. In retrospect, I can see how this prompted not only a career change, but also a profound questioning of my priorities, my values, and my sense of purpose. Through Mezirow's lens, this personal dilemma can be seen not only as a crisis but also as a catalyst for learning, involving critical reflection, meaning making, and the emergence of a redefined, more authentic self.

However, while Mezirow's framework offers a powerful starting point, it has been critiqued for its emphasis on rationality and its limited attention to the emotional, personal, and social aspects of learning. This is where other theorists, such as Knud Illeris and Patricia Cranton, extend and deepen the discussion. Illeris (2014) argues that transformative learning involves not just intellectual development, but an emotional and social perspective also. He frames identity development as a lifelong interplay between internal psychological processes and external social interactions.

Patricia Cranton adds further refinement by emphasising the role of authenticity in adult learning. For Cranton (2006), transformative learning is fundamentally about becoming more 'authentic', a process that involves accepting complexity, challenging internalised norms, and living aligned to one's own values. Her work has helped me to better understand the internal conflict I felt while working in the legal field. It was not only about the performance of the job, but also about the way the industry operates and how I felt being part of it.

Anthony Giddens (1991) suggests that identity in contemporary society is no longer handed down or fixed but must be actively constructed and maintained through reflexive self-

monitoring. Similarly, Zygmunt Bauman (2000) describes identity in modernity as fluid and fragmented, shaped by uncertainty and constant negotiation. In this view, adult learners, especially those undergoing career or life transitions, are often engaged in the delicate task of re-authoring themselves within shifting personal and cultural landscapes.

This aligns with what I heard from my interview participants who spoke of navigating between the expectations of their past roles and the uncertainty of new paths. They described a need to rewrite the stories they had been told about who they were and what success looked like. This process of re-authoring, often slow, messy, and emotionally charged, echoes Bauman's and Giddens' understanding of identity as an ongoing project rather than a settled fact.

In this context, transformative learning can be seen not simply as acquiring new knowledge, but as engaging in the fundamentally human task of meaning-making, identity transformation and re-authoring the self. It invites learners to critically reflect, to examine what has shaped them, and to imagine alternative future selves. In my own case, this meant letting go of the need to sound definitive and composed and instead, beginning to write and speak from a place of openness and vulnerability.

2.3: Emotion, Belonging, and the Relational Dimensions of Adult Learning

While transformative learning is often discussed in terms of logical thinking and critical reflection, some scholars have argued that such a framing minimises the emotional and interpersonal complexities of adult learning. For many adults, returning to education is not only an academic venture but also a very personal and emotional journey that involves vulnerability, doubt, and a rediscovery of the self.

Illeris (2003, 2014) argues that learning involves both intellectual and emotional dimensions. He proposed a model in which learning is shaped by three integrated factors: content (knowledge), incentive (emotion and motivation), and interaction (environment and relationships). From this perspective, emotional safety, personal meaning, and supportive relationships are very much central to the learning process.

This insight has been particularly relevant in my own experience and in the stories shared by the participants in my research. Many spoke of feelings of not fitting in or being good enough, the persistent fear of being exposed as inadequate or undeserving, particularly when transitioning into unfamiliar professional or educational environments. These feelings often had little to do with actual capability and much more to do with internalised beliefs and past experiences.

In this way, transformative learning involves more than challenging our assumptions; it requires us to confront the emotions related to those assumptions also. Taylor and Cranton (2012) argue that identity transformation is an interpersonal act, one that occurs not in isolation, but through interactions, shared experience, and emotional connections with others. They point to the importance of trust, empathy, and deep listening in creating supportive environments where transformation can take place.

For me, this has meant learning to get comfortable with and to value vulnerability in myself and in others as a source of connection and growth. In legal practice, personal vulnerability and emotional expression were seen as unprofessional and a sign of weakness. In educational spaces, however, I began to discover that sharing uncertainty and openness was not a weakness, but instead it created a space for others to feel comfortable doing the same.

The participants in my study echoed this. Those who felt most transformed by their learning experiences often pointed to moments of human connection, a teacher who listened, a peer who really saw them, a space created to use their voice and be heard. These moments were rarely planned; they emerged in the interpersonal spaces of education, often at the margins of formal education.

Belonging also emerged as a significant theme. Many participants described tension between the identities they had left behind and the redefined selves they were trying to establish. Learning, in this context, became a way not just of gaining knowledge, but of seeking a sense of belonging, a belonging that had to be earned. This speaks to Giddens' (1991) idea of identity as a reflexive project that must constantly be shaped, presented, and affirmed within social relationships.

As I reflect on my own path from my professional transition, I realise that my most transformative moments have happened within human connection, with people who have challenged, supported, and seen me in ways I had not yet seen myself.

These relationships have helped me to reframe not only how I learn, but who I am becoming.

2.4: Cultural Narratives and the Shaping of Professional Identity

In exploring identity transformation and the rediscovery of self through adult learning, it is important to consider the broader cultural narratives that shape how we come to see ourselves, particularly in relation to work and professionalism. Our understanding of who we are is never

formed in isolation. It is constructed through our participation in social, institutional, and cultural contexts that signal to us what is valued, expected, and deemed acceptable.

As a lawyer, I became fluent in a particular professional discourse, one that prioritised certainty, detachment, authority, and performance. Culturally, the legal profession is one of composure, confidence, and control, where expressions of vulnerability or uncertainty are often read as weakness. Over time, I internalised these expectations and my professional role began to shape my personal identity, leaving little space to express the other aspects of my personality.

This experience is reflective of what many of my research participants described: the feeling of having been shaped by professional identities that no longer reflected who they were becoming. Several spoke of feeling ‘trapped’ in careers that once made sense but had grown misaligned with their values or sense of self. Others described the conflict of inhabiting roles that were socially admired but personally unfulfilling, and the difficulty of stepping away from these identities without guilt or fear of judgement.

Narrative identity theorist McAdams (1993) suggests that we make sense of ourselves by constructing internalised narratives about who and what we are. These stories, however, are shaped by the cultural and social environment in which we live, including the collective view of success, ambition, gender, and class. In this way, professional identities are not only personal choices, but also responses to what society signals as important and desirable.

Bauman (2000) and Giddens (1991) take the view that late modernity is marked by instability and individualisation, where people must continually construct, perform, and re-negotiate their identities across shifting contexts. Professional roles can, however, offer a temporary sense of belonging or social approval, but they may also constrain self-expression or authenticity, especially when they are tied up in status and external validation.

This resonates with Cranton’s (2006) notion of ‘false consciousness’, the idea that individuals can unconsciously adopt values and behaviours that do not truly reflect their authentic selves, often in response to social pressure or institutional expectations. Transformative learning, in this context, becomes a process of awakening, a way to question the narratives we have inherited and to begin writing new ones.

For me, stepping away from the legal profession was not just a career decision; it was the start of reclaiming my own story. My return to education offered me a space to pause, reflect, and listen to the quieter internal voices quietened by performance and duty. In the stories shared by

my participants, I heard similar experiences, inward reflection, a critical reassessment of self, a desire to live and work in ways that felt more aligned with personal meaning.

But these transformations were rarely straightforward. Many described being conflicted between old and new identities, between the pull of external expectations and the longing to self-define. They spoke of grief for what was left behind, together with excitement for what might come next. These fragilities and emotional complexities highlight the importance of educational environments that honour not just the learner's intellect, but their full human story.

The courage that it takes to dismantle the cultural and professional aspects of a person's identity when they no longer serve should not be underestimated. By understanding identity as both a personal and cultural narrative, we can better appreciate the depth of transformation that adult learning makes possible.

2.5: Summation and Transition to Methodology

Across this literature review, I have explored some of the theoretical and experiential insights that speak to the complex, layered nature of identity transformation and the rediscovery of self in adult learning. From Mezirow's foundational work on transformative learning to Illeris's perspectives on the emotional and social dimensions of learning, it is clear that adult education is not simply a cognitive endeavour; it is also a deeply personal and cultural one.

This review has shown how identity and how we define ourselves is shaped not only by individual reflection but also through relationships, belonging, emotion, and the cultural narratives that tell us who we should be. Cranton's notion of authenticity, Giddens' idea of the self as a construct, and Bauman's image of identity as liquid all point to the fluid, negotiated nature of adult selves in contemporary society. Learning, within this framework, becomes a means not only of acquiring knowledge but of constructing and re-constructing the self.

My own journey from legal professional to adult learner to adult educator sits at the intersection of these ideas. What began as a career transition became, over time, a deeper inquiry into meaning, identity, the narratives we live by and authenticity. I came to see education not just as a place of academic growth, but as a space for redefining the self, a process marked by doubt, discomfort, and emotional risk, but also by clarity, connection, and renewal.

This understanding shaped both the central research question and the methodological approach I have chosen. To adequately address the central research question 'How do adult learners experience identity transformation and self-rediscovery through transformative learning, as

shaped by personal narratives and shared experience?', a methodology incorporating the personal and the critically reflective and the relational was required.

Autoethnography enabled me to put lived experience, my own and others', at the centre of my research, while also critically reflecting on the cultural, social, and emotional powers that shape that experience. Semi-structured interviews provided further depth to this research, providing a discussion space in which other adult learners could reflect on their own transitions and identity work. These conversations brought the literature to life, confirming and complicating the theoretical frameworks discussed here.

The next chapter, therefore, turns to Methodology. It outlines how autoethnography and qualitative interviewing were used to generate data that is both richly personal and analytically grounded. It also addresses the ethical considerations, challenges, and possibilities involved in conducting research that is both vulnerable and rigorous. Through this approach, I hope to honour the stories shared, including my own, and to contribute meaningfully to conversations in Adult and Community Education about who we are, and who we are becoming, when we learn.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This research begins as a personal journey of identity exploration and self-rediscovery, but it does not end with me. My own story is one strand, woven together with the voices of six participants who shared their experiences with me through semi-structured interviews. These interviews were not just about collecting data; they became conversations where meaning was created together, shaped by both the participants' stories and my role as listener and questioner. In this way, the study is both personal and collective, bringing together individual experiences to shed light on shared human themes.

This chapter outlines the methodological foundations of the study. The research is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, underpinned by a relativist ontology and a constructivist epistemology. The methodology reflects both the personal and collective nature of the inquiry, drawing on autoethnography and narrative inquiry to capture lived experiences of identity transformation. The methods employed, including semi-structured interviews and reflexive writing, are presented alongside considerations of ethics, participant involvement, reflexivity, sampling decisions, and strategies to ensure rigour and trustworthiness.

3.2 Research Paradigm: Interpretivism

This study is located within an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is multiple, subjective, and shaped by human experience and interaction. Interpretivism emerged as a response to positivist traditions, shifting focus from prediction and measurement to understanding lived experiences (Schwandt, 1994). According to Weber (1947), interpretive research is grounded in the principle of understanding from the perspective of the social actor. Similarly, Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that social reality is constructed through human interactions and shared meanings. Creswell and Poth (2018) highlight that interpretivist studies seek to understand phenomena in context, privileging depth over breadth.

I aim to explore how individuals, including myself, interpret and make meaning of their experiences. This aligns with the core aim of qualitative research, which is to understand human behaviour, perception, and meaning from the point of view of those experiencing it (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

According to Waring (in Coe et al., 2017), a paradigm encompasses a person's conception of the world, their assumptions about its nature, their position within it, and their relationship to knowledge. My research is guided by an interpretivist/constructivist lens, which assumes that reality is not objective or external, but socially and individually constructed. This paradigm holds that nothing is 'real' unless it is interpreted and understood by people. Researchers working from this perspective aim to uncover the meanings individuals assign to their experiences and to engage in processes of co-construction between researcher and participant.

Murray (2025) highlights that within this paradigm, the researcher is not a detached observer but an active part of the research process. Our values, experiences, and positionality shape the way we interpret what is shared with us. This is particularly relevant in my study, which is as much about my own story as it is about those of my participants. To reflect this, I am consciously and ethically weaving autoethnographic elements into my data collection and analysis.

3.2.1 Linking Interpretivism to Transformative Learning

Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991; Illeris, 2014) emphasises the reinterpretation of meaning perspectives through critical reflection. Interpretivism provides the methodological scaffolding for this process by prioritising participants' own accounts of change and the meanings they attach to it. Rather than imposing an external definition of transformation, an interpretivist approach allows the nuanced, subjective dimensions of transformative learning, emotional, cognitive, and relational, to be revealed through narrative.

In keeping with the work of Mezirow, Giddens (1991), and Bauman (2000), this study recognises that transformation is not solely a cognitive shift, but also a reconfiguration of self-identity within a broader social context. The interpretivist lens ensures that these shifts are examined in the way they are lived and articulated by participants, enabling a richer understanding of how individuals integrate or struggle to integrate into new roles, values, and self-concepts into their evolving identities.

