

Adult education in times of crisis and change: perspectives on access, learning careers and identities

Editors

Liliana Paulos

Barbara Merrill

Sandra T. Valadas

Andrea Galimberti

António Fragoso



UAAlg

UNIVERSIDADE DO ALGARVE
EDITORA

Adult education in times of crisis and change: perspectives on access, learning careers and identities

Editors

Liliana Paulos
Barbara Merrill
Sandra T. Valadas
Andrea Galimberti
António Fragoso



Title: *Adult education in times of crisis and change: perspectives on access, learning careers and identities*

Editors: Liliana Paulos; Barbara Merrill; Sandra T. Valadas; Andrea Galimberti; António Fragoso

Reviewers: The following authors have carried out the scientific revision of the chapters in this book

Adrianna Nizinska (University of Gothenburg, Sweden); Andrea Galimberti (University of Milano–Bicocca, Italy); António Moreira (Universidade Aberta, Portugal); Barbara Merrill (University of Warwick, UK); Carla Vilhena (University of Algarve, Portugal); Cármen Cavaco (University of Lisbon, Portugal); Carol Thompson (University of Bedfordshire, UK); Catarina Doutor (University of Algarve, Portugal); Federico Zamengo (University of Turin, Italy); Graça Santos (Polytechnic Institute of Bragança, Portugal); Greta Persico (University of Milano–Bicocca, Italy); Jérôme Eneau (University of Rennes 2, France); Joaquim Coimbra (University of Porto, Portugal); José Pedro Amorim (University of Porto, Portugal); Lucília Santos (University of Aveiro, Portugal); Manuel Célio Conceição (University of Algarve, Portugal); Miriam Tavares (University of Algarve, Portugal); Mónica Aldeia (Agrupamento vertical de Ferreiras e Centro de Formação de Albufeira, Portugal); Samantha Broadhead (Leeds Arts University, UK); Sofia Bergano (Polytechnic Institute of Bragança, Portugal); Ted Fleming (University of Maynooth, Ireland/College Columbia University, USA)

Proofreading: Raquel Couto

Publisher: Universidade do Algarve Editora

First edition

Place of edition: Faro

Year of publication: 2024

Graphic design and pagination: João Correia

Printing: Grafisol – Edições e Papelarias, Lda.

ISBN: 978-989-9127-84-5 (print version)

Legal Deposit: 541317/24

ISBN: 978-989-9127-85-2 (digital version)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34623/w45h-kg09>

Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10400.1/25870>



© Universidade do Algarve
Campus de Gambelas
8005-139 Faro
Portugal
All rights reserved

This book is dedicated *in memoriam*
of our colleagues and friends
Henrique M.A.C. Fonseca and Joaquim Luís Coimbra

Table of contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Introduction | 7 |
| Chapter 1 | |
| – Toward a transformative pedagogy of crises and experience..... | 17 |
| Chapter 2 | |
| – On systemic reflexivity, consciousness and students' voices..... | 33 |
| Chapter 3 | |
| – Mature students in the secondary education – motivations, process of learning and benefits..... | 57 |
| Chapter 4 | |
| – Evolution of lifelong learning and M23 students at the Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave in Portugal..... | 77 |
| Chapter 5 | |
| – Social environmental changes influence on the profile of mature students in higher education: An exploratory study | 91 |
| Chapter 6 | |
| – Learning Returns: Experiences of mature students in art and design captured through YouTube | 113 |
| Chapter 7 | |
| – The social and cultural issues revolving around changes in the workplace and in training: the place, and changing face, of research in the field of adult education | 137 |
| Chapter 8 | |
| – Educational and cultural challenges: Digital technologies in higher education..... | 157 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Chapter 9 | |
| – Postcards from the Edge – developing a professional identity for trainee teachers in English education..... | 185 |
| Chapter 10 | |
| – Through the looking glass: Professional identity during a pandemic | 203 |
| Chapter 11 | |
| – The pandemic and disorienting narratives of old age | 221 |
| Chapter 12 | |
| – Effects of the pandemic on the Roma community of Cerro do Bruxo | 237 |
| Chapter 13 | |
| – Working in a local community without community: Reinventing community work in an Alpine valley during a pandemic..... | 257 |
| Chapter 14 | |
| – Crisis in adult education of the post–pandemic period: A possible model of sustainable welfare | 277 |
| Editors Biographical Notes | 295 |
| Authors Biographical Notes | 299 |

Introduction

This book emerges from a conference held at the University of Algarve in Faro, Portugal, in July 2022 by the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) Access, Learning Careers and Identities Network. Researchers from across Europe came to discuss and share ideas about adult education in times of crisis and change. In 2022 the world was still immersed in a global period of change and crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the theme of the conference reflected this situation. However, it was not the first time the network's conference has focused on change in adult education.

Looking back at the 2013 conference of the network in Linköping, Sweden, the theme was 'Times of Change: The role of adult education in times of crisis'. The notion of 'times of change' has become relevant again as a result of the pandemic and its effects on adult education, and the lives of both adult students and adult educators. Issues of crisis and change, therefore, emerge over time albeit in a different context.

A History of the Network

As stated above, the network is part of ESREA. ESREA is a research society, it was established to provide a European-wide forum for researchers engaged in adult education research and learning, and to promote disseminate theoretical and empirical research in the field. Since its launch, in 1991, the landscape of adult education and learning has changed to include more diverse learning contexts at both formal and informal levels. At the same time there

has been a policy push by the European Union, OECD, UNESCO, and national governments to promote the policy and practice of lifelong learning. ESREA provides an important space for discussion and reflection of these changes and a (re)definition of adult education and learning in relation to research, theory, policy, and practice. This takes place at the triennial conference, network conferences and through the publication of books and RELA journal.

The ESREA Access, Learning Careers and Identity Network was established in 1996 and a first UK network conference was held at the University of Leeds. At that time the network was called the Access Network, reflecting the focus of adult education research at that time. The conference book publication entitled *Participation and Organisational Change* (Hill & Merrill, 1997) illuminates the narrow theme of the network, however, at that time it only addressed access and participation in higher education. The network convenors were Chris Duke, Etienne Bourgeois, and Barbara Merrill. This focus of the network continued to dominate the following two network conferences at the University of Barcelona and the University of Edinburgh. Subsequent network conferences (held every two years) were located again at the University of Barcelona, Spain (2000), then Louvain University, Belgium (2006), University of Seville, Spain (2008), University of Aveiro, Portugal (2011), University of Linköping, Sweden (2013), University of Seville, Spain (2015), University of Rennes, France (2017) and University of Coimbra, Portugal (2019).

Ten years after the network started, and to the changing nature of European adult education research and literature, which was moving beyond research on access and participation to other wider concerns and concepts, the network name was changed to Access, Learning Careers and Identity. The narrow focus was thus widened from just accessing and getting into an institution to experiences of learning in a wider range of educational contexts, such as further and higher education, community education, vocational learning, and informal learning. Importantly the network also explores the impact of biography and lifelong learning in shaping learning careers and how this process may result in a changing self and identity. This raises issues of agency and structure and their interaction by taking into

account the socio-economic position in which adult learners are located and the actions that they take to develop their learner identity and career within a particular educational setting. In doing so the network examines the different conceptual approaches to understanding learning careers and learning identities. The network provides a forum for adult educators from a range of disciplines to discuss, debate and share these issues. Over the years participants have come from beyond Europe such as Canada, Brazil, Australia, and South Africa. The network is now convened by three convenors: Barbara Merrill, University of Warwick, UK, Andrea Galimberti, University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy, and António Fragoso, University of Algarve, Portugal.

The chapters in this book reflect and extend on the ideas of changing times, transformation, access, learning approaches and identity. The authors discuss the immense impact that the pandemic caused by COVID-19 has had on adult education, communities, and society more widely. The chapters explore the consequences of these changes on adult education and the resultant experiences for students and adult educators. More broadly many countries have experienced an intense economic crisis, an increase in unemployment, extensive changes in the working world, and an increase in social inequalities and poverty as a result of the pandemic. It has also resulted in specific changes in higher education policies, practices, and other spheres of adult education, with the intensification of debates regarding learning and teaching using distance instruments and digital teaching and the effects that this has had on learning as a social process.

This crisis has also changed access to adult education, and the learning and teaching approaches and experiences of learning as face-to-face teaching has been temporarily lost and replaced by digital teaching and distance learning in all forms of adult education (community education, further and higher education, work-based learning). This has raised both old and new issues about learning and teaching as the experiences of adult students have been transformed, especially regarding learning as a social experience. Having to teach remotely and digitally has also significantly changed the teaching experiences of adult educators. The mandatory use

of online platforms during the pandemic resulted in the possibility to record lessons and offer an 'asynchronous' learning experience. On the one hand, this situation has given non-traditional students, with children at home or working full-time jobs, the possibility to have online materials for accessing at a time which suited them. It gave them an expanded learning space that was not available in a non-pandemic situation. This chance was, in some ways, 'more' than what they could afford in a non-pandemic situation.

On the other hand, the lack of face-to-face social relationships and interaction caused a series of side effects that are not yet completely outlined and analysed. First, we know that relationships and social networks were lost as these play an important role in the learning trajectories of these students (Finnegan et al., 2014) and are crucial to the building and diversity of social capital (Field, 2000, 2005). So, we may raise different questions on this front. Is this opportunity still a possibility in an online learning environment? Is this possible with online learning or is it related only to face-to-face teaching in an educational institution? Some of the authors in this book explore these issues.

On another side, periods of confinement due to the new conditions in higher education and adult education more generally might also affect women and men differently, both students and educators alike. It is important to ask the following questions: Did gender inequalities increase during the crisis in which we are living and how has this affected their learning and teaching experiences, family, and community lives? If so, what and how can we combat this through adult education? What impact did the new way of learning had on class, race, age and disability inequalities, as well as the issues of access, learning careers and learning identities?

The changes towards digital learning might also change the teaching experiences of adult educators. How did they change their professional practices in order to maintain their commitment to enhance people's opportunities and learning within these new limitations and constraints?

Finally, the pandemic situation also had an impact for scholars researching issues of access, learning careers and identity leading to new dimensions in relation to research topics and methodologies.

Reflecting on past and current situations, we would like to project to the future possibilities and implications and changes for adult education. What can we learn as adult educators and researchers from across Europe and beyond?

The following section provides an outline of the fourteen chapters in this book. Ted Fleming begins the book with his chapter entitled *Toward a transformative pedagogy of crises and experience*. The author delves into the transformative learning opportunities that emerge during crises, emphasising the experience of disorientation. It explores the concepts of crisis, experience, and work, applying Oskar Negt's critical theory of adult education and drawing from philosophers like John Dewey. The chapter centres on the dialectical concept of experience, rooted in the traditions of Hegel and Negt, influencing the understanding of learning, transformative pedagogy, and adult education. The chapter concludes by outlining implications for teaching.

Laura Formenti, in the second chapter entitled *On systemic reflexivity, consciousness and students' voices*, discusses using dialogic pedagogy in higher education to foster creative and critical learning. It focuses on assessing students' reflexive capacity through reflective essays, exploring differences between reflection and reflexivity. The author challenges potential elitism in the concept of reflexivity, emphasising the need for freedom and openness in students' voices. Analysis of students' assignments, using Gilligan's Listening Guide, aims to assess reflexivity while celebrating individual voices.

Julita Pieńkosz, Marta Petelewicz and Joanna Stankowska in the third chapter entitled *Mature students in the secondary education – motivations, process of learning and benefits*, investigate the decision-making process of adult learners in formal secondary education in Poland, emphasising motivation, expectations, and fears. It explores characteristics of the educational process, obstacles faced, and support received by mature students. Despite high motivation and dedication, the study highlights that the patterns of functioning in adult secondary schools often replicate those of compulsory education. The institution and teachers do not adjust to the needs and capabilities of the participants. Although engaging in secondary education brings satisfaction, expands skills, and empowers students, the

findings underscore the need to better align formal education institutions with the needs of adult learners.

