

## ESOL and Covid-19: Developing community capital in times of disconnection

### **Background:**

Although not in any way related to a research project, and intended as a voluntary community development initiative, the experience of running the English lessons in Preston shines a light on ways in which community capital can be developed. In this article I will discuss how even in times of crisis, such as the current unprecedented Covid-19 crisis, principles pertaining to the connected communities approach such as involving individuals and facilitating a continued group learning experience in adverse circumstances increases the level of connectedness, citizenship and community building.

Since autumn 2018 I have been organising and delivering English language lessons at a local primary school in Inner East Preston. The English language lessons were initiated as part of the activity programme run by the local community group *Casa Românilor* back in 2014, when they were aimed mainly at the Romanian community in Preston. In 2018 the venue changed to a local primary school, as did the scope, so as to welcome any non-English speakers of any nationality.

The classes are run with the help of retired UCLan TESOL lecturer Nick Gregson, with the nationalities of current learners including Romanian, Latvian, Indian, Polish, Bulgarian and Hungarian. The lessons are offered for free, as the teaching is done on a voluntary basis and the venue is offered at no charge for the use by the wider community by the headteacher of a local primary school who understands the value of language adult education being made available to parents from the school.

Evidence based on keeping in contact with previous attendees suggests that some are showing a significant degree of becoming part of a wider community, with some joining in health and wellbeing movements such as Parkrun, and more locally, joining in community action, such as litter picking. More than that, there is gratitude for being in this country and a willingness to engage in citizenship to a larger extent than might be expected. Indeed, the sentiments of gratitude and reluctance to be a burden on the state expressed by members of the Iranian community and noted in [Reza Gholami's article](#) in April's 'The Conversation' are equally evident in many other immigrant communities and frequently the subject of discussion in our English classes. Anecdotally, there is a strong argument that access to such initiatives supports social and economic inclusion by providing individuals with a further impetus for self development and positive educational outcomes for themselves and their children.

### **How has Covid-19 changed things?**

The current circumstances have put an end to group meetings at the school. The English language classes have now migrated to the virtual realm and as before, we still meet every Wednesday evening but now via Skype.

The change from a physical presence in a classroom to a virtual presence in our own living rooms has not been without its challenges. I would suspect that few ESOL learners are likely to be enthusiastic embracers of technology as a medium for learning, or to find technology easy to navigate and to operate. However, with no indication from the six online sessions that have taken place since the

lockdown commenced that the learners who have managed to join on Skype have any imminent intention of ending their participation, it appears that there is a continuing level of interest and commitment. Lessons at the school were attended by a minimum 15 and a maximum 20 learners, with Skype sessions being attended by a minimum 7 and maximum 10 learners each week. There have been several learners who have been in touch to let us know that the technology was an insurmountable barrier for them. Despite the technical difficulties for us all which have at times made learning even more difficult, through overcoming technology barriers, and persevering with the classes, we have laughed and learned but most importantly remained engaged and connected to one another during times of crisis, which is particularly important for groups who are already social isolated and marginalised.

Perhaps the question should be what things have not been changed by Covid-19 in our English lessons? And the answer would be that multi-cultural connectivity has been kept very much alive during times of social distancing. As in the classroom, attendees who continued English lessons via Skype have shown a lot of patience and I suspect the connections within the group will be strengthened.

### **Is the current situation an opportunity to look at things differently?**

In the current circumstances, ESOL teaching might not seem to be the most important thing on the agenda. But the current situation made me reflect on what the shift in policy and funding priorities that might be expected would imply for how things should be done differently. The withdrawal, in response to austerity of resources from local authorities that previously provided community services for adult education, has been counterproductive in the context of recent waves of immigration. I would like to join my voice to those who ask for a suitably resourced public sector that can ensure that a version of our English language lessons happens at a wider scale, as there is no doubt that such a measure would be of great benefit to individuals and wider communities. With the greatest will in the world, the demand is far greater than that which we are able to accommodate in our lessons. The experience of teaching the groups over the past few years has been both sobering - in terms of how much resilience can be re-learned, and humbling – in terms of all the hidden humanity that is revealed in what often termed as ‘migrant communities’. Despite language barriers there have been many, often heart-warming instances of connection.

In a new world, in places like Inner East Preston, it is obvious that not tapping into the energy, willingness and commitment of the ‘migrant communities’ or for the state not to take proper responsibility for doing so by allocating sufficient resource would be short-sighted. Moreover, it would raise a serious question as to whether, from this very recent experience, anything concerning this important aspect of citizenship has been learned.

Austerity looks to have been a failed experiment, impacting on the availability of effective community support in an uneven and often negative way. While a supportive community environment is fundamental, proper funding by local authorities to meet local need in all corners of the community is necessary to achieve it. In recent times, the onus has been unfairly placed on charities and community groups to provide services that the cash - strapped local authorities can no longer provide. Now would be a good time to re-think this strategy.

In a different world with a focus on funding evidence-based initiatives, I might conclude that further research and/or evaluation is necessary to demonstrate the benefits of free English language provision for non-speakers as adult learning to individuals and community. But post – Covid-19 I would be tempted to advocate for a change in outlook towards the support available through public bodies to increase the level of community connectedness, and in this way, the health and wellbeing of individuals because there will be a new urgency in doing so. Ability to communicate in a confident manner is a pre-requisite for individuals within a community if they are to ensure that their voices are heard, and essentially, listened to. Supporting people as citizens in their communities, with assets to bring to these communities, as we see in many of our learners, is going to be a vital route to better communities. Recognising and building people’s skills and capacities, as charities and community organisations have been doing for most of the last decade, deserves active and dependable public sector support. Now is a crucial time for the state to take a more active role in ensuring that this happens