These interpretivist principles form the philosophical foundation upon which my chosen methodological framework of autoethnography and narrative inquiry rests.

3.2.2 Linking Interpretivism to Identity Exploration

Building on this connection to transformative learning, interpretivism also offers a valuable lens for exploring how individuals experience and narrate their evolving identities.

Interpretivism is particularly relevant to identity exploration because it treats identity as something constructed through experience, relationships, and cultural context rather than as a fixed trait. By recognising that individuals create and negotiate meaning in interaction with others, the interpretivist approach allows this study to focus on how people narrate, question, and reconstruct their sense of self. This is important for understanding processes of learning and transformation, where shifts in identity often emerge gradually and are expressed through personal stories. Through this lens, identity exploration is not measured against an external standard but is understood as a lived, subjective, and evolving process, shaped by context and narrated in ways that reveal both continuity and change (Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2000).

3.2.3 Relevance to Autoethnography

The interpretivist worldview is particularly compatible with autoethnography. Autoethnographic inquiry depends on the researcher's reflexive engagement with their own experiences, while situating those experiences within wider social and cultural frames (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). From an interpretivist standpoint, my own narrative is not treated as an isolated, subjective account, but as one of many situated realities that can illuminate broader processes of identity construction and transformation.

Here, knowledge is co-constructed: my personal reflections are informed by, and in turn inform, the interpretations I develop from participants' narratives. This reflexive positioning, acknowledging that I am both subject and researcher, is consistent with the interpretivist emphasis on researcher-participant intersubjectivity (Finlay, 2002).

This interpretivist stance ensures that my own story, though subjective, is treated as one strand among many, which becomes particularly important when considered alongside participant narratives.

3.2.4 Relevance to Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews conducted with participants also reflect an interpretivist commitment to exploring participants' own meanings rather than imposing predetermined categories. The open-ended nature of these interviews allowed participants to articulate their experiences of identity change, feelings of self-doubt, and learning in their own terms, enabling a richer understanding of their subjective realities (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

In interpretivist research, interview data are not viewed as 'facts' to be discovered, but as co-produced accounts shaped by the interaction between interviewer and interviewee (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). My prior experiences, values, and theoretical interests inevitably

influenced the topics probed and the interpretations drawn, an influence that interpretivism sees not as a flaw, but as a necessary part of meaning-making. This approach aligns closely with the layered model of identity described by Illeris (2014), as it allows exploration of transformation at the levels of core identity, personality, and preferences, as expressed by participants themselves. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) argue that interviews are not neutral data-gathering tools but active sites of meaning-making, where knowledge is co-produced by interviewer and interviewee.

In this way, interpretivism not only underpins my autoethnographic work but also shapes the way I engaged with participants through interviews, where meaning was co-constructed in real time.

For this study, interpretivism provides a way of exploring identity as an evolving, storied process. It recognises that both participants and the researcher bring their own perspectives, experiences, and values to the research encounter. Stake (1995) reminds us that qualitative research under interpretivism does not aim for universal truths but for insights into human meaning-making within specific contexts.

3.3 Ontology and Epistemology

This study is shaped by a relativist ontology and a social constructionist epistemology. From a relativist perspective, I do not see reality as one fixed or objective truth. Instead, I believe there are multiple realities, each shaped by people's experiences, perceptions, and interactions with others. This feels true to me as I have seen in my own life how two people can live through the same event but walk away with completely different stories about what it meant. As Braun and Clarke (2013) point out, relativism emphasises that what is considered 'true' or 'real' always depends on the context, the individual, their background, and their environment. Waring (in Coe et al., 2017) further explains that relativist researchers view knowledge as tied to where and how it is generated, with no single reality or meaning dominating. In this sense, reality is always situated, contingent, and evolving.

From an epistemological standpoint, I work from a social constructionist perspective, which holds that knowledge is created through meaning-making and dialogue rather than discovered as a pre-existing truth. We interpret the world through the lens of our histories, relationships, cultures, and the power structures in which we live. As Murray (2025) explains, social constructionism sees knowledge, identities, and norms as socially and culturally produced;

even when they appear fixed, they are the product of collective and historical processes. Lincoln and Guba (1985) similarly argue that knowledge is co-constructed between researchers and participants, emerging through reflection, cultural context, and interpersonal engagement. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) remind us that qualitative inquiry is an interpretive, naturalistic approach in which the researcher plays an active role in shaping meaning.

This way of thinking about ontology and epistemology is particularly relevant to the story-based, qualitative research I am undertaking. It shapes how I collect knowledge, through my own and others' narratives, and how I make sense of it, through reflection, relationships, and cultural awareness. As Waring (in Coe et al., 2017) highlights, a social constructionist lens allows researchers to explore how meaning is made through interaction, which is especially important when studying identity, transformation, and adult learning.

Taken together, my ontological and epistemological positions provide the grounding to explore how people, including myself, come to understand, question, and reshape their identities through life experiences and education. These positions underpin my choice of methods, which allow me to investigate how individuals both discover and rediscover aspects of themselves, and how knowledge is built collaboratively through stories and dialogue.

3.4 Methodological Framework: Autoethnography and Narrative Inquiry

The literature reviewed has highlighted that identity transformation in adulthood is a deeply personal, socially embedded process, often catalysed by experiences of learning and change. Theories from Mezirow, Illeris, Giddens, and Bauman point to the interplay between individual meaning-making and broader cultural narratives, suggesting that transformation is as much about reinterpreting one's life story as it is about acquiring new knowledge or skills. These insights call for a methodological approach that can capture the richness, complexity, and subjectivity of such experiences.

The methodological framework draws on both autoethnography and narrative inquiry. Autoethnography positions the researcher's own experiences as a legitimate source of insight and analysis. Ellis and Bochner (2000, p.739) describe autoethnography as 'research, writing, and storytelling that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural'. Reed-Danahay (1997) highlights its three components: auto (the self), ethno (the cultural), and graphy (the process of writing). By integrating my own story of transition from barrister to educator, the study acknowledges the presence of the self as central to meaning-

making and transformation. Chang (2008) further argues that autoethnography is both a process and a product: it requires reflexive self-exploration while generating knowledge that connects the individual with the collective.

As Ellis and Bochner (2000, p.739) explain, autoethnography is ‘research, writing, and storytelling that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural.’ This captures the layered way in which my personal experiences are connected to wider cultural and social contexts.

Having established interpretivism as the paradigm guiding this study, I now turn to the methodological frameworks that operationalise it.

Narrative inquiry complements this approach by focusing on the stories of participants as sites of identity and meaning. Bruner (1990) and Polkinghorne (1995) both argue that human beings make sense of their lives through narrative. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe narrative inquiry as the study of experience as story, recognising that stories provide insight into how people understand themselves, their past, and their futures. Riessman (2008) emphasises that narrative inquiry is not only about gathering stories but also about analysing how stories are told, structured, and situated in cultural contexts. Lieblich et al. (1998) extend this view, suggesting that narrative research illuminates how individuals construct meaning from events over time. Together, autoethnography and narrative inquiry form a coherent methodological framework for examining both my own journey and the experiences of participants.

In keeping with the work of Mezirow, Giddens (1991), and Bauman (2000), this study recognises that transformation is not solely a cognitive shift, but also a reconfiguration of self-identity within a broader social context. The interpretivist lens ensures that these shifts are examined in the way they are lived and articulated by participants, enabling a richer understanding of how individuals integrate or struggle to integrate new roles, values, and self-concepts into their evolving identities.

My chosen methodology reflects this interpretive approach. As Waring (in Coe et al., 2017) notes, methodology provides a rationale for the strategies and methods utilised in a piece of research. A method, on the other hand, refers to the specific tool or process used for collecting data, such as interviews, focus groups, or document analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

In keeping with my methodological orientation, I chose to conduct semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a small number of participants. These interviews allowed me to explore each

participant's personal experiences in depth while remaining flexible and responsive to the flow of conversation. Mears (in Coe et al., 2017, p. 183) describes in-depth interviews as a way of discovering what a participant knows, thinks, and feels about a topic, including what meaning that topic holds for them. Semi-structured interviews are ideal in this context because they create space for openness and reflection throughout the interview while still ensuring that the core topics are explored.

As Braun and Clarke (2013, p. 78) explain, semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to guide the conversation while also encouraging participants to bring in their own perspectives, stories, and emphasis. This method aligns well with my interpretivist stance as it supports the idea that knowledge is co-created in the interaction between Susannd researcher and allows for deep exploration of how people construct meaning in their lives.

This approach also complements my ontological and epistemological positions, as well as my goal to conduct research in a relational, compassionate, and human-centred way. Semi-structured interviews invite a balance between structure and flexibility, making them especially appropriate when dealing with sensitive topics like identity, transformation, belonging and self-perception.

Furthermore, these interviews allowed me to reflect on my own experience in parallel with the stories of others. They became not only data collection tools, but also spaces to connect and share vulnerability, mutual respect, and learning.

3.5 Methods

Part of my research is shaped by my use of autoethnographic writing. This method emerged naturally as I tried to make sense of my own story, particularly my experience of personal growth and evolution as part of my studies on the Higher Diploma in Further Education in 2022/2023 and my M. Ed in 2024/2025. These periods of time gave me the space to pause and reflect and to understand that my personal experiences were not separate from, but part of, societal and cultural dynamics.

While narrative inquiry allowed me to preserve the integrity of participants' stories and to situate my own account within broader cultural and educational contexts, it was also necessary to move from story to analysis. To do this, I employed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012) six-phase approach to thematic analysis. In practice, this meant treating each narrative, whether an interview transcript or an autoethnographic reflection, as a storied whole, before systematically coding and identifying patterns of meaning across the dataset. In this way, the narrative form

was honoured, while thematic analysis provided a structured means of examining how recurring ideas, tensions, and insights spoke to the central research question (see Discussion) of identity transformation in adult learning.

3.5.1 Narrative Inquiry and Identity Transformation

Narrative inquiry offers a valuable methodological and conceptual lens for this study because it begins from the assumption that people live and understand their lives as stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). Narratives are the means through which individuals organise past events, interpret the present, and imagine the future. This study, which seeks to understand identity transformation in adulthood, is therefore well served by an approach that privileges stories as the central unit of analysis.

As Polkinghorne (1995) argues, narrative inquiry can operate in two ways: the analysis of narratives, where multiple stories are examined to identify themes or patterns, and narrative analysis, where a coherent story is constructed from fragmented or diverse experiences. Both of these approaches are relevant here. The semi-structured interviews provided multiple stories that could be thematically analysed for shared experiences of transformation, feelings of self-doubt, and belonging. At the same time, my own autoethnographic reflections required narrative analysis, weaving past and present experiences into a meaningful account that links individual identity with wider cultural and educational contexts.

Narrative inquiry also aligns with the interpretivist paradigm underpinning this study. It assumes that meaning is co-constructed through dialogue between researcher and participant, and that stories are always situated within broader social, cultural, and historical frames (Bruner, 1990; Clandinin, 2007). For example, participants' stories about education were not simply personal accounts; they reflected wider narratives about class, gender, legitimacy, and the value of learning in adulthood. In bringing my own narrative into the study, I also acknowledge that my story is shaped by, and helps to illuminate, these wider cultural scripts.

Importantly, narrative inquiry is particularly powerful in identity research. Brockmeier and Carbaugh (2001) note that identity itself can be seen as a narrative project, an ongoing story that we tell about who we are and who we are becoming. This resonates with the transformative learning theories explored earlier: Mezirow (1991) describes transformation as a re-examination of meaning perspectives, while Illeris (2014) frames identity change as layered and ongoing. Narrative inquiry provides the methodological bridge to capture these processes in practice. By attending to how participants storied their experiences of uncertainty, change,

and growth, and how I storied my own journey through my professional transition, this study situates identity transformation as a dynamic narrative act.

Finally, narrative inquiry strengthens the relational and reflexive dimensions of the research. Stories are not neutral data; they are co-produced in the research encounter (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). My presence as interviewer inevitably shaped the way participants chose to recount their experiences, just as their stories influenced the ways I reflected on and retold my own. This reflexive, dialogic process is not a limitation but a hallmark of narrative inquiry, ensuring that both individual and collective voices are recognised in constructing knowledge.

The methods employed in this study are consistent with its interpretivist stance and narrative framework. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with six participants, alongside reflexive writing of my own experiences. Semi-structured interviews provided both structure and flexibility, allowing participants to share their stories in their own words while ensuring coverage of key topics relevant to identity and transformation. The interviews were conducted in person and online, reflecting participants' preferences and practical considerations. Reflexive writing enabled ongoing self-examination, bringing my own narrative into dialogue with participants' stories (Finlay, 2002). As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) emphasise, semi-structured interviews are particularly effective in qualitative research because they balance focused inquiry with openness, allowing participants to express experiences in their own words.