Evolution of lifelong learning and M23 students at the Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave in Portugal by Ricardo Simões and Natália Rego is the title of the fourth chapter. It addresses the pressing need for lifelong learning in higher education, emphasising its importance for social inclusion, active citizenship, and employment rates. The chapter focuses on the Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave's (IPCA) recent changes in student evaluation regulations to admit candidates over 23 years old based on various criteria, reflecting a commitment to re-skilling and up-skilling. The paper outlines IPCA's current plans for lifelong learning programmes, considering labour market transformations and emerging job requirements. Ongoing challenges include managing diverse student profiles, optimising class performance in remote and digital teaching, and implementing measures for success among older students.

The fifth chapter focuses on non-traditional students aged over 23 (NTS23) entering a Portuguese University. The chapter is written by Henrique M. A. C. Fonseca and Lucília Santos and is entitled *Social environmental changes influence on the profile of mature students in higher education: An exploratory study*. This chapter explores their unique responses to crises, such as economic downturns or the COVID-19 pandemic, which differ from traditional students. During the COVID-19 lockdown, online surveys were conducted with NTS23 to assess their learning experiences, challenges, and with teachers to gauge their perception of NTS23 adjustment to distance learning. University databases were analysed for sociodemographic and academic changes in NTS23 profiles. The study aims to understand student success and improve the connection between their academic experiences and real-life challenges.

Samantha Broadhead is the author of the sixth chapter entitled *Learning Returns: Experiences of mature students in art and design captured through YouTube*. The Learning Returns project initiated in response to the changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, focuses on capturing the experiences of

mature students studying art and design in a specialist arts institution in the North of England. The project aims to investigate how former art and design students communicate with prospective students considering a return to education outside formal institutions. Participants share their stories through filmed interviews, where they exhibit confidence, take control of content, and contribute to aesthetics. Identified themes include reflections on learning journeys, connecting past experiences with learning, understanding positionality, encouraging others, and envisioning future projects beyond education.

The seventh chapter from France delves into the role of adult education and research in an ever-changing world, emphasising the involvement of adult learners, facilitators, and researchers. It is written by Anne-Gaëlle Dorval, Eric Bertrand, and Jérôme Eneau, and is entitled *The social and cultural issues revolving around changes in the workplace and in training: the place, and changing face, of research in the field of adult education*. The chapter analyses crises in work, training, and research, presenting a multi-referential grid and theoretical approach to understanding transformation. The research-action training approach reveals a cooperative and transformative model. Insights from experiences during the COVID-19 crisis showcases the transformation of professional practices, researcher support, and changes in learners' profiles and practices.

Ana Cristina Lopes and Maria Natália Ramos are the authors of the eighth chapter entitled *Educational and cultural challenges: Digital technologies in higher education*. Their chapter is prompted by the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, addresses the shift to digital technologies and its effects on students, emphasising the disparities in distance learning on higher education. Through interviews with teachers and an online survey, the study aims to uncover positive and negative aspects, contributing insights for the evolution of education. The chapter underscores the necessity for adaptive, inclusive methodologies to address unforeseen circumstances and promote cultural diversity in Portuguese higher education.

In *Postcards from the Edge: Developing a professional identity for trainee teachers in English education* (chapter nine), Carol Thompson and Elaine

Battams explore the impact of post-compulsory education de-regulation in England, focusing on the challenges faced by pre-service trainees in developing professional identities, especially exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study employs focus groups and reflections from teachers trained during the pandemic to highlight obstacles to identity formation. Results illuminate strategies taken by trainees to navigate the journey from trainee to fully-fledged teacher.

The tenth chapter entitled *Through the looking glass: Professional identity during a pandemic* by Neil Hopkins and Carol Thompson explores the meaning of the professional identity of educators compared to other fields. Using a narrative approach, participants engage in an auto reflection to analyse their professional identity, considering cultural and environmental factors. The study, based in the UK, focuses on the challenges faced by teachers and leaders in the transition to virtual classrooms, impacting skills, roles, policies, and infrastructure. Initial findings reveal the sector's fragility and resilience, signalling a shift where previous certainties are no longer definitive.

The pandemic and disorienting narratives of old age by Micaela Castiglioni (chapter eleven) addresses the oversight of the emotional, social, and relational impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly on the elderly and adolescents. It emphasises the need to investigate and raise awareness of the long-term consequences of such emergencies, aiming to prepare for future situations. The author critiques the inadequacy of relying solely on social isolation in the absence of institutional assistance, highlighting the resulting marginalisation and unequal treatment among different age groups. It specifically examines the delayed implementation of health and safety measures in care homes, emphasising the neglect of the elderly during the pandemic.

The twelfth chapter, entitled *Effects of the pandemic on the Roma community of Cerro do Bruxo*, by Aurora Coelho and Cláudio Garcia, explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on a vulnerable Roma community, in Portugal, and the intervention of social workers from the Lusco-Fusco project. Focusing on education, socioeconomic status, and perceptions of pandemic consequences, the research aims to assess the inclusivity of societal responses.

Findings reveal inadequate responses during the first confinement, widening the gap between the Roma community and institutional structures, and highlight the community's vulnerability, emphasising the need for external support.

Working in a local community without community: Reinventing community work in an Alpine valley during pandemic by Paola Zonca, Federico Zamengo, Nicolò Valenzano and Marianna Peotta take us to the thirteen chapter. It outlines a participatory action-research, focusing on the training of a multidisciplinary team involved in the *Terres Monviso Incl: Invecchiare Bene* cross-border cooperation project. Funded by the European Regional Development Fund, the project aims to test an integrated social and health system in the Monviso massif region. The training, led by the University of Turin, Italy, focuses on developing individual and collective reflexivity using the Critical Incident Technique. The central thesis explores the potential of supporting practitioners in enhancing the quality of work, relationships, and skills.

In the last chapter, *Crisis in adult education of the post-pandemic period: A possible model of sustainable welfare*, Vito Balzano explores the role of adult education in shaping sustainable social policies in the post-pandemic context. Based on research conducted in the Apulia region of southern Italy, the author reflects about the intersection of learning, welfare policies, and transformations in family and labour structures. The analysis highlights the need to extend the scope of adult education beyond professional qualifications and the labour market, fostering a pedagogical model that promotes active citizenship and social sustainability. Drawing on Mezirow's theory of transformative learning, the author considers how education can redefine meanings and encourage more equitable and innovative forms of social participation. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the concept of proximity welfare, emphasising the crucial role of the third sector and social cooperatives in reconstructing a more inclusive and participatory welfare system.

Barbara Merrill,
Liliana Paulos,
Andrea Galimberti,
Sandra T. Valadas &
António Fragoso

Chapter 1

Ted Fleming

Toward a transformative pedagogy of crises and experience

Introduction: Crises and Experience

Crisis and human experience are central to adult life and adult learning. The uncertainty, the wondering and the perplexity brought about by crises provide the experiences that lead to learning, even transformative learning. According to Dewey (1910) perplexity is 'the guiding factor in the entire process of reflection' (p. 19). The added urgency of current crises may short circuit thinking especially critical thinking. A crisis means that the learning is urgent. A great deal is at stake—maybe everything.

We may have lost what was previously taken for granted, including formerly unproblematic notions of health, freedom of movement, safety, or lifestyle. Crises today have individual, societal and even global dimensions. It is useful to see crises today as a defining experience of this time in history. Freire asserts that epochal themes indicate limit situations. It appears that the themes of crisis and experience may be what he means by 'epochal themes' that function as limit situations and, by implication, opportunities to learn (Freire, 1972, p. 73). A crisis suggests a turning point or at least a

situation where normal frames of reference are disrupted; do not function as we wish, and when new actions must be taken soon. The challenge in these moments may be to bring about both self-transformation and social change—to think new thoughts triggered by perplexities that may unsettle fixed positions personally and socially. These experiences may provide learning opportunities and call for transformation, 'rethinking deeply held, and often distorted beliefs, about who we are and our lifeworld' (Finnegan, 2019, p. 46). Limit situations (Freire, 1972) invite us to go beyond, to imagine and learn to identify hidden forces, submerged realities and overcome prescribed endings and closed solutions, to imagine, to reflect on present experiences and create breakthrough moments (Greene, 1973) that shatter sedimented thinking. When the very ability to learn is challenged, as in the current crises, we struggle to imagine learning as offering transformative possibilities.

In this chapter, crises and experience are explored as opportunities for learning transformatively. In this journey the allies are John Dewey in particular, along with Jack Mezirow as the transformative learning scholar. But the principal source of understanding is the German critical theorist and transformative pedagogy scholar Oskar Negt. The title *transformative pedagogy* is used here as a way of bringing together his critical theory contributions and his adult education contributions as an active workers education practitioner. The experience of workers and Negt's own experience as an activist are brought together in his transformative pedagogy.

Crisis: Habermas and Dewey

In working towards an understanding of crisis, it is appropriate to turn to Jürgen Habermas who identifies new stages of individual and social development that leads to new levels of learning. New knowledge and learning to bring new problem situations, new risks, and burdens. Habermas (1974), in a prescient moment, asserts that:

as natural scientific medicine brings a few diseases under control, there arises a consciousness of contingency in relation to all illness... Suffering from the contingencies of an uncontrolled process gains a new quality to the extent that we believe ourselves capable of rationally intervening in it. The suffering is then the negative of a new need... (p. 164). Though we may now face new and existential crises (for example, climate change) experiences of crises are not new. Habermas (1995), in a moment of typical idealism, asserts that the world faced the crises of the twentieth century with 'enlightened perplexity' (p. ZB4). However, he soon reverted to a more mundane confidence when he wrote about 'learning from catastrophe' as part of coping with the damage done to social cohesion by the crises he identified then as the 'dismantling of the welfare state' and 'superpowers gone wild' (Habermas, 2001, p. 47). This Marx inspired understanding of the crises of capitalism is important but not sufficient for the present moment. There is more to present disorientations than this economic perspective permits.

Learning utilises prior experience to construe new or revised interpretations of experience that in turn guide action. Experience, especially of crises, may prompt a questioning of what has been taken for granted. As disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow, 1978) or 'perplexity' (Dewey, 1910, p. 19) are the beginning of learning, I suggest that today crises motivate learning. Crises act as disorienting dilemmas, as starting points for transformative learning. As the horizon of meanings available to people may be distorted or the range of meanings available as people attempt to make meaning are too often infused with conspiracy theories and resistance to the knowledge of scientific enquiry, there is a distortion in the lifeworld that complicates a critical thinking through of these issues. Crisis is best understood when it is both a personal and social experience. I want to focus on current experiences as the starting point for learning. This connection with experience is the major ingredient in this search for a transformative pedagogy of crises and experience.

Experience is a key ingredient of learning and Dewey (1966) defines education as the 'reconstruction of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience' (p. 76). The concept of experiential learning is now taken for granted in discourses about facilitating adult learning, and Kolb's experiential learning, and Knowles andragogy have been central to this development. The past years have been marked by new, unexpected, challenging, and awful experiences, such as COVID. The COVID experience is of interest to educators because it most likely provides a motivation for learning. These experiences provide an opportunity and maybe even force us to reconstruct experience. Access, learner identity and if we are to believe a pre-COVID McKinsey Report, jobs and careers have been in a period of some stability and even predictability (Lund, 2019). Now even the expectations and assumptions we make about the development of, for example, the hospitality industry that is an industry of social closeness is threatened by the requirement for social distancing and the stay-at-home route to education access. COVID-19 is of course a medical disease. We may gather more insights for our purposes if we understand it as also a social disease. I am not going to assume that work and the work of the learner in adult education or higher education are identical, it is useful here to identify that both work and learning share the activity we call work. Lifelong learning ensures they remain connected (Fleming, 2021a).

Work and Learning

And how have identities and work been redefined? We do not know. We can only in this moment of transition out of COVID-19 think that in ways we cannot yet understand, work and learning are being transformed. The race to base working lives, and learning lives, and identities on the internet, Zooming, and Skyping, and Facetiming, and Microsoft Teams may be important. I suspect that the inequalities in the labour market, the marginalization of women, the segmented work on the basis of class, North/South divides will in a moment be amplified and transformed as COVID-19 bites, and maybe bites again. But

widening inequality will remain. Access and learning lives may be affected in similar ways.

How did we experience digital working, and learning, and teaching? What aspect of the crisis emerged in pedagogical work? What benefits emerged? Who won and who lost in the digital world? What questions emerge and what learning will help us face the next crisis? What is the next crisis? Climate? Gender? Race? Migrations? All of these? What broad social and political questions emerged in the crisis? Where are the digital divides and divisions now? How have democracy and social justice fared? What threats are posed by the rise of authoritarianism? So many questions. So many questions for the adult educator with an eye on a transformative pedagogy of crises.

It is becoming clear that the existential, and related crises of climate change, and climate justice may well be addressed by the powerful in society in the same way that COVID was addressed. Denials, fake news, suspicions about science, and of course the much-discredited herd immunity will be recycled in the new crises. The global rise of the Right also poses a threat for democracy, and for the neoliberal economy that is far from being held to democratic accountability. In pursuit of useful ideas for this task of finding a transformative pedagogy of crises and experience, this chapter will turn to and harness the ideas of Oskar Negt and his key understanding of experience as dialectical.

Oskar Negt

Oskar Negt (b. 1934), as an associate of the Frankfurt School, focusses his attention on the ability of education to understand better the social situations in which we find ourselves. By understanding the experiences of learners, the unfair, and unjust social, and economic environment (neoliberalism) can be better understood and hopefully transformed. Negt studied with Horkheimer and Adorno, was assistant to Habermas from 1962, and is an orthodox Marxist and active supporter of social democracy. He continues as a prominent scholar at what many regard as an extension of the Frankfurt

School, in Leibnitz University Hannover. He is driven by similar concerns that motivate all Frankfurt School scholars who address the question of how Nazi Germany emerged. He works theoretically and pedagogically in support of more just, caring, and democratic societies. 'Democracy is the only politically conceived social order that has to be learned, over and over, every day, into old age' as a 'process of education and learning' (Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 452). Negt is a prolific writer on a wide range of topics including philosophy, sociology, and organization theory, and is active in journalism and the media. He works closely with Alexander Kluge, an award-winning movie and TV producer (see Kluge, 2020). Negt researches work as a source of identity and dignity (and injustice); studies pedagogy for adults and schools (as a source for his social theory, emancipatory learning and action); and is active in politics. These ideas are gaining some modest traction in adult education literature (Finnegan, 2022; Fleming, 2021a, 2021b, 2022).

His focus is on the experience of workers (learners) that he states is infused with the contradictions of capitalist society and their experience is a source of 'resistance to capitalism' (Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 31). More importantly these experiences are the starting point for learning and creating social theory. He uses these experiences in his pedagogy, and with sociological imagination he works to understand these issues and prompt social action to alter the condition of workers. His colleague, Stollman, writes that 'the rallying cry for Negt and Kluge's work is no longer 'Workers of the world, unite!' but rather 'Experiences of the world, unite!' (Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 464). In a rare excursion into adult learning theory by a Frankfurt School associate, Negt (1975, 2008) outlines his pedagogy of experience. Before unearthing further relevant aspects of his pedagogy it is useful to divert momentarily into the roots of these ideas in John Dewey. The transformative pedagogy of Mezirow is also built on these same foundational concepts.

Dewey and Experience

The phases of the process of transformation that start with a disorienting dilemma deal with experiences of disorientation, of fear, of anxiety, and of identifying one's problem with broader social issues. Negt goes beyond Dewey's rather limited view of experience. For Dewey experience has two dimensions. First, experience is in continuity with previous experience. In making meaning new experiences are modified or integrated with previous experience. Mezirow (1978) builds on this, asserting that 'a meaning perspective refers to the structure of cultural assumptions within which one's new experience is assimilated to—and transformed by—one's past experience' (p. 101). Second, experience interacts with one's broader environment. Experience is created by this interaction (Dewey, 1963, p. 43). For Mezirow frames of reference interpret experience and dysfunctional frames of reference distort experience. Dewey (1966) defines education as the 'reconstruction of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience' (p. 76). The increase in meaning 'corresponds to the increased perception of the connections and continuities of the activities in which we are engaged' (Dewey, 1966, pp. 76–77). Learning is the process of becoming aware of these interactions and continuities.

Negt: The Dialectical Understanding of Experience and Its Social Context

Negt, relying on Hegel, asserts that these continuities and interactions of Dewey (and Mezirow) are dialectical. Learning is not just an adaptation or integration of experience; the process is dialectical. One's individual experience cannot be properly understood unless it is seen as being in a dialectical relationship with one's social environment. Disorienting dilemmas and the search for solutions are more complex than understood by Mezirow (1991), and this changes how learning is understood. Without the dialectical,

the relationship between individual experience and the social context each is misconstrued—and so too is learning. The experience of crises is dialectically connected to previous experience. If one cannot speak properly of individual experience unless it is connected to broader social issues, it is clear that crises are neither totally individual nor social. They are both. In so much of the literature on transformative learning, from Mezirow to Hoggan et al. (2017) the dialectical nature of experience is absent. This is a form of 'stuckness' in transformation theory that goes beyond that, to which others such as Hoggan et al. (2017, pp. 50–54) refer. This dialectical understanding avoids falsely dichotomizing social and personal aspects of transformative learning. To work for the dialectical nature of experience is exactly what Maxine Greene proposed when she wrote about learning how things are connected: 'the self can never be actualized through solely private experiences, no matter how extraordinary these experiences might be' (Greene, 1986, p. 74). This is also aligned with Freire's work on transcending traditional western dualisms such as thought/action and teaching/learning.

In light of Negt's work, the political and personal are connected and connected dialectically. If Honneth (1995) asserted that the political is personal, then Negt adds that these connections are dialectical. The critiques that assert that transformation theory does not have a social dimension actually misconstrue the situation. The problem is entirely different. This makes the process of understanding the nature of one's problem and the search for solutions more complex. Relating an individual problem to broader social issues is not just an interesting add-on (or a missing dimension), but an essential aspect of understanding experience. Without this dialectical dimension the relationship between experience and environment is misconstrued, as is the connection between one's current experience and previous experience. The current crises of the world are not just objectively a product of social agencies, neither do they just happen. 'The ways people interpret crises... gives shape to what these crises come to be, and in return, dialectically these crises affect the fate of those involved' (Fassin & Honneth, 2022, p.3).

Habermas (2008) also expresses this in his own rather complicated way when he writes that the 'public domain of the jointly inhabited interior of our lifeworld is at once inside and outside' (p. 14). The inside/outside dichotomy is misleading and even in the most personal moments our consciousness thrives on the 'impulses it receives from the cultural network of public, symbolically expressed, and intersubjectively shared categories, thoughts and meanings' (Habermas, 2008, p. 15). The personal and the lifeworld are dialectically interconnected. It is difficult to imagine a stronger statement than this of the false dichotomy of individual and social, and this idea now informs this pedagogy of crisis. Learning requires an ability to perceive the world in this connected way. Transformation theory does not acknowledge this critical insight (Fleming, 2021b). It is this insight borrowed from Hegel and worked through by Habermas, Honneth and Negt that moves this transformative pedagogy forward.

Its emphasis on the dialectic understanding is in line with the recent scholarly work of Peter Alheit (2021). More straight forward examples of dialectics in action than the Goffman inspired example outlined by Alheit show dialectics in operation in the world of ordinary experience. Imagine a game or sport in which points are allocated for a win and a draw. Maybe 1 point for a draw and 2 points for a win. On occasion a team may, in that situation, play safe and settle for a draw. This may lead to a significant number of teams achieving their purpose well before the end of the game—risk averse teams in particular. This can be unsatisfactory for spectators. The administrators of the game (the owners) may want to overcome this team behaviour or strategy. If they allocate instead 3 points for a win this may motivate teams and players and heighten the excitement and experience for spectators. This is an example of the dialectic at play between players, team managers, owners of the game (administrators) and supporters. An action by one will trigger a reaction from other(s) and that reaction in turn may trigger another reaction—and so on. We understand this dialectic in ordinary life.

Kluge, a close collaborator of Negt, is well aware that the implications of this for the practices of bringing about individual or social change are not easy, as the title of his recent book *Drilling through hard boards* (2017) illustrates.

In a world where fake news, conspiracy theories and rejection of scientific knowledge often dominate and undermine public discourse, this pedagogy of transformation may be an exciting possibility but faces significant resistance. In a final acknowledgment of the density of the resistance to such an understanding of learning the final step in the phases of transformation involves taking action on the basis of new transformed perspectives. These actions are not only individual and personal, but essentially social too.

Olesen (1989), quoting Negt, sees 'experience as a collective process because when we experience as individuals we also do so through a socially structured consciousness' (p. 8) or again 'the socialized individual cannot experience individually' (p. 68). The individual is always multiple (Kluge & Negt, 2014). These connections are made to extend the links between the central role of experience in this transformative pedagogy of crises and experience.

Oskar Negt: Adult Educator

A transformative pedagogy informed by the approach of Oskar Negt involves thinking independently, dialectically, systemically, with sociological imagination, utilising critical reflection and democratic participation. Negt (1973) describes adult learning as an analysis that brings into awareness the historical process of how learners' interests are defined for them and how relationships of power are experienced, in order that they can learn about their roles in society. Then they may identify possibilities, and actions, that will change unjust realities. A transformative pedagogy is then involved in social and political arenas and provides a framework for an historical and material interpretation of subjectivity as produced by the neo-liberal system. In addition, it helps learners create a new just and caring social order (Kluge & Negt, 2014).

One more new idea is possible. Workers and learners have a great deal in common and not just as a result of the lifelong learning agenda (Fleming, 2021a). When Negt and Kluge (1993) assert that experience is the most important thing that workers actually produce (p. xlviii) it is within the bounds of reason to suggest that learners also produce experience. When

we then understand how experience is influenced by social structures, there is the possibility of what Maxine Greene (1995) calls breaking-through the inertia of convention when people 'are enabled to explain their "shocks" and reach beyond' (p. 39). Such a (transformative) pedagogy, Greene continues, 'offers life; it offers hope; it offers the prospect of discovery; it offers light' (p. 133). These moments can help transcend limits and engage one's sociological imagination in the process of social transformation (Negt & Kluge, 1993).

Negt's (1975) pedagogy goes beyond the teaching of skills and competencies and emphasizes the importance of understanding 'workers existence as a social problem' (p. 4). It involves workers, or learners, analysing their social situation, interpreting it in order to understand the causes of their current situation and thus inform actions to change it. It focusses on developing a transformative pedagogy of education and a corresponding teaching manual. He (1975) developed 'an immediate self-evident connection between the emancipatory objectives of the labour movement and a theory that would underpin it scientifically' (p. 18).