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), which provided a systematic yet flexible approach to identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns across the dataset. This approach was well-suited to capturing the recurring themes of identity transformation, while remaining sensitive to nuance, contradiction, and complexity in participants' accounts (Nowell et al., 2017). Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a flexible yet rigorous method for identifying and analysing patterns within qualitative data, widely used across social sciences.

Both narrative inquiry and autoethnography appealed to me as research methodologies as they have the human story at the centre. Each recognises that storytelling is not just a way of recounting experience, but a fundamental way of gaining understanding and meaning-making. As Randall (2014) puts it, 'we see human beings as storied, and as constructing and being constructed by individual and collective experience.' In adult education, this idea places the human story at the heart of transformative learning.

The words of McCormack, O'Neill, Ryan, and Walsh (2020) helped me understand the power and responsibility of this approach:

‘We see human beings as storied, and as constructing and being constructed by individual and collective experience. From this viewpoint, inquiring into the stories that constitute our lives, understanding the power dynamics that are at play in how stories get made, told and heard, is transformative learning’ (McCormack et al., 2020, in Grummell and Finnegan, pp. 74–75).

This perspective affirmed to me that reflecting on my own experiences with care and intention was not self-indulgent, but transformative. However, I also understand that autoethnography demands ethical and emotional sensitivity, especially when personal stories intersect with those of others.

Reed-Danahay (1997) breaks down the term autoethnography into its three core components: auto (the self), ethno (culture), and graphy (writing). Therefore, autoethnography is not just about the self in isolation, but the self in a societal and cultural context. McCormack et al. (2020, p. 75) expand on this further, stating: ‘Autoethnography honours the reality that in any piece of research, the self of the researcher is the substantive, constituent fabric of the epistemological tapestry. We cannot research narratively without explicitly honouring ourselves as substantially present in how we write, think and research.’

For me, these quotes confirmed what I was already feeling, that research grounded in personal experience can be both rigorous and relational, analytical and emotional. That recognising the self as part of the research is not a flaw is an acknowledgement of how knowledge is produced.

I found myself still navigating between various frameworks, narrative inquiry, autoethnography, social constructivism, and interpretivism. While all of these are interconnected, given the depth of personal reflection and the centrality of my own experience, autoethnography is the most appropriate and coherent primary approach. Narrative inquiry informs the work, especially in how I view stories and meaning-making, but autoethnography provides the clearest methodological anchor for both the structure and purpose of this study.

Storytelling as both subject and method allows me to investigate not only what participants say, but how my own experiences complement and extend the use of the semi-structured interviews, listening, reflecting, responding, and growing alongside those who were generous and courageous enough to share their stories.

3.6 Participants and Sampling

Six participants were selected using snowball sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981; Noy, 2008), a strategy where existing participants refer the researcher to new participants. This approach is often used in qualitative research to access participants who share common characteristics or experiences, and where trust is an important factor. It was particularly useful here because of the personal and sensitive nature of identity exploration.

The group consisted of three men and three women, ranging in age from their mid-thirties to mid-sixties. Five were employed in teaching roles, and one was a full-time student. Four participants were married and two were single, with a mix of urban and rural backgrounds. Interviews took place both in person and online, depending on participant preference, including two conducted in a college setting and one in a participant's home.

Sample size in qualitative research is often guided by depth rather than breadth. Creswell (2013) recommends between 5 and 25 participants for phenomenological studies, while Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) suggest that data saturation often occurs within the first six to twelve interviews. Given the dual focus on my own autoethnographic account and the narratives of participants, six interviews were deemed sufficient to provide rich, in-depth data while maintaining a manageable scope for analysis. This number allowed for diversity of perspective while ensuring that each story could be given adequate attention.

The decision to work with six participants was guided by the methodological commitments of this study. In line with an interpretivist paradigm, the emphasis was placed on depth rather than breadth. Small sample sizes are typical in qualitative, narrative, and autoethnographic research because they allow for a richer, more detailed exploration of participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each participant provided extensive data through open-ended, semi-structured interviews, which, when combined with my own autoethnographic account, created a dataset large enough to identify patterns while still preserving the individuality of each narrative. This balance ensured that the analysis could capture both shared themes and the unique nuances of personal identity transformation.

3.7 Ethics

Ethics and reflexivity are central to my research, particularly given its personal, narrative, and emotional nature. Working autoethnographically brings its own unique challenges, from navigating my own biases to protecting the dignity and confidentiality of participants, to

managing the emotional impact of the work itself. I aimed to approach these issues with care, self-awareness, and integrity.

3.8 Emotional Impact and Managing Difficult Stories

Both my own reflections and the stories shared with me during interviews often contained emotional content. Several participants recounted deeply personal and sometimes painful experiences, including loss, trauma and low self-worth. I recognised that asking people to share these experiences could be emotionally triggering for them, and for me.

To navigate this, I approached interviews with sensitivity and openness. I paid close attention to tone, language, and pace, and I made it clear that participants were under no obligation to discuss anything they did not feel comfortable sharing.

To support participants with anything that might come up for them during the interview, I included a list of relevant support organisations (e.g. Samaritans and Aware) in the information sheet provided before the interview.

On a personal level, I recognised that revisiting my own emotional experiences and hearing those of others could impact me also, so I sought peer support throughout the research process and took breaks when needed.

3.9 Privacy, Consent, and Confidentiality

Writing autoethnographically raises important concerns about privacy, not only my own, but also that of people in my life whose stories may intersect with mine. To protect them, I made careful decisions about what to include and what to omit. I anonymised all individuals mentioned in my personal narrative, even in cases where their identities might seem incidental. I also removed or disguised any identifying details (names, locations, specific events) that could allow someone to recognise themselves or others.

When it came to interviews, informed consent was central. Each participant received an information sheet and consent form in advance. These documents clearly explained the purpose and scope of the research, how data would be collected, stored, and used, and participants' right to withdraw at any stage. Consent was obtained in writing, via signed forms, before interviews took place.

During interviews, I made sure to create an atmosphere of respect and equality. I reminded participants that they were the experts of their own experience and that I was there to listen,

not to judge. I expressed sincere appreciation for their time and their generosity in sharing their story with me. I tried to establish rapport and create an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect. I believe this is essential when undertaking qualitative interviewing, especially when discussing sensitive topics.

3.10 Data Sensitivity, Protection, and Anonymity

Managing the collection of personal and sensitive data was a significant part of this project. Some participants shared more than I expected, and in some cases, more than was needed. I redacted any personal information that was not relevant, ensuring that participants' privacy was protected.

All participants' names were anonymised. Data stored in hard copy is locked in a secure cabinet accessible only to me. Soft copy data is stored on a password-protected, encrypted device. In line with Maynooth University policy, research data will be securely stored by my supervisors and destroyed after ten years.

I began each interview by welcoming and thanking the participants for their time and by clearly explaining what the interview would involve. This was to help reduce any anxiety and to make them feel safe and respected.

Throughout the interviews, I used active listening techniques to show participants that their words were being heard and valued. This included nodding, maintaining eye contact (where appropriate), using brief affirmations, and summarising or paraphrasing key points to confirm my understanding. I also used prompts, such as 'That sounds really difficult' or 'I am sorry that happened to you' or 'Thank you for sharing that with me' to create space for the participants to sit with their feelings and to help them feel safe in doing so.

I avoided using judgemental language and never interrupted or rushed them. I always acknowledged the generosity and courage it took to share personal experiences, particularly when the content was sensitive or painful. These approaches were necessary to the integrity of the interviews. They created the space for genuine storytelling and allowed participants to speak with confidence and clarity, knowing they were being met with respect and kindness.

Ethical considerations were central to the research design. Participants gave informed consent, were assured of confidentiality, and had the right to withdraw at any stage. Care was taken to protect anonymity, particularly given the personal nature of the stories shared (BERA, 2018). Data were stored securely, and pseudonyms were used in reporting findings.

Reflexivity was also critical. As a researcher-participant, I continually reflected on my positionality and potential influence on the research process (Finlay, 2002). Pillow (2003) argues that reflexivity involves not only acknowledging positionality but also embracing discomfort and uncertainty as part of the research process. By adopting a reflexive stance, I recognised both my own role in shaping the research and the relational nature of knowledge creation.

3.11 Researcher Bias and Strategies to Mitigate It

Researcher bias is an ever-present challenge in qualitative inquiry, particularly in autoethnographic and narrative work where the researcher is also an active participant. Confirmation bias, for example, may lead the researcher to privilege data that supports their prior beliefs (Nickerson, 1998). Similarly, selective perception can influence how stories are heard, remembered, or presented.

Several strategies were employed to mitigate these risks. First, reflexive journaling was used to track my evolving thoughts and reactions throughout the research process. Second, member checking was used to ensure that participants' accounts were represented fairly by returning transcripts and emerging themes for feedback (Birt et al., 2016). Third, triangulation was achieved by integrating autoethnographic reflection with participant interviews and theoretical literature (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Finally, peer debriefing with academic supervisors provided an external perspective on my interpretations, challenging assumptions and highlighting alternative readings.

3.12 Trustworthiness and Rigour

To enhance trustworthiness, I employed strategies recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985), including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was supported through member checking and prolonged engagement with the data. Transferability was enhanced by providing thick description, allowing readers to assess the applicability of findings to other contexts. Dependability was addressed by maintaining an audit trail of methodological decisions, while confirmability was strengthened by reflexive journaling and triangulation across data sources. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify four key criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which guided my approach here.

3.13 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological foundations of the study, beginning with its interpretivist paradigm and constructivist epistemology, before setting out the methodological framework of autoethnography and narrative inquiry. The chapter has also described the methods employed, participant sampling and sample size rationale, ethical considerations, reflexivity, researcher bias and strategies to mitigate it, and approaches to ensuring rigour and trustworthiness. Together, these elements provide a coherent and robust foundation for the exploration of identity transformation presented in the following chapters.



Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

As I sat across from each participant, what struck me most was not just the content of their stories, but it was how the stories weaved in and out of vulnerability and resilience. I heard echoes of my own experiences, the fear, the hope, the courage. This chapter presents the findings of this research through five interrelated themes, each grounded in narrative, both theirs and mine.

This chapter seeks to shine a light on how adult learners navigate identity transformation and self-rediscovery in ways that are very personal, often painful, and occasionally profound. These are not neat or tidy stories, they are messy, real, and full of the stops and starts that come with being human. The themes emerged from a process of listening to more than just the spoken word but to the tone, gestures, silence, and memories. My own experience, which is threaded throughout, is not offered by way of comparison but instead as a companion. Autoethnography, in this context, is less about ‘me’ and more about ‘we’, and about how adult learning becomes a shared space where identity and the self are not only rediscovered but renegotiated.

These findings represent moments where learning intersected with loss, ambition, shame, and imagination. The five themes explored here, the five themes introduced earlier, trace a journey from disorientation to connection. They reflect the emotional architecture of what it means to return to learning not just as a student, but as a person in flux.

4.2 Coding and Thematic Development

In the early stages of analysis, a wide range of initial codes was generated from both the interview transcripts and my own autoethnographic reflections. These codes captured a spectrum of meanings, from surface-level observations to deeper underlying assumptions. As I reviewed, refined, and clustered them, five overarching themes were constructed. Retaining five themes allowed me to balance depth and clarity: enough to reflect the richness of participants’ stories, but not so many that the findings became fragmented. Each theme represents a different dimension of how adults experience identity transformation through learning.

My approach to coding was guided by Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2012) widely recognised framework for thematic analysis. They outline six recursive phases: familiarising oneself with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming

them; and, finally, producing the analytic account. This process offered a systematic yet flexible structure that was well-suited to my combination of interviews and autoethnographic material.

The process began with immersion: re-reading transcripts, listening to recordings, and making reflective notes. Initial codes were then applied systematically, marking both explicit meanings and more latent ideas. For example, statements of self-doubt were coded not only as ‘lack of confidence’ but also as ‘internalised class narratives’ or ‘feelings of self-doubt feelings.’ Codes were then grouped into provisional themes, which brought together related experiences like self-doubt, comparison with peers, and fear of not belonging.

Themes were reviewed and refined through multiple stages, ensuring that they both captured the essence of participants’ experiences and aligned with the central research question. Some themes were collapsed, others split, until each one carried a clear scope and focus. Subthemes were used to capture nuance where necessary, for example, within the broader theme of Identity Transformation, subthemes such as ‘Reframing Past Experiences’ and ‘Integrating Personal and Professional Selves’ provided structure and depth.