The implications are clearly applicable to other forms of adult learning. He studies how learners experience their lives, how to understand human misery and take action to change the social situation that causes this misery. This involves an exercise in sociological imagination in order to re-imagine the lived experiences of learners and the possibilities that may emerge. This is linked with Mezirow's approach to transformation theory, but with an added, integrated social dimension. The social dimension of a transformative pedagogy is not an optional add-on but an essential part of understanding experience and learning. Thus, transformative pedagogy is not just about an individual accumulating knowledge or learning. It is necessarily a collective journey of self-determination and a process of political and emancipatory actions.

Unlike transformation theory, Negt proposes a curriculum or list of competences that are essential for exemplary learning. The 'six competences', as Negt (2010, pp. 218–234) calls them, are: Identity competence; historical competence; social justice (or awareness) competence; technological competence; ecological competence, and economic competence His curriculum links

the learners' individual experiences (including misrecognitions and injustices) with broader social issues; investigates and explores the interconnections in order to see how individual experiences and structural issues in the social environment are connected—dialectically. For example, the experiences behind the Black Lives Matter movement's objections to police brutality are connected to systemic, historical, economic racism and slavery—forms of systematic/social/historical misrecognitions undermining individual and social self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem (Honneth, 1995). The learning involved is meta-learning (Negt, 1993) and along with dialectical thinking are of 'fundamental importance' for transformative pedagogy (p. 661).

Negt's education goes beyond views of education that emphasise personal growth and development that may lead to fitting into the social and democratic structures of the current world. When experience is understood as influenced by social structures there is then the possibility of what both Paulo Freire and Maxine Greene call break-through moments. These moments can help engage the sociological imagination in a process of social transformation (Negt, 1975; Negt & Kluge, 1993).

Negt (and Kluge) systematically present materials and suggestions as to how their ideas might be utilised in learning situations (Kluge & Negt, 2014; Negt & Kluge, 1993). This is in marked contrast to the absence of teaching methods in the published transformative learning work of Mezirow. Negt and Kluge use science fiction and a range of innovative materials to support and enhance the critical intelligence of learners (Negt & Kluge, 1993). Negt's contribution to understanding adult learning also includes the concepts of exemplary learning and societal competencies. When a transformative pedagogy of learning is discussed in times of crisis, whether thinking of struggling with a global pandemic, racism, or climate change, we benefit from extending transformative pedagogy by adding this further dialectical process. Using science fiction, satire, fragments of literature, film, and documentaries Negt encourages dangerous thoughts of critical intelligence. Kluge and Negt (2014) collect a visual archive of pedagogical methods for facilitating the exploration of how things could be different (p. 260).

References

- Alheit, P. (2021). Biographicity as 'mental grammar' of postmodern life. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 12(1), 81–94.
- Dewey, J. (1910). *How we think*. Boston, MA: D.C. Heath.
- Dewey, J. (1963). *Experience and education*. Macmillan.
- Dewey, J. (1966). *Democracy and education*. The Free Press.
- Fassin, D., & Honneth, A. (2022). Introduction. In D. Fassin & A. Honneth (Eds.), *Crisis under critique: How people assess, transform and respond to critical situations* (pp. 1–8). Columbia University Press.
- Finnegan, F. (2019). Freedom is a very fine thing: Individual and collective forms of emancipation in transformative learning. In T. Fleming, A. Kokkos, & F. Finnegan (Eds.), *European perspectives on transformation theory* (pp. 43–57). Palgrave.
- Finnegan, T. (2022). Reflections: Living theory in transformative times. In E. Kostara, A. Gavrielatos, & D. Loads (Ed.), *Transformative learning theory and praxis: New perspectives and possibilities* (pp. 226–237). Routledge.
- Fleming, T. (2021a). Models of lifelong learning: An overview. In M. London (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of lifelong learning* (2nd ed., pp. 1–26). Oxford University Press.
- Fleming, T. (2021b). Toward a critical theory of transformative learning: Learning from Oskar Negt. *International Journal of Adult Education and Technology*, 12(1), 1–16.
- Fleming, T. (2022). Critical theory and transformative learning: Making connections with Habermas, Honneth and Negt. In A. Nicolaidis, S. Eschenbacher, P. Buergelt, Y. Gilpin–Jackson, M. Welch, & M. Misawa (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of learning for transformation*. Palgrave.
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin.
- Greene, M. (1973). *Teacher as stranger: Educational philosophy for the modern age*. Wadsworth.

- Greene, M. (1986). Reflection and passion in teaching. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 2(1), 68–81.
- Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts and social change*. Jossey-Bass.
- Habermas, J. (1974). Toward a reconstruction of historical materialism. In J. Habermas, *Communication and the evolution of society* (pp. 130–177). Beacon Press.
- Habermas, J. (1995, December 30). Aufgeklärte Ratlosigkeit. Warum die Politik ohne Perspektiven ist [Enlightened perplexity: Why politics has no prospects]. *Frankfurter Rundschau*, p. ZB4.
- Habermas, J. (2001). Learning from catastrophe? In J. Habermas, *The postnational constellation* (pp. 38–57). Polity.
- Habermas, J. (2008). *Between naturalism and religion*. Polity.
- Hoggan, C., Mälkki, K., & Finnegan, F. (2017). Developing the theory of perspective transformation: Continuity, intersubjectivity and emancipatory praxis. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 67(1), 48–64.
- Honneth, A. (1995). *The struggle for recognition: The moral grammar of social conflict*. Polity.
- Kluge, A. (2017). *Drilling through hard boards: 133 Political stories*. University of Chicago Press.
- Kluge, A. (2020). *Alexander Kluge: Homepage*.
<https://www.kluge-alexander.de/>
- Kluge, A., & Negt, O. (2014). *History and obstinacy*. Zone Books.
- Lund, S., Manyika, J., Segel, L.H., Dua, A., Hancock, B., Rutherford, S., & Macon, B. (2019). *The future of work in America: People and places today and tomorrow*.
- Mezirow, J. (1978). Perspective transformation. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 28(2), 100–110.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey Bass.
- Negt, O. (Winter, 1973). Don't go by numbers, organize according to interests!: Current questions of organisation. *New German Critique*, 1, 42–51.

- Negt, O. (1975). *Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen: Zur Theorie und Praxis der Arbeiterbildung* [Sociological imagination and exemplary learning: On the theory and practice of workers' education]. Europäische Verlagsanstalt.
- Negt, O. (1993). Wir brauchen ein ziveite gesamtdeutsche Bildungsreform [We need civic all-German educational reform]. *Geiverkschaftliche Monatshefte*, 11, 657–666.
- Negt, O. (2008). Adult education and European identity. *Policy Futures in Education*, 6(6), 744–756.
- Negt, O. (2010). *Der politische Mensch: Demokratie als Lebensform* [The political person: democracy as a way of life]. Steidl Verlag.
- Negt, O., & Kluge, A. (1993). *Public sphere and experience: Analysis of the bourgeois and proletarian public sphere*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Olesen, H.S. (1989). *Adult education and everyday life*. Adult Education Research Group.

Chapter 2

Laura Formenti

On systemic reflexivity, consciousness, and students' voices

Most people most of the time live in a state much closer to total unconsciousness than to any degree of consciousness even half-ways adequate to our real situation.

David Constantine, *Poetry*

I like to start

Questioning myself

To make the path, to see

Distinguishing (Clare)

I wanted

I understood

I realized that meant devoting time to myself

I needed to stop and reflect, I had to chill out (Bella)

Introduction

The capacity of (higher) education to change the world into a better place depends on consciousness and the students' capacity of naming oppression (Freire, 1972). The ones who achieve the highest levels of formal education are expected to be agents of social change and improvement by enhancing their critical capacity. Yet, unconsciousness and alienation seem to jeopardize this capacity, and to silence the need for identity and meaning. Individualism and consumerism shape both the provision of HE courses and the learning strategies of students, limiting their voices and capacity to read the context; the role of critical reflection seems to be confined at taking appropriate answers to problems, after thorough evaluation of the evidences.

Today, we live in the *reflexive* era, characterized by the massive employment of experts and tools in monitoring all kinds of processes, calculating risks, and taking informed decisions (Beck et al., 2003). The compulsory push to (self)reflexivity (Alheit, 2022) is the blessing and curse of our times; it may raise consciousness, but also nurture constant (self) surveillance that produces the 'domestication' of the best students to comply with institutional expectations. As teachers in HE, we risk reinforcing consensual and potentially oppressive beliefs and practices, instead of liberating ones (Frizelle, 2020). Then, the assumption that reflexivity would be good in itself and an antidote to the systemic forces shaping human actions and thoughts (Daniel, 2012) needs to be challenged. What do we mean by reflexivity? How do we pursue it as an aim of HE?

I teach to future social educators in different HE courses (undergraduate, graduate, master). In my teaching, I propose reflexivity as a combination of critical reflection, curiosity, creativity, and collaboration; these skills are exercised all along the courses by individual and group work, narrative and aesthetical practices, dialogic sessions, critical peer review, and the analysis of lived experience, cultural artefacts, and stories. The learning process is embodied, ecosystemic, and critical. Embodiment fosters the students' presence and responsiveness. Critical reflection signals emerging problems,

contradictions, and conflicts (Formenti et al., 2020; Harder et al., 2017), illuminating the influence of assumptions, values, cultural biases, and power. Aesthetic and narrative practices nurture creativity and imagination, hence allowing more depth, freedom of expression, and openness in connecting with others and the environment.

This narrative, aesthetic, and collaborative pedagogy, inspired by the tradition of adult education and learning, is explicitly aimed at enhancing systemic reflexivity. Distinguishing it from 'mere reflection' has become crucial in my work. At the end of each course, students must write a reflexive essay to present the outcomes of their learning path, positioning themselves from a systemic and critical perspective. In my career, I have read and assessed more than 7000 texts, but only recently I am becoming more curious—and dubious—about my framework.

In this chapter, then, I question myself, my presuppositions about reflexivity in reading and assessing these essays. In the following, I consider my learning biography as a passage that is fundamental to enable listening and recognizing that students bear different stories, relationships to knowledge, and their own ways to reflexivity. Then, I will compare two students' essays by using Gilligan's Listening Guide (Gilligan et al., 2003), a generative method of analysis that enables a deeper quality of listening and understanding. The differences between these two students' assignments illuminate—I will argue—the diversity of reflexivity.

Systemic Reflexivity: Beyond Reflection

Reflexivity is considered a key feature of qualitative interpretative inquiry, entailing the researcher's capacity for self-positioning (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; Maton, 2003; Simon & Chard, 2014). As a reflexive systemic researcher, I should be aware that my action is embedded in a context (Lyle, 2019) and take responsibility for the impact of my choices and actions on the people and systems involved in my research. And yet, what is reflexivity? How is it different from reflection? Do we really need another word to talk about it?

A literature review on systemic social work and the learning needs of social educators (Formenti & Rigamonti, 2020) has shown that reflection and reflexivity are often used interchangeably. Both refer to the human capacity of creating recursive loops of the mind—thinking about our own thinking and acting—as a result of the systemic properties of the mind: circularity, interconnection, and feed-back. However, reflection is a cognitive skill by which individuals analyse their actions and thoughts in order to adapt or change the course of action. It is involved in identifying errors, making plans, and taking decisions. It can be used to revise the meaning of past action, too. Reflection is individual, adaptational, and self-orienting (Ferguson, 2018; Schön, 1983).

We use reflexivity, instead, to stress the calibration of action (Bateson, 1972) in a complex, evolving, and layered environment. It goes beyond cognitive skills since it entails interactions with changing and unpredictable situations. Reflexivity can be seen as a meta-competence entailing a range of skills beyond reflection. For authors with a psychoanalytic background (Hunt, 2013), it includes the workings of the unconscious; for post-colonial and feminist scholars (Lykes & Távora, 2020), it encompasses relationality and dialogue. In the systemic reading of social work (Krause, 2012; McNamee, 2009; Partridge et al., 2019), it considers the entanglement between the observer and the observed (Foerster, 1981). Trans-individual, entangled, and multilanguage reflexivity (Jude, 2018; Simon & Chard, 2014) embraces disorientation and uncertainty. So, while reflection relies on rationality, that is used to categorize, clarify boundaries, check outcomes, and find solutions to problems, reflexivity relies on relationality and positionality, allowing to see a larger and deeper picture, and to act coherently, recognizing the embeddedness, complexity, and mystery of human experience and the polyrhythmic quality of learning processes as a basis for emancipation (Alhadeff-Jones, 2016).

Our literature review (Formenti & Rigamonti, 2020) identified three levels of analysis of reflexivity as a systemic feature. At the microlevel, *self-reflexivity* (Bingle & Middleton, 2019) is employed by subjects to explore their own ideas

(Magnuson et al., 2012) and to question their previous judgement (Andrew, 2015; Taylor & White, 2001), combining sensorial, emotional, and experiential information (Ferguson, 2018). Students and professionals in social work and education can be empowered by this capacity (Kearns & McArdle, 2012; Papp & Rácz, 2016). At the mesolevel, shared or relational reflexivity is a quality of a group, program, or organization (Bingle & Middleton, 2019; Dugmore et al., 2018; Jude, 2018) that nurtures its capacity as a whole to respond to the evolving needs and identities of its components, partners, users, and interlocutors, and to the environment. This level of reflexivity enhances the calibration of collective action, relational awareness (Partridge et al., 2019) and shared authority (Watson, 2019). At the macrolevel, cultural reflexivity is the possibility to reveal societal structures and discourses (Monson, 2020); it becomes epistemic reflexivity (Bourdieu, in Maton, 2003) when aimed at highlighting the role of (dominant) knowledge in the construction of professional practice (White, 1997). This enhances the professionals' capacity of interpretation and interrogation of the normative categories implemented in their practices and workplaces, coming from the dominant discourses in the wider society, not only a personal thing (Taylor & White, 2001).

In the world of practice, reflexivity is a key competence (Ball, 2013; D'Cruz et al., 2007) that sustains the professionals' capacity for adaptation and calibration, as well as the evolution of meaning and identity (Papp & Rácz, 2016). Ryan and Walsh (2018) connect it to critical pedagogy and social justice: 'There is no possibility of global equality without a reflexive critique of society's educational provision and of the assumptions which define knowledge. Reflexivity is essential for all educators who aspire to social justice' (p. 1). The exercise of critical subjectivity (self-reflexivity) goes together with the awareness of the circularity between subject and environment (shared/relational reflexivity), and the possibility to talk back to power. Without reflexivity, higher education would be reduced to the mere transfer of culturally embedded (dominant, hegemonic) contents, values, and practices. Reflexivity brings to interrogate any idea or action that has been normalized and naturalized.

However, in a provocative chapter, Lynch (2000) wonders about its meaning and epistemic virtue. Any paradigm seems to invoke it, like a mantra. Besides, any thoughtless device could perform a recursive process of feedback. More importantly, he states that claiming reflexivity as an unquestioned value could marginalize those who do not appropriately perform it. For instance, learners from other cultures or epistemologies, with different values and life experiences, who may not be at ease with propositional knowledge. If we consider reflexivity as a performance, it becomes normative, and this creates a strange, paradoxical loop. As a researcher and a teacher, I feel compelled to revise this concept and my practice of it, and to question its outcomes. What do I consider as an 'appropriate performance' of reflexivity? Am I contributing to raising consciousness, or marginalizing those students who do not perform appropriate skills?

My Experience: An Auto-ethnographic Exercise

In teaching, I follow the principles of complexity and co-operative transformation (Formenti, 2018), based on von Foerster's aesthetical imperative 'if you desire to see, learn how to act' and the ethical imperative: 'act always so as to increase the number of choices' (1973, pp. 60–61), on Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (Mezirow et al., 2000), and Heron's practice of co-operative inquiry (1996). My syllabus is based on 'learning by doing'; reflexivity starts from reconsidering experience and read it with a plurality of lenses. Taking inspiration from Frizelle (2020), I use autoethnography to highlight the political in my experience of teaching. I wonder if my action reproduces or reveals oppression in my students' academic experience. Most academic teaching, in fact, is normative and normalizing; teaching practices are very seldom questioned. The disconnection of the professional from the personal brings to disembodiment; emotions, bodies, and biographic experiences are expunged. When teaching is presented as neutral and objective (Hooks, 2003; Shor & Freire, 1987; Sternberg, 2002), it reinforces the *statu quo* and hinders the emergence of new thoughts and

actions. While Frizelle's work (2020) is focused on personal knowledge about LGBTQ issues, my aim is to interrogate my learning experience and compare it with my students'. Is it possible that I unintentionally enact oppression by forcing students towards performing reflexivity? Does my pedagogy foster empowerment and voice?

My autoethnographic journey started by a biographical reconstruction of my relationship to knowing (Munari, 1993), and its evolution:

I have always been a good learner. My odds were unfavourable for gender, social class, and family background. No graduated persons among my relatives. But learning came very easy for me, and a hidden hierarchy of privilege ensures that excellent students benefit positive attention, recognition, and access to more education and resources. 'Poor learners' were disenfranchised and oppressed at school. Maybe I cannot fully understand the learning experience of those who feel unfit to the system. Only after my PhD I realized my position as a non-traditional student, a working-class woman in HE, with problems with the university habitus, and I opened up to vulnerability, starting to challenge previous thoughts and practices. I was able, in time, to name my own hyper adaptation to the academic profile, and to question my assumptions.

From 1999 to 2010 (Formenti, 2009, 2014), I taught teachers and invited them to write autobiographically on *how did I learn about learning?* I wanted to offer them the opportunity to build awareness and understanding of their personal relationship to knowing. Their narratives about their learning journey illuminated individual singular experiences; occasionally, they mentioned specific positive or negative relationships; only very rarely they became critical of the context—at the meso and macrolevels. In that period, I collected more than one thousand self-reflexive essays that confirmed—as I see it now—an implicit assumption about individual and cognitive reflection (not reflexivity) as a pillar in the building of a teacher's identity, while social engagement, power awareness, and collective learning remained in the shadows. I was not asking explicitly enough to explore the social and institutional dimensions of their learning.

In 2005 I started using a compositional approach inspired by Heron's work (1996), where autobiographical awareness mingled with presentational languages, collaborative sense-making, and social commitment. The collaboration with younger researchers brought me to explore the interplay of material and symbolic objects (Formenti et al., 2017), the construction of collective minds (Del Negro & Formenti, 2019), and the multiplication of voices and stories in the classroom (Formenti & Jorio, 2019; Formenti & Rigamonti, 2020). Using autoethnography to booster the reflexive impact of autobiography, I formalized a pedagogical model based on systemic reflexivity (Formenti, 2017, 2018; Heron, 1996).

Now, I question myself: What kind of learners are my students? Do I design, run, and assess my courses coherently with their life experiences, or am I enforcing my own agenda, reinforcing mystification and power? This dilemma is also fuelled by critiques: some students complain about being challenged and not supported enough; some struggle when I ask them to take a position towards learning and towards oneself as a learner. My assignments risk to add on structural constraints, power issues, and misrecognition. Power is unbalanced in my favour: they have no choice but comply. The university sends a message that knowledge is one and everyone learns in the same way; somehow, my message is no different. Yes, I propose a personalized curriculum to sustain each student's uniqueness, interests, and way of knowing and learning, but this very proposal might paradoxically marginalize those who perform in a way that appears to me inappropriate. That is, 'not enough reflexive'. This is why I tried to read the reflexive essays written by my students with a fresher look, paying specific attention to their voices.

Listening To Voices (and Voicing) in the Reflexive Essay

Speaking of students' voices, and their relationship to academic success, it is crucial to recognize that 'voice' may be a problematic construct, and narrowed down to domesticated voices, as argued by many studies in critical

interpretative inquiry (see for example Young & Jerome, 2020). For space reasons, I cannot develop this argument here, but I want to stress that *voice* is an emergent quality of a relationship and a context: in oppressive relationships, the individual does not have a voice, and sometimes the journey to 'voicing' oneself is very long. Besides, voice is multiple and changeable: we express different needs, desires, identities in different situations and moments of our lives. So, for me learning is not about 'discovering my true voice' (an ontological, static, individual construct), but 'voicing the multiple voices' and consider their relational and social effects. It is also about taking responsibility for the process.

In the reflexive essay, I ask each student to (re)interpret their learning path by writing in a narrative yet academic way (i.e. bringing arguments, using quotes, referring to theories and concepts, etc.), using the first person, and bridging their experience in the course (and beyond) with aesthetical imagination, theory, and practice. It is a challenging task, but a good way to start self-assessment and to build some awareness of one's own learning. I take this essay as a starting point for a process of evaluation that ends with the oral exam. Many students seem to learn while writing, rereading and rewriting their text, then when they receive my written feedback (some of them talk about an epiphany), and in the dialogic conversation that we have during the exam, bringing to a final mark. The first evaluation of the essays is challenging for me. I read them looking for clues of systemic reflexivity and the 'four Cs': criticality, creativity, curiosity, and collaboration. Usually, a few of the essays lack both reflection and reflexivity; these students 'cut-and-paste' concepts from the readings. Most students perform some kind of reflection, for example in comments about something that happened during the course, or ideas found in the readings, or some experience interpreted in the light of the course contents. Reflexivity—as defined above—is more elusive and rarer; since the reflexive process is invisible, I can only infer it. What are my clues? In the past few years, I have used creativity, curiosity, collaboration, and criticality as guidelines for the assessment, but I am searching for a more rigorous and respectful method.

Last year, I analysed more thoroughly a corpus of 18 reflexive essays written by master students. I wondered: are these students empowered by writing a reflexive essay, as I would like to think? During the course (15 months long), they have been invited on many occasions to question themselves, to enact emotional and relational awareness individually and collectively, to write stories and use active listening, to discuss with each other about their traineeship and work experience: did this reflexive pedagogy build reflexivity and self-reflexivity? How is this witnessed in the writings?

I took inspiration from the Listening Guide, an interpretative method for analysis developed by Gilligan and coll. (2003), based on four steps:

- A. Listening to the plot: what is the landscape, what is happening here? This thematic analysis, based on relationships and process, recognizes the author's position, as well as the researcher's.
- B. Listening to the subject's multiple voices by creating an I-poem made by extrapolating all the phrases starting with 'I' in the original order; the researcher chooses the length of each phrase and uses punctuation and cuts to enhance the poetic quality and rhythm of the resulting text.
- C. Listening to counterpoints: different voices are marked to signal a change in attitude, style, or a recurrent content etc. These voices can work in unison, in opposition, or complementarily.
- D. The researcher composes the final text using the different readings and reflexive notes.

In all phases, the researcher is engaged with their own values and expectations. Since this method celebrates interpretation, it requires self-reflexivity and a willingness to question each step of the analysis. In building the I poem, since the subject is often implicit in the Italian language, and the construction of the phrase is not linear as in English, I had to interpret and make choices about cuts, already at the level of the text. Then, I realized that each word or phrase in these texts can be read as a tentative of 'voicing

oneself' (more selves, indeed), but the outcome will depend on the quality of my listening. I tried to be faithful to words, and aware of my frameworks of meaning.

I divided the I poems in stanzas following my inspiration, to enhance the emerging different voices and their counterpoints. This obliged me to recognize my interpretative contribution at each step in the process.