Crucially, thematic analysis is not a passive process. As Braun and Clarke (2019) argue, themes do not simply ‘emerge’ from data; they are actively constructed through reflexive engagement. My position as both researcher and participant meant reflexivity was essential. I maintained an audit trail of coding decisions, engaged in iterative questioning of my own assumptions, and remained attentive to how my interpretations shaped the final themes.

This reflexive and inclusive coding process allowed me to honour the diversity of experiences while drawing connections that reveal broader patterns of meaning. The five themes that follow are not definitive truths but carefully constructed accounts, offering insight into the ways adult learners navigate identity, belonging, and transformation.

Given my dual role as both participant and researcher, I remained reflexively aware of how my own experiences might shape interpretation, and I worked to ensure that contrasting perspectives were given equal weight to avoid confirmation bias.

4.3 Theme 1: Reclaiming the Self

The first theme, *Reclaiming the Self*, explores how participants described moments of rediscovering or affirming aspects of their identity that had been obscured by external pressures

or expectations. These accounts reveal the importance of reconnecting with an authentic sense of self as a foundation for transformation.

Participants often described returning to education as an act of self-rediscovery. Whether through overcoming addiction, navigating mid-life career change, or simply reconnecting with long-held interests, adult learners spoke of education as a space for reclaiming suppressed or sidelined aspects of themselves and their identity.

This theme captures how adult learners use education not merely to gain qualifications but to reconnect with, rediscover, or reconstruct aspects of themselves and their identity that have been suppressed, ignored, or forgotten.

Sub-theme 1.1: Returning to Authenticity

Participants frequently discussed education as a return to something fundamental, not just for life but for themselves, a passion or interest that had been discouraged, denied, or neglected.

Susan began a creative journey through performing arts and sound production after initially following a more practical furniture design course. Her education path allowed her to reconnect with music, a long-standing interest, ultimately leading to session work and performance opportunities.

I am quite realistic in that I know I'm not going to be an international Rockstar But like, I'll do a few gigs and, you know, get some experience out of its things. And from doing them, it's led to other things.

Faye shared how her initial ambition to pursue marine biology was derailed by a teacher's dismissal of her abilities. She later reclaimed her creative identity through studying art, despite resistance from her father. The journey through art education became a symbolic reclamation of both self-expression and confidence.

I fought like hell with my dad about doing art because my mum was an artist, and dad didn't believe it was a good idea. I did my PLC course. I obviously tried for NCAD but I didn't get it, but I got Cork, and I went to Crawford down there. I had an absolute blast – I loved it.

Bobby talked about how he had wanted to be a teacher from a young age, inspired by his older brother and really good teachers he had encountered during his own education. But college life and the bright lights of travelling took over and he found himself working in the fast-paced, stressful financial sector for years before finally returning to education to pursue his dream of teaching.

I had a couple of really good teachers I suppose very good role models, I would have looked at them and would have admired them a lot and would have been a great help to me one or two of them especially were really, really, you know, gave me a lot of extra.

Niamh among the Stories

My own experience of moving through my professional transition reflects a shift from a rigid professional identity to a more connected, personally meaningful self. Education allowed me to return to the quieter, evolving parts of myself that long remained silent throughout my legal training and professional life. My return to adult education allowed me to move from a space of professional detachment to authentic self-inquiry.

Sub-theme 1.2: Healing Through Learning

For many of us, education was not just vocational but therapeutic. It was a safe space to process trauma, feelings of self-doubt, feelings of disconnect, or not belonging.

Finn described returning to education after decades marked by addiction, depression, and suppressed ambition. Education became a structure for healing and self-belief: *'I wasn't sure because I was so unsure all my life... I am an alcoholic... but I want to study psychology'*.

Faye described how unresolved trauma from childhood shaped her identity and sense of capability, and how later engagement with counselling and adult education allowed for self-understanding and emotional healing: *'You can't take compliments, you're not comfortable in your own skin... but counselling helped me understand myself'*.

John returned to education after a difficult childhood and career setbacks, describing how being older gave him the confidence to embrace learning. Education became a place of empowerment: *'I wasn't afraid to ask questions... I knew I wanted to be something, and education was the way'*.

Elaine returned to education after years of low self-esteem and self-doubt. University education was something she thought was only for other people and not something that she deserved. *'It feels like I lost myself for a while, and coming back to education helped me remember who I used to be and who I could still be.'*

Niamh among the Stories

Returning to education provided me with a safe space to shed the legal persona I had armoured myself with and allowed me an opportunity to share my experiences and vulnerabilities and to connect with peers. I felt safe and accepted for who I really was. I felt safe to share my difficult life experiences and how they had shaped me.

Sub-theme 1.3: Challenging the Inner-Critic

A recurring topic is the reframing of long-held beliefs about personal inadequacy. Education enabled participants to rewrite internal scripts of *'not smart enough,' 'not capable,'* or *'not worthy.'*

Elaine confessed, *'I didn't think I was smart enough for university,'* reflecting how early educational experiences and low expectations shaped her self-perception. Returning to study later in life marked a significant personal transformation, allowing her to revise that internal narrative.

I didn't think I would have been able to go (university). I didn't think that it was an option for me. Full stop. And I felt that through, even when I was very young in school, you know, I was held back when I was in 5th class. And I really, you know, always had that in my head that I wasn't, you know, smart. And I wasn't clever and wasn't able for it.

After secondary school, when I saw people going on to university, I would have loved to go. I definitely wanted the experience, you know, and even used to drive by (Maynooth University) because I don't live far away from here, and I used to always be looking at the students coming and going and long for it.

John shared how his upbringing and background influenced his early education and his view of his place in the world.

We were poor and so when I was transitioning to secondary school, you know, we were told one day you need to go to the Christian brothers on this date, you're going to do your entrance exam, zero preparation for this we were not given the first clue of what we were supposed to do or how we were supposed to go about it, or to study for anything or nothing. So generally, the people that showed up from my primary school for that exam. We ended up in the lower classes in the secondary school.

John further shared that after a false start in college at 17 and with the benefit of a few years' maturity, he returned to college at 21.

If I'd been more mature at 17, I would have been a lot better off. So at 21 I went back to the head of Department in Dundalk and I more or less begged him to let me back in.

And he did. And my second experience there was completely different. I wasn't afraid to ask questions. I wasn't afraid to say I didn't understand things. I was there because I really wanted to be there, and I knew why I was there.

Niamh among the Stories

The theme of Reclaiming the Self highlights how returning to education was far more than a career shift; it was an act of healing, self-discovery and identity reconstruction. It offered an opportunity to rewrite previous life scripts shaped by trauma, social expectation, or institutional discouragement. Reclaiming the self through education allowed participants to understand that they are more than what they were told or led to believe.

These accounts reveal how returning to education was not only about gaining knowledge but about reclaiming parts of the self that had long been silenced or constrained. The discussion chapter explores how this process reflects broader ideas of authenticity and transformative learning in the literature.

4.4 Theme 2: Confronting the Voice Within

The second theme, Confronting the Voice Within, captures participants' struggles with internal doubt, self-criticism, and feelings of self-doubt. Here, identity transformation is shown as an ongoing dialogue between confidence and insecurity, shaped as much by inner voices as by external circumstances.

Participants frequently grappled with an internalised sense of inadequacy, particularly when returning to academic settings. This persistent belief that they did not belong or were not capable often clashed with external markers of success. Re-entering education required not only intellectual effort but emotional resilience, as participants negotiated the tension between outward confidence and inward self-doubt.

Sub-theme 2.1: Earlier Educational Wounds

Many participants traced their feelings of self-doubt to formative school experiences that left lasting impressions of not being 'good enough' or 'not academic material.'

Elaine recounted being held back in primary school and internalising a belief that university was simply *'not for someone like me.'* She described passing her Leaving Cert but feeling invisible in the classroom, especially in career guidance: *'It was never even spoken to me that I might go to university.'*

Faye internalised the message that she *'could have done better,'* a refrain repeated throughout her school years. Her interest in marine biology was dismissed due to subject choices, and her teachers made her feel 'dumb.' This created a lingering self-image that carried into adulthood: *'I felt dumb. That label stayed with me'.*

Susan shared how returning to education to follow her dream made her initially feel like feelings of self-doubt 'I kept thinking someone was going to realise I didn't belong here. Like I had somehow fooled them.'

Niamh among the Stories

For me, confronting the voice within was a slow process. My inner critic worked hard at undermining me in my legal roles, but at the same time, it wanted me to stay in those positions, feeling weak and unworthy. When I thought of leaving and trying to regain my authentic self, it told me that I'd be seen as weak and a failure if I left – a quitter. It was only when I found the strength and determination to return to education that my voice within finally quietened.

Sub-theme 2.2: From Professional Competence to Academic Vulnerability

Several participants had successful careers but found themselves unsure when returning to education. Confident in the workplace, they now felt exposed.

John, as an experienced electronics professional, shared how returning to college as an adult felt like starting over. Despite having had a successful career, he remembered thinking, *'Am I still capable of doing this? My brain had been idle for so long'.*

Bobby, after 16 years in finance, felt the weight of giving up a lucrative career to pursue teaching. Despite strong academic foundations, he questioned whether he could still learn, manage assignments, and succeed alongside younger students.

Faye recalled how unsure she was about herself returning to education. She recalled how all of her classmates were dressed well and all had years more professional experience than she did.

I was bricking it going in the first day. I was absolutely bricking it because everyone's dressed in rich clothes as I would have described them at the time, which is hilarious now, but were all very nice. But like the teacher made a really bad decision. I think the teacher, now as a teacher, looking back at it now from my position, said, and I can see

why they did it. Can I get everyone to stand in order of experience and sales in the room? And I was at the very end of the line.

Niamh among the Stories

I also experienced academic vulnerability on returning to education. Your peers assume that as a legal professional, you are confident in every aspect of your life. Being back in a classroom was very much out of my comfort zone, and to undertake studies that I was completely unfamiliar with. I felt out of my depth and full of feelings of self-doubt. Some of my peers in the room had years of teaching under their belt. I could talk about education law, but I could not tell you the first thing about educating people.

Sub-theme 2.3: The Performance of Confidence

Participants spoke about often presenting outward confidence while concealing deep insecurities about not being 'real' students.

Finn described intense inner conflict: *'Was my brain still working? Could I remember anything?'* Though he was top of his class in primary school and always seen as capable, he confessed, *'I never had confidence in my ability'*. His experience of depression and addiction compounded his sense of unworthiness.

Elaine shared about how she felt when she had secured her place in college, and everyone around her was so encouraging and confident in her ability.

The self-doubt that I had in myself was even stronger because I was like, Oh my God, I really must do this now. You know, I really must pull this off. Like, am I going to be able for it? Is it going to be hard, like all that kind of even more so? And then when I came over to the lecture hall, and I sat in the room of all those people, so many people had so much experience, you know, with regards to working in community development. Whatever field they were in, I'd zero, absolutely zero. And I was like, I must do the thing right. Am I going to be able for this? But oh my gosh, I didn't know what was ahead of me.

Niamh among the Stories

Related to my previous reflection, my legal studies and training have *taught me to present with distance, not disclose vulnerability*. My performance of confidence in my professional capacity often concealed more fragile internal narratives, while my performance of confidence in my new education setting was to conceal my discomfort with being open and vulnerable with my peers.

Sub-theme 2.4: Finding Belonging Through Peer Support and Encouragement

The feelings of self-doubt were deeply felt, and many participants found ways to gradually overcome it, often through peer validation, compassionate educators, or persistent encouragement.

Finn mentioned how teachers and peers gently pulled him into belonging: *'They pushed me, and they kept pushing me along.'* This push made him feel 'part of something' and gradually more assured.

Faye described the impact of counselling and reflective writing, which allowed her to trace and deconstruct her feelings of inadequacy rooted in childhood trauma and performance-driven self-worth: *'The counselling module and essay last year helped me deeply understand myself.'*

John shared how he felt seen and heard on his return to education and that he was grateful to have had the experience he had with the peers and educators that he met.

I think there's definitely, you know, we were lucky where we went because I do think it's a very different, it's a very people-based approach. Yes, they teach you things, but they don't shove it down your throat.

Niamh among the Stories

From my perspective, I had spent years trying to fit in, doing all the right things to fit, battling my inner-critic and yet the feeling of belonging never came. I felt by time that I was banging my head off a brick wall. I had worked hard, passed exams, gotten jobs and built my life around my work, but still I felt like an outsider. I eventually ran out of steam and stayed quiet in myself long enough to hear myself and to listen to my gut. This led me to find a space in which I belonged, where my peers heard me, and the educators around me were genuinely interested in my personal growth and development.

The theme of self-doubt and internalised inadequacy illustrates the powerful role of inner narratives in shaping adult learning experiences. In the discussion, these findings are considered in relation to theories of perspective transformation and the emotional dimensions of identity work.