Here, I present the results of my analysis of two students' work, Clare and Bella. I have chosen them because of the differences in how they enact their reflexivity. While Clare is the 'typical' academically performing student, connecting field experience with theory, using a research methodology and justifying her choices at every step, Bella can appear, at a first glance, as a narrator, very sensitive but 'not reflexive enough'. The juxtaposition of their poems illuminated my prejudice about what is/is not reflexive.

Students' Voices in the Text: Clare and Bella

Clare: A key to open every door?

In her project for the master course, Clare decided to compare two programs: her workplace—a day unit for vulnerable children—and a group home for adolescents; this comparison of 'two contexts, apparently so similar, then distinguishing them in every single facet', brought her to refine her gaze: 'my eyes, used to see the way of doing in my workplace, revealed my own lenses, and brought to my attention the differences of thought, manners, cultures'.

An epiphany inspired her title—*A key to open every door?* In front of a locked office in the group home, searching in a bulky keyring, the hosting colleague said this is a big waste of time in shifts. Clare was struck:

'I thought it would be more practical to avoid that burden, that cumulates on many others. In my workplace, I have a master key for all the locked rooms. [Then] I wondered on the metaphor: would it be more meaningful and helpful to have one and the same solution for every situation, as a master key [...] or a thought for every choice, a solution that would not forcibly fit with every problem?'

She started to look for more details and differences within the units. Both places looked similar, 'homelike':

'[...] a dining room, a kitchen and a large salon with sofas that represent to me [...] a symbol of sharing. When a boy comes through the door, kicking off his shoes and diving to the couch, to me that's the moment when the place has become his.'

In both places, relationships are the core of intervention: not only with the children, but with parents, teachers, sport coaches, friends, church, and local community. Weaving a network of relationships 'is helpful to make the child feel a protagonist' and to map 'who are the subjects involved in his care'. Little by little, Clare comes to question the way of doing at her workplace: 'Why are our actions done in such a way and not another one?'. Since actions come 'from the ideas we hold about the children and their families', she decides to investigate the representations in the two teams by asking open questions (a questionnaire compiled by each professional) and surprisingly she receives similar answers about ideas, but different ones about actions. This difference can be tackled using theory; Clare is very fond of *Clinica della formazione* (Ferrante & Palmieri, 2019) a Foucauldian approach that combines the material, structural and relational dimensions of the pedagogical apparatus that could be used—she argues—to reveal structural aspects 'enacted by the professionals but never exposed, understood or analysed'.

In the day unit, the child is represented as 'deprived, lacking routine, disoriented, resourceful but unknowingly so, hurt but competent'. Also, the

group home professionals speak of 'disorientation, lack of routine, resources', but they stress more the desire for new experiences, the search for beauty, a sort of energy, strength, and resilience that is manifested by the adolescents. The good and the bad seem more balanced in this case. Clare wonders about the educators' biographies and values; she thinks they should be challenged: 'What makes you think that this dad doesn't want to stay with his son? What is your idea of a functional father?'

Clare identifies contradictions between ideas and actions in observing everyday life in the unit. For example, the idea of a competent child against the constant control by educators. Or: the representation of disoriented children against the implementation of an unstructured setting. She wonders: 'What is behind an educational choice? Why are these units so different? What is the hidden idea under, or inside, the two systems?'

She starts to develop her 'clinic and critical' reflexivity (using the language of *Clinica della formazione*) naming all the structural and contextual constraints impinging on professionals: the unit's routine and habitus, the organization, the funding process from the welfare system, the needs and behaviours of the children themselves and their families. In the closing of the text, she expresses satisfaction for her achievements, and a desire for 'a change in perspective' as a leverage for change in action. She has realized that children at her workplace are framed as lacking and fragile due to their past. On the contrary, the group home is more focused on the present, and this seems to open more possibilities for action.

'I am aware that working for years in a context may bring to stagnating thoughts; I wish I will always have diverse lenses in my pocket, to be used in new, complex and "uncombed" situations, which are common in educational work.'

Clare's I-poem (due to space limitations, this is a short version).

I like to start
Questioning myself
To make the path, to see
Distinguishing
I wanted to find

I work

I have chosen to write
I was asking
I explain

I work

Joking with the colleague
I have thought
I wondered

I work

As I said, I made choices in writing the I poem. In it, I hear two alternating voices. As two birds: one on the ground picking seeds (*I work*), the other on a tree branch looking at it, questioning, making distinctions and choices. The reflexive Clare observes, thinks and problematizes, comparing and wrapping up her data. The working Clare is less audible but strong: *I work* is iterated in the text, creating a rhythm. She can joke with a colleague and ask questions too, playing different positions in the system. It seems to me that she celebrates both reflection and reflexivity, using verbs that refer to actions and thoughts. The way she uses structural theory and pedagogy to answer a dilemma is very personal and engaged.

Bella: The Vegetable Garden as a Time-free Space

Bella has just started a new job as a social educator in a group home for adolescent males. In her reflexive essay, she starts by a long autobiographic narrative connecting her learning path to her father and to the vegetable garden as a transforming place, where physical action, emotions, identity, and self-recognition can happen.

'Since a child I was playing with neighbours selling plants and flowers [...] I remember my father, during the summer he devoted himself to the vegetable garden [...] hardly left me try by myself, he was afraid that I could break the plants' roots [...] He put in this so much love and passion that I just stood there and look at him [...]

Entering adolescence, I less and less went out to the garden with my father [...] until third year of high school [...] I started to notice that I was accompanied by rage, sadness, tiredness, joy, bitterness, frustration, light-heartedness. Working the vegetable garden allowed me to fully live the emotions I was feeling [...] I could let off steam [...] inflicting the spade as a blade.

I could cut the buds of tomatoes with a surgeon's precision [...] I could stay hours contemplating its beauty [...] nobody but the darkness of the night could tell me it was time to go home. I have learnt there to better know myself; I have learnt to recognize my emotions; I have learnt to live them.'

She tells how she has learned to trust herself, 'going to the garden meant dedicate time to me'. This story offers a landscape for the following part of the essay, describing her project for the master course at her workplace. The garden activity is not scheduled in the weekly program of the unit: she wants it to be free and atemporal: 'children are drowned by detailed programs, organized to the minute to accommodate school, homework, sport, support family, origin family', so she wonders: what is left for improvisation or simply doing nothing?

Bella intends to 'follow the flux of what the boys bring in'. But her colleagues are puzzled: Who is running the garden? What are we planning to grow? Let's abound with tomatoes, so we will not need to buy them, right? But Bella wants to 'experiment together, exchange knowledge' and foster self-discovery. She knows that doing brings memories. Every child has a right to live with nature, nurturing imagination, collaboration, problem solving, and self-esteem.

Four boys decide to volunteer and prepare the ground with her. Then, a forced pause to allow the terrain to rest and absorb nutrients. 'The boys were impatient to sow [...] but we had to slow down [...] As for the ground, neither the mind can be arranged once and for all, you have to go back to it every day, doing what is needed to keep it well nurtured and fertile'. Then, time to sow. An older boy joins the group, re-enacting previous learning at a foster home. 'Waiting day by day the tiny creatures' sprouting. Not easy, the waiting seemed never ending, but the joy of seeing a little green new-born leave is priceless.'

Bella starts to notice that boys often go to the garden to check but also to vent, after a quarrel, in search for a connection with the sky's beauty, the changing weather, birds, insects, touching the wholeness of life. Or learning that a pumpkin flower will become a pumpkin only if pollinated. 'So, everything depends on the context and diverse environmental factors, no matter how much care we put in it, it is not said that we will get the outcome we hope for.'

Bella's focus is the experiment, not its outcomes. She is happy when the boys try to involve other educators; these seemed puzzled by the apparent chaos. 'I tried to explain that we were attending the garden, but not interested in harvesting, rather in experimenting and studying nature'. They stopped asking. During a meeting she tried again to make her point on

'the relevance of atemporal activities in our daily life, which is packed with organized things. I was surprised that only one colleague endorsed me, while the others remained silent. Maybe it was not the best moment or maybe we are not ready as a team to let go our weekly planning.'

When I composed Bella's I-poem, I realized that her text is divided in three parts: an autobiographic part where almost all the phrases have 'I' as a subject, a middle part about the garden project, with very few 'I-phrases', and a final part with a mix of subjects. This triggered a question: how can we detect self-reflexivity without an 'I'?

Bella's I-poem (due to space limitations, this is a short version).

I played
I remember, I remember
I liked going out, lend a hand
I went, I joined
I remember
I watched, I stayed looking at him

I penetrated
I went out
I did not want to listen
I felt free to experiment

I felt I could live
I could vent digging, inflicting
I could cut, choose
I could stay, admire, contemplate

I learnt to know myself
I learnt to recognize
I learnt to live them

I don't remember

I had nobody
I was open to listen
I jumped in
I tried to put into practice
I trimmed
I felt bad, I had not obtained, I lost courage

I decided—I would never have to deal with this again
I was satisfied in seeing, I could see
I had to do it, I was ready to, I could experiment and prove myself
I started devoting myself

I wanted
I understood
I realized that meant devoting time to myself
I needed to stop and reflect, I had to chill out

[here, a long silence of the I when the project starts—the subject is mostly 'them', the boys, or the colleagues]

I made [them] notice
I did not insist, I expected
I will need to tackle
I had not explained
I was doing
I told we are arranging, I tried to explain, I managed to talk
I tried.

Bella has a way to express her reflexivity that is not mental, but more related to emotions, actions, and the environment. I used stanzas to represent my grasp of this journey, hearing a different voice at each step: the remembering young woman, the explorer, the empowered adult, the learning,

the resilient, the self-aware. She uses images and metaphors, she shows systemic sensitivity—for the garden, the sprouts, the boys, the clouds, her team, herself—she can refer to theory to sustain her choices and illustrate her motivations, but this is not central to her text. I am able, now, thanks to this exercise, to appreciate more this kind of text, that may appear 'less academically appropriate' just because the author's subjectivity prevails on critical arguments: but what is more critical, nowadays, than creating a chaotic time-free garden, or celebrating the need for slowing down, and respect the rhythms of nature?

Conclusions

With this first endeavour, I tried to explore my theory and practice of reflexivity as a teacher in HE, a critical systemic researcher in adult education, and a learner myself. I have argued that the distinction between reflection and reflexivity is helpful in separating a cognitive skill—useful for adaptation and decision making—from a meta-competence that allows more complex processes, beyond the rational and conscious domain, beyond the individual, and a narrow, ontological, monological view of identity and voice. Using the Listening Guide on Bella's and Clare's essays has been illuminating, and the source of my prejudice became evident: while Bella does not intellectualize, Clare uses a mental vocabulary (compare the verbs in their 'I Poems'). Besides, Clare devotes a large part of her essay to theory. She performs better, academically speaking. However, Bella's voices appear richer, more embodied, her biography is explored in a very significant way as a determinant of her professional identity. They are different, and their difference needs to be considered when they receive assessment.

This exercise allowed me to become more attentive to the strategies of voicing that students use in their assignments, and to discuss with them about it. A further step in shared reflexivity.