4.5 Theme 3: Belonging Through Connection

The third theme, *Belonging Through Connection*, highlights the role of relationships, community, and shared learning spaces in shaping identity. Participants emphasised how connection to others provided affirmation, support, and a sense of belonging that made personal change possible.

Across the interviews, participants consistently described how peer relationships helped ease the discomfort of returning to education. These connections, often unexpected, were not just sources of social support but also catalysts for self-acceptance and identity growth. For many mature students, peer bonds, especially with younger classmates, can become the basis of healing, validation, and belonging.

Sub-theme 3.1: Finding Belonging

Several participants entered educational settings feeling like outsiders due to age, background, or self-doubt. Peer relationships played a pivotal role in softening that edge of alienation.

Finn felt profoundly out of place when he returned to education in his mid-50s, describing his discomfort at being surrounded by ‘touchy-touchy’ younger classmates. But he noted a transformative moment when a younger peer, Ciara, reached out: *‘She snatched me... I’ve*

never told her this, but she helped me feel like I belonged'. Her simple kindness cut through his deep-seated self-doubt and social anxiety.

John spoke of his earlier childhood shyness in school and how his experience of college in his 20s was radically different because of stronger peer engagement: *'I wasn't afraid to ask questions... I had a sense of being part of something this time'*. This contrast highlights how feeling connected changes the experience of learning itself.

Bobby told of how his return to education coincided with COVID, and that his classes started online, which made it difficult to really meet and connect with his classmates. He was already conscious of his age in comparison to his peers, but he found that his love and involvement in sport provided him with a common ground with his younger peers.

Niamh among the Stories

I was very fortunate that when I returned to education, I was part of a classroom that was filled with a large group of people from a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences. The course provided us with time and space to interact and get to know each other on a more than superficial level, and it quickly became apparent that we had more similarities than differences, and this formed the basis for real and meaningful connections.

Sub-theme 3.2: Intergenerational Friendships

Participants often feared being 'too old' to fit in, yet many found deep, reciprocal friendships with younger classmates.

Susan, though only slightly older than her classmates, talked about the joy of staying in college across multiple courses. What sustained her was the camaraderie, a sense of collective discovery through shared artistic and musical interests.

Bobby noted how his younger peers in teacher training did not view him as out of place but often sought his guidance: *'I was involved in coaching already. I suppose I brought something different, but they respected that'*. These interactions helped him reframe his age as an asset rather than a deficit.

Finn shared about how he felt when a peer of similar age left the course, and he found himself being the only person of his age group left in the class and feeling very vulnerable as a result. He decided to be brave and reach out to one of his younger peers sitting beside him;

I had a friend here last year. Her name was Maria as well, and she's left. She's gone to UCD. She's done. I'm here on my own. And I was thinking to leave as well.... I feel so awkward here with, you know, because of the age difference.' His younger peer replied, 'You're our hero You're so confident, and you speak out. You ask the questions. You speak out and get answers to the questions. It's great.

Finn shared that they subsequently became great buddies.

Niamh among the Stories

In the introduction chapter, I talked about transitioning from a professional space marked by formality and detachment to an educational environment marked by shared reflection: '*These conversations... revealed shared struggles around identity, legitimacy, belonging*'. Peer connection, therefore, was integral to the research process.

Sub-theme 3.3: Peer Support as a Catalyst for Emerging Confidence

In many accounts, peers acted as mirrors, reflecting to participants versions of themselves they were struggling to see as capable, intelligent, creative, or simply worthy.

Elaine, who had long carried a sense of being 'not university material' described how her classmates' affirmation in class discussion and group work began to challenge this narrative: '*They didn't see me as different. And slowly, I started to believe I wasn't*'.

Faye recalled struggling with low self-worth stemming from trauma. Yet over time, positive peer interactions became a form of healing: '*It's funny how someone saying, 'you're good at*

Niamh among the Stories

I had a very similar experience to Faye's, in that the space I found myself in felt safe and supportive, and I found myself ready to hear the compliments and encouragement I received from peers and educators. My confidence grew as I was encouraged to try new things and to speak and be open about myself. I find it difficult to trust and was surprised at how I really trusted peers and opened up.

this' can stop you in your tracks'. Her peers, many younger and without her life experience, saw her strengths before she did.

Participant stories highlight how relational support and peer validation created conditions for belonging and growth. The discussion chapter situates these accounts within sociocultural

theories of learning, showing how identity is co-constructed through dialogue, empathy, and connection

4.6 Theme 4: Reconciling Past and Present Selves

The fourth theme, *Reconciling Past and Present Selves*, focuses on how participants made sense of their earlier life experiences in relation to who they are now. Through reflection, they wove together past struggles, achievements, and turning points to create a more coherent narrative of self.

For many participants, returning to education was not just about building a future, but about confronting the past. The learning process invited reflection on earlier life chapters, some marked by missed opportunities, trauma, addiction, or suppressed ambition. Through education, participants began to reinterpret those earlier selves with greater compassion and insight.

Sub-theme 4.1: Reframing Regret

Several participants viewed their educational return as a second chance, an opportunity to pursue paths previously abandoned or never even imagined.

Faye once aspired to be a marine biologist but was discouraged by a dismissive teacher and self-doubt: *'I felt dumb... that label stayed with me.'* Years later, she used adult education to become an educator herself and to challenge that narrative and reconnect with her love for both art and analytical thinking.

Elaine described watching her peers go to university while she believed it 'wasn't for people like me.' Her journey through banking and back to education was motivated in part by the desire to reclaim what she had missed: *'I used to drive past Maynooth and long to be one of them.'* Education became a way to realign her life with earlier, suppressed aspirations.

John spoke about being made redundant after a long career with the company and his feelings of betrayal and of being disposable. John's return to education helped him reframe how he sees his future despite his regrets about how his career ended.

I was really upset My plan was to go all the way through till I was 60. I never looked to leave or, you know, I put many workaholic years into that company, so I was disappointed in that. But surprisingly, after a couple of months, I saw this new life. I still regret how it was done to me. I don't necessarily regret, you know, the life I've had in the last few years.

Niamh among the Stories

Along with trying to realign with my authentic self, my return to education was also borne out of challenges I had faced in my personal life. I had spent years on a fertility journey that had come to an unhappy end. It was something that I really struggled to come to terms with. My return to education was also my drawing a line in the sand in terms of that chapter in my life, and it was about the beginning of a new journey for me.

Sub-theme 4.2: Making Peace

Participants often spoke of earlier periods in their lives and the tendency to view those times with shame or detachment. Through learning, many began to reinterpret those experiences as part of a broader journey, not a personal failing.

Finn reflected on decades of addiction and depression, beginning in his teens. Once identified as a gifted student, he described how his life unravelled: *'I didn't want to be anywhere. I didn't want to do anything.'* Returning to study psychology helped him reframe these experiences: *'Learning has helped me make sense of why I was the way I was. It gave language to my pain.'*

John described his first attempt at college as a failure, driven by immaturity and lack of direction. Yet years later, his return was marked by confidence, curiosity, and success: *'I knew I wanted to be something, and education was the way.'* The contrast between these two periods allowed him to see growth rather than only regret.

Susan talked about spending 8 years undertaking various courses before eventually settling on performing arts, which was what she was spending her spare time doing.

I then decided to do the performing arts because I was doing like music on the side anyway, so like I may as well get like some kind of qualification out of it And then it just kind of was a ripple effect then to have stayed on and so the sound production and then I went to DKIT and did the applied music course there for the degree. So, like I was eight years in education when I came over (to Ireland), so I may as well have done school all over again, you know.

Niamh among the Stories

Part of my own struggle around returning to education and taking a completely different professional direction| was the constant thoughts I had about the time and money that I had spent on my legal training. I also struggled with how intertwined my own identity was with my legal persona. I had to work at changing my thinking around this, and to really connect with my authentic self to make peace with my new direction.

Sub-theme 4.3: Emerging Identities

Many participants came from established careers in banking, IT and management and struggled to reconcile their former professional personas with the vulnerability and novelty of student life.

Bobby spent 16 years in finance before returning to train as a teacher. The career switch was both practical and existential: *'I always thought I'd go back, but then I didn't. Until I had to.'* Learning became a site for reconciling past choices with present desires, allowing him to finally claim a long-suppressed goal.

Faye talked about how her identity as a successful professional in a very fast-paced environment was difficult to move away from. But a series of redundancies and difficult life events helped her to come to terms with it and to understand that we go through stages of life, and with each stage comes a change in how we see ourselves.

I actually thought it was OK to give up that identity. We go through different stages in our lives, and it's really not that important anymore. I've had two children; getting sleep is more important!

Niamh among the Stories

I have already shared, *'What I once saw as professional success began to feel like a mask I no longer wanted to wear.'* Returning to education meant that I had to let go of the legal persona I adopted and learn to engage more authentically with my innate values and emotions.

Sub-theme 4.4: Transformation through Reflection

For several participants, reflective educational practices such as assignments, group discussions, and counselling exercises became powerful tools for identity reconciliation.

Faye highlighted how a counselling assignment allowed her to link childhood trauma to her adult self-perception: *'That counselling essay helped me understand why I couldn't take compliments.'* It turned self-blame into self-awareness.

Finn noted how learning psychological frameworks helped him reprocess past decisions and make peace with them. Rather than erasing the past, he was 're-authoring' it through understanding.

Elaine shared that the process of reflection that she went through after returning to education allowed her to reframe how she saw her younger self; *'Looking back on my earlier self, I'm more forgiving. I can see now I was surviving the best way I knew how.'*

Niamh among the Stories

I found some of the work undertaken as part of my studies very cathartic. I completed an assignment for Philosophy during my Higher Diploma studies that allowed me the space to look at the transformation that I was undergoing. The assignment allowed me to associate how I was feeling and what I was experiencing with the process of Transformative Learning. I found this both comforting and liberating, and it helped me make sense of this phase of my life.

These reflections demonstrate that adult learning offers a context for revisiting earlier life experiences and integrating them into more coherent, compassionate self-narratives. The discussion builds on this by engaging with narrative identity theory and transformative learning frameworks

4.7 Theme 5: Imagining New Futures

The fifth and final theme, *Imagining New Futures*, captures participants' forward-looking reflections. Their stories reveal how transformation is not only about understanding the past and present, but also about envisioning new possibilities, aspirations, and identities still to be lived.

Education emerged as a catalyst for reimagining what is possible. While uncertainty and vulnerability were present, participants consistently expressed a forward-facing hope. Adult learning created space for participants to move from surviving to envisioning, from reacting to choosing. Many framed their current studies not as a return to education, but as the beginning of lives more aligned with their purpose, values, and voice.

Sub-theme 5.1: Reawakening

For many participants, returning to education stirred long-buried hopes and dreams. It was not simply about changing careers, but about reconnecting with long-held goals and ambitions they had abandoned or suppressed.

Susan shared that pursuing studies in music and sound production realigned her professional pursuits with her passion. She reclaimed not only a skill but a version of herself she once thought impractical or unrealistic.

Elaine reflected on how her earlier longing to go to university, once buried beneath self-doubt and low academic expectations, found new life: *'It feels like I lost myself for a while, and coming back to education helped me remember who I used to be and who I could still be.'* Education rekindled a future she once believed was out of reach.

Bobby told how he applied to do his teaching course numerous times before actually getting the courage to leave his successful career in finance; *'I always had it in my head to go back and do primary teaching at some stage'*

Sub-theme 5.2: Purpose Beyond Performance

Several participants described moving away from roles defined by external validation (e.g. corporate success, family expectations) and toward futures based on intrinsic motivation and meaning.

Bobby said: *'I used to be so certain about who I was. Now I realise that person was performing a role more than living a life.'* His move from high-paying finance into teaching was about purpose, not prestige.

John spoke of wanting to *'be something'* through education, not just in a professional sense, but as a fuller version of himself. Now confident speaking in public and working collaboratively, he views his adult learning journey as an emergence into self-assurance and possibility.

Finn talked about the weight of expectation he placed on himself through his own perfectionism and borne out of an urgent sense that he had to make up for lost time. He shared how he felt that he was always doing things for other people and never for himself. His journey through education is for himself.

Faye spoke about the expectations her father had for her and how this caused tension between them. *‘So I ended up going to do a PLC course in art, a portfolio course. I fought like hell with my dad about doing art because my mum was an artist, so Dad didn't believe it would be a good idea.’*

Niamh among the Stories

My own experience of stepping out of my legal persona reflects a similar shift, from a role steeped in prestige and status to a vocational role full of reward and fulfilment. It's a difficult thing to do when you feel that your self-worth or the value placed on you by your family is interlinked with status or job title. But eventually the mask slips, whether it's an oversight at work or an expression of your unhappiness through a behaviour. Living misaligned to your true, authentic self catches up with you eventually.

Sub-theme 5.3: Trusting Emergence

Some participants admitted to not having a clear career goal or endpoint in mind but yet they still spoke with excitement and trust in the unfolding process, a stark contrast to earlier periods of disillusionment and resignation in their lives.

Susan captured this sense of openness: *‘This course lit a spark I didn't know I still had. I don't know exactly what's next, but I finally feel like the road is mine to choose.’*

John echoed this feeling: *‘Now, I'm thinking about possibilities I wouldn't have dared dream about before.’* Both statements reflect the transformative power of education not only as preparation for work, but as an existential reawakening.

Niamh among the Stories

My own experience of this is the pure joy you feel in your heart when talking about your return to education and what you are learning, and the new people you are meeting. Even if a career never followed the expansion of my world and my mind is reward enough for the work involved.

Sub-theme 5.4: Building Futures Through Collective Encouragement

Peer support, educator affirmation, and shared reflection were essential in helping participants see themselves as people *with* futures and not just survivors of the past.

Faye said: *'I was surprised by how much I looked forward to chatting with classmates even though they're all younger. They helped me feel I had something to contribute.'* That recognition sparked momentum and self-worth.

Finn, recovering from years of depression and addiction, described his peers as a lifeline: *'Being part of a group again reminded me I wasn't alone in feeling lost.'* Education didn't just give him a future; it gave him companions and sense of belonging.

John shared how his return to education was life-changing for him in that it changed his thinking and his perspective on life; *'But I do feel lucky to have experienced that (Maynooth University) and you know, I think it's definitely changed me and my ways of thinking, into better ways.'*

Niamh among the Stories

Exploring my experiences through this research has helped me see myself and my life journey as part of a broader movement of people rediscovering themselves and their identities through learning and connection: *'I now see that my story is not an exception, but part of a larger story.'*

In describing new possibilities and orientations toward the future, participants revealed the emancipatory potential of education as a space for agency and self-authorship. The discussion chapter situates these forward-looking narratives within wider debates on reflexive identity and the practice of freedom in adult education

4.7 Conclusion

Across the narratives presented, five interrelated themes emerged: the five themes introduced earlier. Each theme illustrates a different dimension of how adults experience identity transformation through education. While they are distinct, they also overlap and inform one another, together offering a textured account of transformation as both personal and relational.

These findings show that adult education is not experienced simply as a vehicle for skills or qualifications but as a profound space for identity work. Learners revisited earlier experiences of exclusion, self-doubt, and silence; they discovered renewed confidence and belonging; and they began to author more integrated and hopeful versions of themselves. Importantly, these processes were shaped not only by individual reflection but by the presence of peers, educators, and supportive learning environments that affirmed participants' voices and capacities.

The themes also reveal that identity transformation is neither linear nor uniform. For some, it involved confronting painful memories and feelings of self-doubt; for others, it was about rediscovering creativity, reclaiming agency, or imagining a future aligned more closely with personal values. My own autoethnographic reflections echo these patterns, underscoring that the journey of transformation is at once deeply individual and widely shared.

Taken together, the findings highlight the complexity of identity transformation as an ongoing, reflexive process, one that integrates past experiences, reconfigures present understandings, and opens space for new futures. The next chapter draws these themes into conversation with the theoretical perspectives outlined in the literature review, showing how participant voices and personal narratives resonate with and extend existing debates in adult and community education.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Analysis

5.1 Introduction

The findings of this study revealed five interconnected themes: the five themes introduced earlier. Together, these themes show that adult education is experienced not only as a means of gaining knowledge or qualifications but as a profound space for identity transformation. Learners re-examined earlier assumptions, navigated inner doubt, discovered belonging, and began to integrate past experiences into more authentic and hopeful narratives of self.

This chapter builds on those findings by situating them within the theoretical and conceptual frameworks outlined in the literature review. In doing so, it explores how the lived experiences of participants, alongside my own autoethnographic reflections, illuminate broader debates in adult and community education. Specifically, the analysis examines how identity transformation unfolds as a reflexive, relational, and future-oriented process, shaped by both personal histories and wider cultural narratives.

The discussion is structured around the five key themes that emerged from the findings, weaving together participant voices, theoretical perspectives, and personal reflection. This approach demonstrates how adult education can act as a crucible for transformation, a space where authenticity is reclaimed, inner voices are confronted, connections are forged, past and present selves are reconciled, and new futures are imagined.

5.2 Reclaiming the Self

The process of returning to education was repeatedly described by participants as a profound act of reclaiming the self. This theme reflects a journey not only of acquiring new knowledge or vocational direction, but also of revisiting and restoring long-held parts of the self that had been overshadowed by societal pressures, professional constraints, or personal adversity. In doing so, learners embarked on a process that aligns closely with Cranton's (2006) conception of transformative learning as a move toward greater authenticity. To become more 'authentic,' in Cranton's terms, is to critically examine and shed external roles or internalised scripts that are no longer congruent with one's values and aspirations.

For many participants, adult education was less of a detour and more of a return to an integrated and honest version of the self. Susan, for instance, initially pursued furniture design, a choice shaped by perceived practicality and external validation. Yet her eventual pivot toward music and sound production marked not only a change of direction but also a personal reconnection with a creative identity that had been put on hold. Her reflection, 'I know I'm not going to be

an international rockstar, but I've started doing gigs, it kind of paid off', is representative of the reconnection. Here, success is not defined by status or outcome, but by alignment with one's own passions and interests.

Faye offers another compelling example. As a child, she aspired to study marine biology, but a teacher's dismissiveness and lack of encouragement undermined this aspiration. Years later, she was further discouraged from pursuing a love of art by her father, but this time insisted upon following her dream, which ultimately gave her a channel through which to re-express both her creativity and capacity. Her journey was about reclaiming a sense of capability, legitimacy and her authentic self. This act of re-authoring her narrative resonates with Illeris's (2014) argument that transformative learning is not simply cognitive but deeply emotional and personal. It involves integration of past pain and future possibility, facilitated through an educational experience that validates the learner's evolving identity.

My own journey through adult education echoes these experiences. The courtroom had conditioned me to value certainty, detachment, and a performative kind of composure. This professional identity, while externally validated, left little room for emotional depth or creative inquiry. In transitioning into adult education spaces, I began to encounter and eventually embrace 'the quieter, evolving parts of myself that had long remained silent.' This was not about rejecting all previous achievements, but about rebalancing the self, where vulnerability, curiosity, and reflection could coexist with intellectual engagement.

For Finn, education offered a lifeline after years marked by addiction, depression, and chronic self-doubt. His decision to study psychology was not only academically significant but personally transformative. Education allowed him to start believing in himself again. It provided him with not only knowledge, but a structure for healing, a framework through which to make sense of his past and reclaim his future.

Across these stories, it becomes clear that participants often returned to learning with a sense of unfinished business, dreams deferred, identities questioned, or confidence eroded. Through supportive educational environments, they were able to confront and revise internalised limitations, engage again with hope and dreams, and reframe their understanding of who they are and what they are capable of.

Ultimately, this theme underscores that adult education can serve as a sacred space for identity reconstruction. It offers learners the tools, language, and relational context to look inward, challenge inherited narratives, and reassert authorship over their lives. Reclaiming the self, as

evidenced by the participants and my own journey, is not simply a by-product of adult learning; it is often its most powerful outcome.

5.3 Confronting the Voice Within

A second major theme that emerged from the data was the internal negotiation with self-doubt, a persistent sense of unworthiness, or not belonging in academic settings, despite evidence of competence. For many participants, this self-doubt was deeply rooted in early educational experiences and shaped by societal narratives about intelligence, success, and belonging. It often re-emerged during their return to education, prompting uncomfortable but ultimately transformative self-reflection.

Elaine shared, 'I didn't think I was smart enough for university,' revealing how early messages about academic inadequacy had embedded themselves in her sense of identity. She had been held back in primary school and overlooked by her career guidance services and had therefore internalised the belief that higher education was 'not for someone like me.' Her decision in later life to attend university echoed what Mezirow (1991) describes as a 'disorienting dilemma', a moment or process that challenges taken-for-granted assumptions and triggers critical reassessment. For Elaine, returning to study disrupted long-held beliefs of inadequacy and forced a re-evaluation of her capabilities.

Similarly, John, an experienced professional, found himself disorientated by the move from work to academia. 'Am I still capable of doing this? My brain had been idle for so long,' he recalled. Despite his technical competence and life experience, he questioned whether he could succeed in a formal learning environment. His story illustrates how self-doubt is not simply about a lack of confidence but about the conflict between internalised narratives and personal growth. As Giddens (1991) suggests, identity is a reflexive project, shaped and reshaped by social feedback and new settings.

This theme echoed my own journey. Transitioning from my legal persona required a reorientation of voice and identity. Legal practice had trained me in certainty, objectivity, and emotional detachment. Those values were at extreme odds with the vulnerability and reflexivity demanded in adult education. I remember feeling almost tongue-tied at first, like I didn't know the 'rules' of this new space. Writing autoethnographically, I feared that personal reflection would be perceived as self-indulgent. Yet, as Ellis and Bochner (2000) argue, autoethnography is not about self-centredness but about self-awareness, a method of inquiry that recognises personal experience as a site of legitimate, analytical insight.

Many participants echoed this conflict between outward performance and inner uncertainty. Finn, for instance, reflected on the gap between how others perceived him and how he saw himself: ‘Was my brain still working? Could I remember anything? Despite being top of his class in childhood and admired for his intelligence throughout his life, his inner dialogue was filled with self-doubt, shaped by decades of depression and addiction. His experience reinforces the idea that self-doubt is not a superficial lack of confidence but can be a deep-rooted consequence of a lifetime of emotional pain and neglect.

These narratives also highlight the inner strength required to confront feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy. Participants had to navigate feelings of shame, fear, and grief, and emotions often tied to old wounds and unprocessed experiences. Faye, who struggled with low self-worth stemming from childhood trauma, shared how a counselling essay allowed her to reframe her narrative: ‘That helped me deeply understand myself.’ Education became a space of healing and understanding for her, where academic tasks served as methods of self-exploration. This process reflects Illeris (in Discussion)’s (2014) emphasis on emotional integration as a vital component of transformative learning.

The journey from self-doubt to self-recognition was neither immediate nor straightforward. Many participants reported a slow softening of their internal critic, often prompted by peer affirmation, relational support, and opportunities for honest reflection. Finn, for instance, described how two classmates consistently encouraged him: ‘They pushed me along, they made me feel part of something.’ Elaine spoke about how her classmates, many of whom were younger, saw her strengths before she did. These stories reflect the powerful role of community in disrupting beliefs of self-doubt and inadequacy.

Indeed, peer relationships frequently served as mirrors that allowed participants to glimpse aspects of themselves, they had not previously recognised or affirmed. As discussed in the literature review, Taylor and Cranton (2012) argue that identity transformation occurs not in isolation, but through dialogue and relationship. In this study, peer support was not merely comforting; it was revelatory, allowing participants to rediscover themselves through the eyes of others.

From a sociocultural perspective, feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy can also be understood as a response to dominant narratives about who education is ‘for’ and what intelligence looks like. Participants frequently described feeling that they did not ‘belong’ in education spaces, often comparing themselves to younger or more traditionally educated peers. This speaks to

the enduring power of cultural and institutional narratives that equate academic success with uninterrupted educational progression.

By returning to education later in life, the participants challenged such narratives and began to write new stories of authenticity and value. In doing so, they underwent what Mezirow (1991) terms ‘perspective transformation’, a fundamental shift in the way they understood themselves and their place in the world. Through critical reflection, relational validation, and emotional resilience, participants moved from internalised doubt towards a more grounded and authentic identity.

In summary, confronting self-doubt and the inner critic was a key element of identity transformation and self-rediscovery for the participants in this study. It involved exploring hidden narratives, revisiting painful memories, and opening up to the ideas of self-worth and authenticity. Education became both the setting and the catalyst for this monumental shift, a space where old narratives of doubt and inadequacy were heard, challenged, and, over time, re-authored.

5.4 Belonging Through Connection

A profound theme that emerged across participant narratives was the transformative power of connection. Participants often entered educational spaces not only with academic apprehension but with a sense of social marginalisation. Many described feelings of being ‘too old’, ‘too different’, or ‘out of place’ in comparison to more traditionally educated students or wealthier, socially connected students. Yet, across these experiences, it was peer relationships and educator support that offered a pathway toward transformation. These connections provided more than companionship; they served as emotional anchors and affirming mirrors.