References

- Alheit, P. (2022). Autobiography and social climbing: The inevitable compulsion on self-reflexivity and its variants. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 13(3), 301–313.
- Alvesson, M., & Sköldbberg, K. (2000). *Reflexive methodology*. Sage.
- Andrew, Y. (2015). I'm strong within myself: Gender, class and emotional capital in childcare. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 36(5), 651–668.
- Ball, K. (2013). Action learning: Creating a space for multi-agency reflexivity to complement case management. *Practice Social Work in Action*, 25(5), 335–347.
- Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. Ballantine Books.
- Beck, U., Bonss, W., & Lau, C. (2003). The theory of reflexive modernization: Problematic, hypotheses and research programme. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 20(2), 1–33.
- Bingle, L., & Middleton, A. (2019). From doing to being: the tensions of systemic practice in social work. Group reflective supervision in child protection. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 41(3), 384–406.
- Constantine, D. (2013). *Poetry*. Oxford University Press.
- D'Cruz, H., Gillingham, P., & Melendez, S. (2007). Reflexivity, its meanings and relevance for social work: A critical review of the literature. *British Journal of Social Work*, 37, 73–90.
- Daniel, G. (2012). With an exile's eye: Developing positions of cultural reflexivity (with a bit of help from feminism). In I. Krause (ed.), *Culture and reflexivity in systemic psychotherapy* (pp. 91–113). Routledge.
- Del Negro, G., & Formenti, L. (2009). What's in the making of a collective mind. In L. Garrino & B. Bruschi (Eds.), *Togetherness and its discontents* (pp. 27–42). Pensa Multimedia.
- Derby, M. W. (2015). *Place, being, resonance: A critical ecohermeneutic approach to education*. Peter Lang.

- Dugmore, P., Partridge, K., Sethi, I., & Krupa-Flasinska, M. (2018). Systemic supervision in statutory social work in the UK: Systemic rucksacks and bells that ring. *European Journal of Social Work*, 21(3), 400–414.
- Ferrante, A., & Palmieri, C. (2019). Understanding educational experience. 'Clinica della Formazione' as a hybrid and inclusive research approach. Proceedings of the *Third European Conference of Qualitative Inquiry. Qualitative inquiry as activism. Edinburgh, 13–15 Feb. 2019*, pp. 101–108.
- Foerster, H. von. (1973). On constructing a reality. Reprinted in P. Watzlawick (ed.), *The invented reality. How do we know what we believe we know? (Contributions to constructivism)* (pp. 41–61). W.W. Norton & Company.
- Fook, J. (2012). The challenges of creating critically reflective groups. *Social Work with Groups*, 35(3), 218–234.
- Formenti, L. (2009). In prima persona: pedagogia compositiva per futuri insegnanti. *Quaderni di didattica della scrittura*, 2, 71–90.
- Formenti, L. (2014). Profession and context: training teachers in a systemic, co-operative and auto/biographic view. In B. K apflinger et al. (Eds.) *Changing Configurations of Adult Education in Transitional Times*, Proceedings ESREA (pp. 328–342), Berlin, von Humboldt University.
- Formenti, L. (2017). *Formazione e trasformazione. Un modello complesso*. Raffaello Cortina.
- Formenti, L., & Jorio, F. (2019). Multiple visions, multiple voices: A dialogic methodology for teaching in higher education. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 17(3), 208–227.
- Formenti, L., Luraschi, L., & Rigamonti, A. (2017). L'oggetto evocativo. Innovazione, riflessivit  e trasformazione nella didattica universitaria. *Encyclopaideia*, XXI (48), 5–27.
- Formenti, L., & Rigamonti, A. (2020). Systemic reflexivity in residential child care: A pedagogical frame to empower professional competence. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, 11(4.2), 115–139.
- Foucault, M. (1963/1973). *The birth of the clinic: An archaeology of medical perception*. Vintage Books.
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin.

- Frizelle, K. L. (2020). The personal is pedagogical (?): Personal narratives and embodiment as teaching strategies in higher education. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 34(2), 17–35.
- Gilligan, C., Spencer, R., Weinberg, M. K., & Bertsch, T. (2003). On the *Listening guide*: a voice-centered relational model. In P.M. Camic, J.E. Rhodes, & L. Yardley (Eds.), *Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design* (pp. 157–172). American Psychological Association.
- Heron, J. (1996). *Co-operative inquiry: Research into the human condition*. Sage.
- Hunt, C. (2013). *Transformative learning through creative life writing: Exploring the self in the learning process*. Routledge.
- Jude, J. (2018). The practice of systemic reflexivity. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 32(1), 45–57.
- Kearns, S., & McArdle, K. (2012). Doing it right? Accessing the narratives of identity of newly qualified social workers through the lens of resilience: I am, I have, I can. *Child & Family Social Work*, 17(4), 385–394.
- Kondrat, M. E. (1999). Who is the 'self' in self-aware: Professional self-awareness from a critical theory perspective. *Social Service Review*, pp. 451–477.
- Lykes, M. B., & Távora, G. (2020). Feminist participatory action research: Coconstructing liberation psychological praxis through dialogic relationality and critical reflexivity. In L. Comas-Díaz & E. Torres Rivera (Eds.), *Liberation psychology: Theory, method, practice, and social justice* (pp. 111–130). American Psychological Association.
- Lyle, E. (2019). *Fostering a relational pedagogy: Self-study as transformative praxis*. Brill.
- Lynch, M. (2000). Against reflexivity as an academic virtue and source of privileged knowledge. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 17(3), 26–54.
- Magnuson, D., Patten, N., & Looyesen, K. (2012). Negotiation as a style in child protection work. *Child & Family Social Work*, 17(3), 296–305.

- Mason, B. (2015). Towards positions of safe uncertainty. *InterAction: The Journal of Solution Focus in Organisations*, 7(1), 28–43.
- Maton, K. (2003). Reflexivity, relationism & research: Pierre Bourdieu and the epistemic conditions of social scientific knowledge. *Space and Culture*, 6(1), 52–65.
- Mezirow, J., & Associates (Eds.) (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. Jossey-Bass.
- Monson, T. A. (2020). Risk attitudes within 'complex youth' assessment and decision making: Professional perspectives. *Child Care in Practice*, 26(2), 210–222.
- Papp, E., & Rácz, A. (2016). How professionals in the social system and child protection perceive their profession. *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae – Social Analysis*, 6(1), 71–91.
- Partridge, K., Dugmore, P., Mahaffey, H., Chidgey, M., & Owen, J. (2019). 'Step by step, side by side': the quest to create relational artistry through systemic practice within children's social care. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 41(3), 321–342.
- Ryan, A., & Walsh, T. (2018). *Reflexivity and critical pedagogy*. Brill.
- Schön, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.
- Simon, G., & Chard, A. (2014). *Systemic inquiry: Innovations in reflexive practice research*. Everything is Connected Press.
- Taylor, C., & White, S. (2001). Knowledge, truth and reflexivity: The problem of judgement in social work. *Journal of Social Work*, 1(1), 37–59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146801730100100104>
- Watson, R. (2019). Jointly created authority: A conversation analysis of how power is managed by parents and systemic psychotherapists in children's social care. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 4(3), 357–383. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6427.12244>
- White, S. (1997). Beyond retrodution? Hermeneutics, reflexivity, and social work practice. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 27(5), 739–753.
- Young, H., & Jerome, L. (2020). Student voice in higher education: Opening the loop. *British Educational Research Journal*, 46(3), 688–705.

Chapter 3

Julita Pierkosz, Marta Petelewicz & Joanna Stankowska

Mature students in the secondary education – motivations, process of learning and benefits

Introduction

In this chapter, we primarily focus on the perspective of mature students (25+) who have made the decision to attend secondary school in Poland. Pursuing this type of education requires long-term commitment, dedication, and various resources. It entails venturing beyond one's daily routine and openness to engaging in new activities. Particularly, we examine the motivations and concerns of adult students as they continue their educational journey beyond compulsory education. We also explore the characteristics of the educational process, the challenges encountered, and the multidimensional benefits associated with participating in such activities.

Research on adult secondary schools in Poland has received limited attention in recent years. Existing studies highlight the educational benefits and efficiency of these institutions for adult learners, but they are often undervalued by society (Duda, 2021; Kurantowicz & Nizińska, 2012).

Schools for adults, stage II sectoral vocational schools, and post-secondary schools are part of the adult education and training system in

Poland. Schools for adults are available to those who wish to complete their primary or secondary education or obtain new vocational qualifications and skills for personal or professional reasons¹. However, they are not very popular, only 2.5% of adult Poles (aged 25+) participate in this form of education (Petelewicz et al., 2023).

Adult secondary schools use a semester-based credit system, where credit allocation varies depending on the teacher. Minimum attendance of 50% is required. The programmes culminate in achieving Level 4 proficiency in the Polish Qualifications Framework through a vocational exam administered by an external commission and non-vocational subjects are also assessed and credited on a semester basis. While education in these institutions is generally free, non-public schools receive state subsidies.

A group of mature students captured our particular interest due to the unique life circumstances in which they resume their learning journeys. We focus on the areas of shaping decisions concerning taking up education and staying in the process (i.e. making decisions, concerns, motivations), perception of the educational process and coping strategies, as well as benefits. We examine how previous educational experiences, from compulsory education, shape the motivation, concerns, and expectations of adult students. Findings from other researchers indicate that they have profound influence on attitude towards school, motivation, and expectations. Deeply rooted schemes can serve as a source of barriers and concerns (such as fear of evaluation and the need for traditional confirmation of acquired knowledge) and at the same time as a source of support for individuals, shaping their orientation towards rewards (Crowder & Pupynin, 1995). Motivations are examined from the perspective of biographical learning, taking into account transitional moments and crises (Alheit, 2011; Erikson, 1980). We consider external stimuli and internal factors, as well as their persistence throughout the learning process (Niebrzydowski, 1989).

¹ Secondary school for adults lasts 8 semesters (4 years), and those who completed stage 1 of a vocational school can enter at the third semester. Graduates before 2017 must complete an 8-semester education cycle. The matura exams, similar to those in youth schools, are required for obtaining a full secondary education for higher education admission, but they are not compulsory.

We look at the educational process from the perspective of adult students. On one hand, we examine how they cope with it, what approaches they employ, and what their expectations are. On the other hand, we observe the organisation of the educational process itself—to what extent it differs from standard formative learning and the patterns known from compulsory education. In the literature, it is noted that prior educational experiences have an impact not only on the decision-making process but also on its course and quality. Thinking patterns are shaped by years spent in school, which is reflected in the acceptance of the belief that the responsibility for learning rests on the institution and teachers, and it is the duty of teachers to ensure that students know what they should know (Illeris, 2007). Martin Kohli argues that the universal education system, along with its defined levels and profiles of qualifications, determines the starting point and initial opportunities for individuals and sets the direction in which their lives can subsequently unfold, consequently shaping their social positioning as well (Alheit, 2011, p. 9). School is a key site for shaping patterns of learning, through the internalization of specific educational content, individuals also learn certain forms of learning.

Empirical findings show that adult learning is most often undertaken in relation to work (Czarnik et al., 2022; Petelewicz et al., 2023). However, from the perspective of the individual, participation in educational activities has a much broader range of functions and benefits. As T. Schuler and D. Watson point out, 'learning reinforces the power to take control of one's own life' (2009, pp. 7–15). It relates to various dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and social, it helps to build social capital and open up new avenues of personal development and confidence (Illeris, 2007). In the psychological perspective, the key determinants of educational success among learners include problem-solving abilities, effective knowledge acquisition, and the application of acquired experiences, broadly referred to as intellectual abilities. From a sociological perspective, educational effectiveness aims to reduce social inequalities by narrowing the achievement gap, particularly among vulnerable groups (Kyriakides et al., 2018).

Methods

In order to explore above-mentioned issues, we used the data from a qualitative research project Institutional Dimension of Adult Learning at the Local Level, which aimed to diagnose the situation in the area of formal and non-formal learning from the perspective of local government representatives, educational institution managers, as well as users.