This theme supports the work of Illeris (2014), who suggests that learning is always situated within contentment, incentive, and interaction. According to Illeris, the interactional or relational dimension is not merely a backdrop to learning but a crucial mechanism through which transformation takes root. Similarly, Taylor and Cranton (2012) assert that meaningful learning occurs through dialogue, empathy, and the co-construction of meaning. In this view, identity is not formed in isolation but emerges through encounters with others who help reflect, challenge, and affirm our evolving sense of self.

Finn’s experience is a good example. Returning to education in his mid-50s, he initially felt alienated among younger classmates, whom he described as ‘touchy-touchy’ and alien to his world. However, one peer, Ciara, offered him the opportunity of inclusion: ‘She snatched me,

she helped me feel like I belonged.’ This simple gesture disrupted his narrative of social exclusion and shifted his identity from outsider to valued peer. This is an example of what Seidman (2013) calls the ‘epiphany of connection’, when a learner experiences relational validation that changes how they view themselves in relation to others.

This interpersonal transformation was repeated in other participant stories. Bobby initially feared that his age and background in banking would set him apart in teacher training. Yet, younger peers not only welcomed him but sought his perspective. ‘I suppose I brought something different, but they respected that’, he noted. Rather than being sidelined, Brian’s age and life experience became assets in the learning community. This reframing supported his ongoing journey of self-rediscovery, highlighting that belonging was not contingent on age or conformity, but on contribution and mutual respect.

Elaine, who had long internalised the message that she wasn’t ‘university material’, described how peer interactions gradually eroded that belief. ‘They didn’t see me as different’, she shared. ‘And slowly, I started to believe I wasn’t’. These moments of peer validation challenged deep-rooted internalised narratives and created conditions for what Cranton (2006) refers to as ‘authenticity’, a way of being that emerges when individuals feel safe to express their whole selves.

My own educational journey mirrors these patterns. Conversations with classmates often opened up the emotional and intellectual dimensions I had long repressed during my legal career. These conversations became spaces of meaning and insight, where I could question and be vulnerable.

Participants frequently spoke about these spaces as unexpected gifts. Faye, who had suffered childhood trauma and carried feelings of inadequacy, shared that her peers ‘saw her strengths before she did’. Elaine noted that group work and class discussions were critical in reshaping how she saw herself, ‘They didn’t treat me like I was older or less capable’. In both cases, belonging was felt through everyday interactions where dignity and worth were affirmed.

Participants spoke of then in turn modelling emotional openness, resilience, and generosity. Finn noted that once he began to feel included, he also began offering support to others, ‘They’d ask me stuff, they knew I’d been around’. In this way, mature learners were not just beneficiaries of community but co-creators of it.

These experiences suggest that belonging is not an incidental outcome of education but a core component of transformative learning. When learners feel seen, heard, and valued by peers, they are more willing to take intellectual risks, to share vulnerabilities, and to reimagine their place in the world.

Finally, these findings intersect with Giddens' (1991) notion of the reflexive project of the self, in which identity is continuously shaped and reshaped through social interaction. The classroom, then, becomes a space where the self is negotiated and rediscovered, not just through curriculum but through community.

In summary, *Belonging Through Connection* affirms that adult education is not solely an academic endeavour, but a deeply personal one. Peer relationships serve as catalysts for self-worth, belonging and connection. They provide the emotional scaffolding needed for learners to confront old wounds, take new risks, and imagine new versions of themselves.

Adult learners often arrived in educational settings carrying not just academic anxiety but a sense of social marginalisation. Yet, many found profound transformation through safe educational spaces and peer relationships. This theme supports the work of Illeris (2014) and Taylor and Cranton (2012), who argue that transformation occurs in relational contexts where dialogue, empathy, and shared vulnerability are present.

5.5 Reconciling Past and Present Selves

The act of returning to education frequently catalysed profound personal reflection for participants. In particular, it served as a means of revisiting and reinterpreting past experiences, often characterised by regret, trauma, or a sense of missed opportunity. This reflective process was not only therapeutic but transformative, enabling learners to construct more coherent and compassionate narratives about who they were, who they are, and who they are becoming. This theme aligns closely with McAdams's (1993) theory of identity as a narrative construct, one that is continuously edited in light of new experiences and understandings. Through adult education, participants were able to weave together fragmented life chapters into more meaningful, integrated stories.

For Elaine, the return to university rekindled a long-held aspiration that had been dismissed early in life. Recounting how higher education 'wasn't for people like me,' Elaine revealed the internalised class-based and academic assumptions that had shaped her self-perception. Watching peers go to university while she took another path left her with a sense of exclusion and unfulfilled potential. Returning to study offered her more than a qualification; it provided

a redemptive narrative arc: ‘I used to drive past Maynooth and long to be one of them,’ she shared. Now, as a student, she re-situated herself within that landscape, not as an outsider, but as a rightful participant.

Faye described how unresolved childhood trauma and dismissed ambitions had left her with lingering doubts about her capability and self-worth. Her engagement with counselling modules in her studies, particularly a deeply personal assignment, allowed her to draw connections between her past experiences and current identity: ‘That counselling essay helped me understand why I couldn’t take compliments.’ The educational space became a container for healing, allowing her to narrate her past not as a fixed source of shame, but as part of a longer story of resilience and growth. This is what Mezirow (1991) describes as a transformation in meaning perspectives, where reinterpretation of life events leads to a more empowering self-concept.

Finn similarly found in education a way to bring coherence to a life disrupted by addiction, depression, and social isolation. Once labelled as a gifted child, Finn’s potential had been buried under years of struggle. Studying psychology offered him the tools to understand these struggles: ‘It gave language to my pain.’ Rather than viewing his past as a series of failures, he began to see it as a context for growth and reflection. His learning process allowed him to reclaim aspects of himself that had long been neglected or buried beneath stigma.

John articulated a contrast between his earlier, unsuccessful attempt at college and his current return as a mature, more focused learner. Describing his younger self as ‘immature’ and lacking direction, he saw his adult education experience as a moment of redemption and clarity: ‘I knew I wanted to be something, and education was the way.’ The juxtaposition of past and present not only provided perspective but enabled a fuller, more generous self-understanding. As Randall (2014) notes, storytelling allows individuals to integrate life experience into a narrative that is not only reflective but also forward-facing.

My own journey echoes these accounts. The identity I had constructed within the legal profession, while externally impressive, had become increasingly at odds with my inner world. It was, in many ways, a performative identity, one shaped by authority, precision, and emotional restraint. As I engaged in adult education and began writing autoethnographically, I realised that what I had once considered a strength was often a mask. Through reflective practice, relational learning, and narrative inquiry, I began to re-author a story that honoured emotional vulnerability, intellectual curiosity, and authentic self-expression. This was not a

rejection of my past but an integration of it, a way of bringing forward what served me and gently releasing what no longer did.

These stories reveal that narrative integration is a central feature of identity transformation in adult learning. It is through reflection, often prompted by assignments, peer dialogue, or introspective coursework, that learners begin to reframe who they were, not as failures or detours, but as necessary parts of a larger, unfolding story. Illeris (2014) emphasises that transformative learning requires both cognitive and emotional engagement, and this dual focus is evident in how participants made meaning of their earlier experiences.

Furthermore, these reflections underscore the emotional labour involved in such transformations. Making peace with past selves requires courage, compassion, and the willingness to revisit uncomfortable truths. Yet, in doing so within a supportive educational environment, learners were able to find coherence where there had once been fragmentation. As Bauman (2000) suggests, identity in modernity is fluid and self-constructed; adult education offered participants the tools and context to reshape their narratives on their own terms.

In sum, the process of reconciling past and present selves illustrates that adult education is not merely about acquiring future-oriented skills. It is also a space for looking back with new eyes, for re-storying the past in ways that honour complexity, foster healing, and support more empowered and hopeful futures.

5.6 Imagining New Futures

The final theme centres on possibility, forward momentum, and the reclaiming of agency. For many participants, returning to education was not only a retrospective act of narrative integration but also a prospective one, a space in which they began to imagine, perhaps for the first time in years, alternative futures rooted in authenticity, hope, and self-authorship. This capacity to envision a life beyond past constraints and inherited expectations reflects what Bauman (2000) and Giddens (1991) describe as the reflexive project of the self in late modernity, where identity becomes a continuous negotiation between past experience and future aspiration.

Susan articulated this transformation with clarity and humility: ‘I don’t know exactly what’s next, but I finally feel like the road is mine to choose.’ This shift from uncertainty to agency did not depend on having a clear plan. Rather, it signified a change in orientation, from reacting to circumstances to authoring possibilities. Education, in this sense, provided not only skills or

credentials but a framework for reimagining what was possible. It helped learners move from survival mode to a place of intentional, values-aligned living.

Bobby offered a parallel narrative. A former banking professional who had once embodied corporate success, he now questioned whether his previous role had ever truly reflected who he was. 'I used to be so certain about who I was... now I realise that person was performing a role more than living a life.' In returning to education and training as a teacher, Bobby began to reconstruct a version of himself less concerned with status and more focused on purpose, connection, and contribution. His story underscores the idea that adult learning is not merely vocational but existential, a crucible for becoming.

What stands out in these narratives is not just the shift in future direction, but the process by which learners began to believe in the possibility of change. This belief was often scaffolded by peer relationships and community. Faye described classmates who 'saw her strengths before she did,' and who helped her rediscover her own capacity for joy, creativity, and self-worth. Finn, who had battled addiction and years of disconnection, described his classmates as a 'lifeline' that helped him imagine a life beyond his past. These relational experiences offered more than support; they acted as mirrors reflecting potential, affirming that transformation was not only desirable but achievable.

My own journey reflects a similar transition. Leaving the courtroom meant shedding a role that, while once empowering, had become constraining. Stepping into education was, for me, a step into ambiguity, into an identity not yet fully formed, and a path not clearly marked. Yet within that ambiguity lay potential. Education became the site where the unknown felt generative rather than threatening, where I could begin to imagine futures that were more aligned with my values, emotional truth, and intellectual curiosity.

As hooks (1994) writes, 'education is the practice of freedom', a process that enables us to transgress imposed boundaries and imagine new realities. In this study, participants did not speak of education solely in transactional terms. They spoke of it as a space of reinvention, of relational belonging, and of creative possibility. Futures imagined were not always defined by job titles or traditional success markers, but by fulfilment, alignment, and growth.

This orientation toward agency and hope also emerged in subtle but powerful shifts in language. Participants began to use phrases like 'I can,' 'I want to,' and 'I choose to' rather than 'I have to' or 'I should.' These linguistic changes reflect deeper cognitive and emotional shifts, from external obligation to internal motivation. As Illeris (2014) notes, motivation is a

key dimension of transformative learning, and here it was evident in the way learners began to take ownership of their narratives and envision futures that felt not only possible but personally meaningful.

Moreover, this reimagining of the future was not about erasing the past but integrating it into a new, fuller story of the self. The pains, detours, and setbacks became part of a tapestry from which new patterns could emerge. In this way, education offered not just a second chance but a new lens, a way of seeing oneself and the world that opened up space for agency, creativity, and connection.

In sum, this final theme captures the emancipatory potential of adult education. It affirms that transformation is not just retrospective, a way of making peace with the past, but prospective: a way of building futures grounded in hope, autonomy, and relational belonging. For the participants in this study, and for myself, education became not only a journey of return but a horizon of becoming

5.7 Revisiting the Research Question

The central research question guiding this study was: How do adult learners experience identity transformation and self-rediscovery through transformative learning, as shaped by personal narratives and shared experience?

The findings across participant narratives and my own autoethnographic reflections suggest that identity transformation in adult education is not a singular or uniform event, but a deeply personal, emotional, and relational journey. This transformation is shaped by a confluence of factors: unresolved wounds from the past, critical reflection in the present, and emergent hopes for the future. It is not confined to the classroom but unfolds in conversations, in solitude, in writing, and in the quiet act of showing up to learn despite fear or uncertainty.

Transformative learning, as experienced in this study, manifests through five interlocking dimensions:

Reclaiming authenticity (Cranton, 2006): Participants rediscovered sidelined passions, forgotten aspirations, and parts of themselves that had long been suppressed under the weight of professional roles or social expectations. Education offered a space to become more aligned with one's true values and emotional truth.

Challenging internal narratives of inadequacy (Mezirow, 1991): The return to learning disrupted entrenched beliefs of unworthiness and invited critical self-reflection. Learners

confronted feelings of self-doubt and began to deconstruct the internalised voices that once held them back.

Finding meaning in connection (hooks, 1994; Illeris, 2014): Peer relationships played a pivotal role in shaping identity transformation. Moments of relational validation, empathy, and shared vulnerability helped participants feel seen, affirmed, and capable of change.

Re-authoring life stories (McAdams, 1993): Participants used their educational journeys to revisit and reinterpret past experiences, integrating them into more coherent and compassionate narratives. Assignments, counselling modules, and reflective exercises became tools for personal insight and narrative healing.

Imagining alternative futures: Education acted as a launchpad for reimagining what life could look like. Futures were no longer inherited or reactive, but self-authored, guided by inner values and sustained by relational support.

Through the lens of autoethnography, my own experiences did not merely parallel those of the participants but engaged with them in dialogue. The process of writing, reflecting, and revisiting my own educational journey revealed shared contours of vulnerability, rediscovery, and growth. Adult education can serve as a powerful site for identity reconstruction, offering not just content, but context, not just knowledge, but space. It is within this space that learners can pause, reflect, and imagine anew who they are and who they might yet become.

5.8 Limitations and Reflections

While this study offers rich, textured insights into the identity transformations experienced by adult learners, it does so with several important limitations. The use of autoethnography, while deeply generative for uncovering nuanced, emotionally layered experiences, also imposes constraints on scope and generalisability. As both researcher and participant, my interpretations are inevitably shaped by my own positionality as a former barrister, a mature student, and someone personally navigating the terrain of identity rediscovery. These dual roles offered unique depth but also introduced potential for bias.

Moreover, the participant sample was small and self-selecting. Those who chose to participate were, in many cases, already inclined toward reflection and had found value in their educational experiences. As such, the study may under-represent those for whom education was alienating, disempowering, or incomplete in its transformative promise. The findings, therefore, are not intended to be representative of all adult learners but to evoke what Ellis and Bochner (2000)

describe as ‘resonance rather than generalisability.’ The goal of autoethnographic inquiry is not to produce universal truths, but to offer stories rich enough to prompt recognition, connection, and critical reflection in others.

This research also demanded emotional labour, both from me and from participants. The intensity of exploring trauma, vulnerability, and personal growth required a careful balancing of empathy and ethical responsibility. Confidentiality was paramount, as was the creation of a research environment that honoured participants' dignity and autonomy. Reflexive practices were embedded throughout the process to ensure that emotional exposure was met with care. As detailed in Chapter 3, this included maintaining ongoing consent, offering opt-out opportunities, and prioritising psychological safety in interviews and analysis.

On a personal level, the research process prompted moments of profound introspection, discomfort, and ultimately, growth. Writing autoethnographically demanded that I not only interpret the stories of others but also expose and examine my own. In doing so, the boundary between researcher and subject blurred, inviting a more holistic and vulnerable approach to knowledge production. This methodological positioning may be seen as a limitation by some, but it was also the wellspring of the study's insight.

5.9 Conclusion

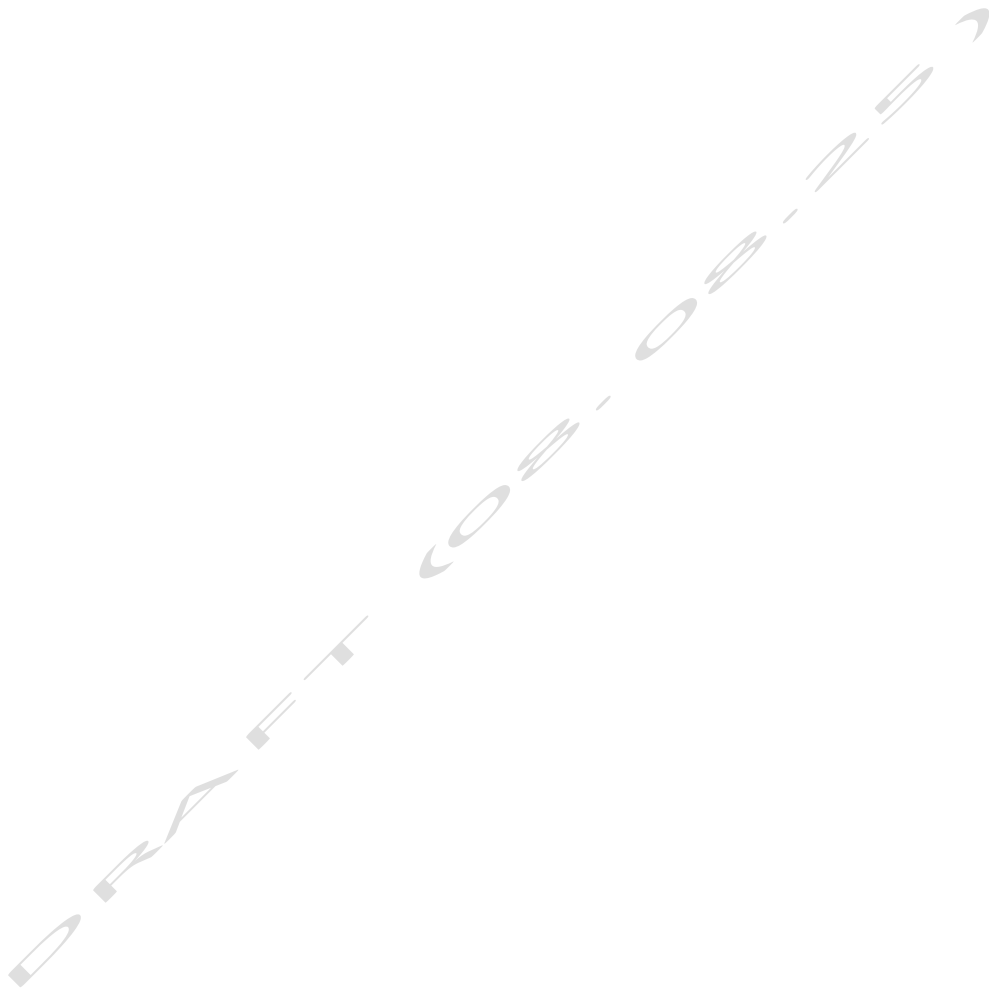
This chapter has explored the five themes identified in the findings, the five themes introduced earlier, and situated them within the wider theoretical landscape of transformative learning and identity studies. Taken together, these themes highlight identity transformation as an ongoing, reflexive process of becoming, shaped by the interplay of personal history, relational connection, and future aspiration.

The voices of participants, alongside my own, reveal the richness of this process. Bobby's declaration that he no longer wanted ‘to be invisible,’ Susan's admission that she feared she had ‘fooled’ others into believing she belonged, and Elaine's reflection that she could now forgive her earlier self all illustrate the diverse ways learners confront and reconfigure their sense of identity through education. These accounts underscore that transformation is not linear, nor uniform, but deeply personal, relational, and context dependent.

By connecting these lived experiences to theorists such as Mezirow, Illeris, Cranton, Giddens, and Bauman, the analysis demonstrates that adult education is more than a site of skill acquisition. It is a crucible for self-discovery and self-authorship, a relational space where

learners are supported to challenge old narratives, integrate past and present selves, and imagine new futures.

As the thesis now moves to its final chapter, these insights provide a foundation for considering how adult and community education practice might better support learners undergoing such identity transitions. The recommendations that follow aim to translate these findings into strategies for fostering compassionate, inclusive, and transformative educational environments that honour both the struggles and the possibilities of adult learners' journeys.



Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This thesis set out to explore how adult learners experience identity transformation and self-rediscovery through education, drawing on both participant narratives and my own autoethnographic reflections. Guided by a relativist and constructivist stance, the study has shown that adult education is not only a place of knowledge acquisition, but also a deeply personal and relational space where learners negotiate authenticity, confront doubt, find belonging, reconcile past experiences, and imagine new futures.

6.2 Revisiting the Journey

The opening chapter framed the research as both personal and collective, situated within the field of adult and community education. The literature review examined perspectives on transformative learning, reflexive identity, and authenticity. The methodology combined semi-structured interviews with autoethnographic inquiry, recognising the researcher's dual role as subject and analyst. The findings highlighted four interrelated themes: identity, transformation, authenticity, and self-rediscovery. These themes were deepened through dialogue with theory, illustrating how adult learning acts as a crucible for identity reconstruction.

6.3 Key Contributions

This study contributes to scholarship and practice in three significant ways. First, it affirms the centrality of identity work in adult education, extending existing models of transformative learning to highlight not only cognitive change but also the emotional, relational, and narrative dimensions of transformation. Second, it demonstrates the value of autoethnography as a methodology, showing how personal reflection, when placed in dialogue with participant narratives, can illuminate the interplay between individual experience and wider cultural forces. Finally, it offers practical insights by providing recommendations for policy makers, practitioners, and researchers, with an emphasis on compassion, inclusivity, and learner agency in the design and delivery of adult education.

6.4 Recommendations

This research journey has confirmed for me that adult and community education can be a powerful site of identity work, transformation, authenticity, and self-rediscovery but to really harness this power there needs to be a greater recognition of identity development and personal transformation as core outcomes of adult education.

Policy frameworks particularly in more recent times, present adult learning primarily as a mechanism for labour market preparation. Yet participants in this study spoke about education as a process of healing and discovering who they really were, a finding which confirms that adult education must also be valued for its personal and social outcomes. Access routes and the recognition of prior learning should continue to be widened and made more flexible. For many learners, early childhood and educational experiences left them doubting their own capabilities and whether education would ever be a part of their journey. Policies should continue to dismantle these barriers, helping to ensure that adult education remains accessible and genuinely inclusive. Alongside this, wellbeing and mental health supports should be embedded within provision, since many learners experience self-doubt and vulnerability when returning to study. Finally, funding frameworks must give greater recognition to and place value on, reflective, holistic and creative programmes. These programmes currently provide rich opportunities for healing, authenticity and self-rediscovery but are undervalued in the 'skills to work' era. Maybe such programmes would sit better among a holistic approach to some of our society's biggest challenges such as poverty, addiction, loneliness, poor mental health and the general disconnect that exists in society today. We are not only disconnected from ourselves, but we are disconnected from each other and the natural world that we inhabit.

In practice, this research highlights the central role of educators in creating conditions where personal growth and transformation can take place. Safe and inclusive learning environments are vital, spaces where learners can explore identity and share authentic experiences without fear of judgement. Participants described moments when classroom dynamics allowed them to forget their discomfort and engage more fully, demonstrating the importance of relational practice. Embedding transformative learning approaches such as reflective practice, storytelling, and dialogue enables learners to integrate new identities and reconnect with themselves. Authenticity is further supported when practitioners validate lived experience as a form of knowledge. For one participant, the act of helping others gave renewed purpose and

affirmed their sense of self. Peer support structures are important in recognising the sustaining power of group connection in times of uncertainty. Underpinning all of this is the need for ongoing professional development, ensuring that educators are equipped with skills in reflective pedagogy, trauma-informed practice, and facilitation of identity work.

For researchers, this work identifies several potential directions for further research. More research could be undertaken in the area of identity transformation in the context of adult and community education programmes delivered to disadvantaged adults and marginalized communities, older people, people with disabilities, early school leavers and one-parent families for example. Longitudinal studies could deepen understanding of how authenticity and self-rediscovery are sustained over time and how these changes affect family life, employment, and community participation. Further research could explore how the role of educators can continue to support learner transformation, focusing on the pedagogical and relational strategies that best nurture learners' journeys. Finally, this study is hopefully an example of the value of autoethnography for connecting personal and collective narratives. Researchers should be encouraged to continue refining and expanding the use of this methodology within adult and community education, as it offers a powerful means of capturing the lived experience of identity, personal growth and transformation.

Together, these recommendations aim to strengthen the sector's capacity to respond to learners as whole people, not only as students acquiring skills. From a policy perspective the value of reflective pedagogy, trauma-informed practice, and the facilitation of identity work should be embedded into national frameworks and funding priorities. For practitioners, the challenge lies in continuing to cultivate inclusive and reflective pedagogies that honour lived experience when adult education is increasingly becoming about the skills-based economy. For researchers, the opportunity is to extend the evidence base on identity work, learner authenticity and transformative learning across diverse contexts. In combination, these actions will help ensure that adult and community education continues to be a transformative force, preparing learners not only to move forward in life, but also to reconnect with who they truly are and to move forward as their true authentic selves.

6.5 Closing Reflections

For both participants and myself, education was experienced as unsettling and liberating, a place where inherited voices of doubt could be challenged and where more authentic selves could take shape. Identity transformation, as demonstrated here, is not linear but a lifelong, reflexive process of becoming. Adult education, when responsive to this complexity, has the potential to act as a practice of freedom, healing, and social connection.

6.6 Final Word

The true power of adult education lies not only in what is learned, but in who learners become. I know this because it happened to me. I walked in as one person and, slowly, came out as someone else. By creating spaces where past and present can be reconciled, and futures imagined with hope, adult education enables people to re-story their lives in ways that are both personally meaningful and socially transformative. The challenge ahead is to ensure that such opportunities are accessible, inclusive, and sustained, so that the transformative promise of education is realised for all who seek it.

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