The project was conducted between January and April 2022 in 6 counties, in Poland. A total of 50 in-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted, including 24 with learners. For the purpose of the analysis presented in this chapter, only participants of formal adult education were included, totalling 14 interviews. The interviews were structured and focused on issues such as the decision-making process, characteristics and perception of the undertaken educational activity, life situation/context, future educational needs, and plans. The basic criterion for recruitment was to be an active student at the secondary school for adults, having completed at least half of the educational programme. Eight people attended general secondary school, five attended an administrative technician programme, and one attended a food service technician programme.

Nevertheless, additional characteristics were also taken into account to maintain diversification among the cases, such as gender (4 men, 10 women), age (3 people: 25–34 years, 11 people: 35–49 years), achieved level of education (4 people at ISCED 2: lower secondary, 5 people at ISCED 3: vocational, and 4 people at ISCED 4: secondary without upper secondary), and occupational status (11 people employed in medium and low skilled occupations according to the ISCO 08 classification; 2 people in the process of changing jobs, 1 person inactive). Each interview lasted around 90 minutes, was transcribed, coded, and analysed with MAXQDA software.

Results

The final decision to apply for secondary school was, in most cases, a challenging and complex matter for the interviewees. Becoming a

student requires substantial commitment lasting a few years, which has a considerable impact on daily life. This involves attending classes, engaging in study sessions, and dedicating time to exam preparation, all of which become integral parts of one's daily tasks and responsibilities. The notion of 'maturing to the decision' often recurs in their narratives. Respondents often mentioned that the decision to pursue further education was a gradual process that evolved over time.

The reasons for the postponement are primarily attributed to the challenging and complex life situations faced by the respondents. These situations encompass the burden of family responsibilities associated with raising children, unexpected and sometimes traumatic events such as the loss of a loved one.

The results of the study confirm theoretical findings that adults often undertake their educational endeavours during milestones in their lives. The act of engaging in education is viewed as a way for individuals to restructure their lives and foster personal growth (Alheit, 2011). Moments of 'suspension' in one's biography, crisis of values, or a decrease in the quality of interpersonal relationships are often motivating factors for individuals to engage in education (Kurantowicz & Nizińska, 2012). In the narratives of our respondents, some kind of change seems to be a key motivating factor for pursuing education, which particularly resonates in the narratives of women. The decision to study often aligns with a sense of 'regaining' time and personal space, which correlates with a decrease in the responsibilities associated with the mother's caretaker role. This change allows for more time to dedicate to personal commitments, but it also represents a form of transition in women's lives, where the need to fill a certain void and explore new activities for self-development emerged.

The concerns of our interviewees can be divided into two categories. The first one refers to experiences and assumptions stemming from compulsory education. The experience of the interrupted/broken educational path as well as some recollections of school life, student–teacher relations, school failures, shape fears concerning their educational performance in adulthood.

They doubted their cognitive abilities. What is more, they were anxious about taking part in traditional assessment processes, especially in front of others (Kolb & Kolb, 2022). According to theoretical assumptions, adults often must overcome negative self-perceptions regarding their abilities as learners and their potential for learning. Current educational experiences and decisions are influenced by the residual memories of all past learning moments. The significance lies in those acquired during compulsory formal education (often negative), as well as subsequent experiences that can support the breaking of barriers and reluctance to reenter the school environment. Although we do not know how individuals develop this capacity throughout their lives and at what stage, when they make the decision to pursue further education, for some of them (especially older students, whose decision-making process is spread over time and may last for years), it signifies leaving behind any negative self-identifications associated with learning (*ibidem*).

It should be noted, however, that these initial fears slowly abated during the process and sometimes even constituted a source of additional motivation. The interviewees brushed up knowledge and skills and compared what they had learned in the past with the current—lower in their opinion—requirements in key subjects, i.e. those required for the secondary school leaving diploma and those commonly regarded as difficult. What they had learned in the past was treated as a valuable resource to build up their position and to be shared with others. The interviewees also raised the issue of previous educational successes, predispositions, unfulfilled plans, and ambitions. They seem to be important in legitimising the decision to start learning at a later age, but also supporting them in remaining in the educational process. 'Let me put it this way, I thought the level would be higher, that's one thing. And two, well, in my case there just weren't any surprises' (ID_U_16).

Interviewees emphasise that experience of the break in education contributed to change of the approach—greater appreciation of knowledge and strengthening the desire to learn, reaching the maturity to participate fully in the educational process.

'First of all, I don't know, maybe you also need to grow up, you understand more from the lessons, you work harder. But it's also, I'll tell you, a break from everyday life. (...) I can learn something more. Well, I think I would do it a second time, a fourth time too (laughs). Yes, I don't think I regret it' (ID_U_10).

The second category of concerns are those connected with the ability to reconcile learning with other responsibilities, especially in long-term perspective. Women were especially under pressure concerning handling household chores, childcare and at the same time attending classes and studying at home. Some of the interviewees work in shifts, also during weekends when classes are held, which makes it difficult to combine working hours and presence at the classes.

Motivation seems to be a complex issue, influenced by both external and internal factors. It is often stimulated by professional career aspirations as well as specific patterns within the environment, particularly when positive educational models exist among family or friends.

In some cases, interviewees make the decision to attend school together with another person such as relatives or friends. This arrangement seems very supportive and gives the advantage of mutual motivation throughout the learning journey. It also provides a sense of security and reduces uncertainty when facing new challenges. The respondents' relatively low level of cultural capital, along with their apprehensions and doubts about their own abilities to engage in a culturally distant educational domain, may underlie the need for collective decision-making in pursuing studies and the shared experience of learning.

However, the reasons why respondents decide to enter secondary school are much more complex, they are neither solely instrumental nor solely autotelic. While instrumental motivations, which are often associated with professional plans, do exist, they appear less frequently in the narratives of interviewees and are typically not mentioned as the primary reason. In their responses, respondents indicate a desire for a change in their professional status, the potential for increased earnings, and the opportunity to leverage various

initiatives or programs offered by labour market institutions. These motivations ultimately relate to the increase of higher social and professional status.

It seems, however, that internal motivation is much more powerful for them, perhaps resulting from their specific stage of life and the conviction that this is the best and sometimes the last opportunity to engage in learning. An important factor is their personal sense of lacking an education and the desire to satisfy unfulfilled educational ambitions. Interviewees stated that they had to go beyond the embarrassment and inferiority connected with low level of education. They experienced it in institutions, the workplace or when looking for a job, sometimes also among friends or in the family.

Another category of motivations is those connected with the desire and need for personal development and strengthening interviewees' empowerment. 'One would like to show people something else. One would like to prove something, that I can do this, that I could, I don't know, change my qualifications, change my job' (ID_U_15).

Such conclusions are confirmed by other studies on lifelong learning, where the motivation to overcome one's own limitations is emphasised among other reasons (Illeris, 2007; Kurantowicz & Nizińska, 2012). According to sociologist Anthony Giddens, people strive for a sense of continuity in building meaning in their lives, endeavouring to construct their own identity, their vocation or destiny (Giddens, 1991). Initial motivation is crucial on the starting point, but an equally significant aspect is the issue of maintaining motivation till the end. Quantitative research (Lee & Pang, 2013) focusing on the factors that encourage adults to engage in learning also demonstrates that educational achievements positively correlate with autotelic motivation, such as cognitive curiosity, acquiring new knowledge, expanding horizons, and learning for the sheer joy of it.

Our analysis shows that receiving support during the educational process is a vital factor in maintaining motivation of the interviewees. In the narratives, women frequently expressed the need for external support. The systemic context, which has deeply influenced the respondents' attachment to their social roles, is noteworthy. In Poland, there is a high degree of familial

caregiving, yet there is limited availability of systemic support for families. Women bear a major share of household duties, extending beyond childcare. For our female respondents, receiving support from family members, particularly instrumental support, was highly valued as a facilitator of learning. The most common allies for the respondents were parents or husbands, partners who assumed childcare responsibilities, and adult or adolescent children who helped with household duties. We can also notice differences that emerged concerning the extent and intensity of assistance, notably in the realm of emotional support provided by the partner or husband. This support ranged from expressing confidence in the decision to pursue education to motivating the respondent to persist in the educational process, especially during challenging moments.

'It started when the online began, and I was saying "I can't do this". You know, at home, with the kids, it was hard. But my husband was saying "you can do it, this won't last forever". He said, "you can do it, you'll make it". And I made it' (ID_U_10).

Adults participating in secondary schools typically do not associate it with receiving regular support in the form of additional funding. The interviewees do not consider it necessary, as their perceived participation costs are generally low, given that students usually do not pay for learning. However, participants are solely responsible for minimizing additional costs such as transportation expenses to the educational institution or the purchase of learning materials and equipment. Real costs, such as forgoing participation in a course aligned with personal interests and needs due to distance or not purchasing books, as well as sharing computer equipment with school-age children, are not adequately addressed or fully recognized by the respondents.

Systemic solutions are also inadequate in providing support for economically active adults who choose to pursue learning that is not directly connected to their workplace and not organised by their employer. Much relies on the goodwill of the employer as well as the organisational skills and

determination of the interviewees. However, in some cases, adjusting one's job to the schedule of classes is not feasible, resulting in significant consequences.

'I had an unpleasant situation at work because someone was just jealous that someone could go to school at this age. And this was a young person, who was just able to, I don't know, complain that I am taking lessons online while at work. That's not nice. I lost one of my job responsibilities because of this [...]' (IDI_U_14).

Perception of Educational Process

Starting school for adults means also becoming part of a new social entity and being a member of the new social group. Building relationships and getting to know people are important and generally satisfying aspects of undertaking adult education. The perception of self and own position in the students' group is connected to the attitude towards learning and the way of participation in the process. All our interviewees shape their perception of themselves within the group, based on the distinct division between their own—mature subgroup and 'youngsters'. Participants aged 25 and older, in their own opinion, treat the educational process seriously and appreciate the opportunity to supplement their knowledge. They decided to become adult students, because they want to learn and gain as much as they can from being in the process. They are deeply involved in classes and more respectful towards teachers. The interviewees have a sense of responsibility for the group, they have a feeling that how the lesson goes on depends on them in some way. Their level of commitment to tasks is high, they try to answer questions and participate in discussions. They do not want to disappoint the teacher's presumed expectations, so they try to stay until the end of class, while some others in the group leave earlier. Mature students share a positive, committed attitude, which can be an important factor in building identity, stimulating, and supporting each other (Kolb & Kolb, 2022).

The image of the younger group is drawn just the opposite. According to

mature students' opinions, 'younger' classmates are not making an effort, rather they meet the attendance requirement and learn at a minimum level—just to pass. They don't do what is required of them during the lesson—they talk, play with their phones, and are not prepared for the classes as recommended by the teachers. Nevertheless, the relationships in the whole group are most often described as good, the atmosphere between students is friendly and despite a clear division, all students are integrated. They exchange information, share materials with each other and spend time together during breaks and sometimes even after school.

Starting a learning activity at a school for adults is a return to patterns of behaviour familiar from compulsory education, particularly strong is acceptance of the hierarchical order and inferiority towards teachers (Freire, 1992). The teacher is treated as the person in charge for the whole process, while the student is a 'receiver' with no prospect to influence the process, rather taking it for granted (Illeris, 2007). There is a lack of opportunity to shape the content, the teaching conditions, the teacher's assessment or to draw on one's own experiences in an educational context (Kurantowicz & Nizińska, 2012, p. 72). The respondents accept and perform assignments, even though they are not always comfortable with its form, i.e. in front of the others they do not question the didactic methods and in many cases do not even ask for additional explanation. That has profound consequences, especially in the case of difficult subjects. Many concerns in schools for adults revolve around mathematics. The respondents are aware of their deficiencies stemming from previous educational stages, which influence their anxiety at present. However, learning English is the most problematic. English is taught at an advanced level in secondary school; however, for most of our respondents, this is their first contact with learning this language. They do not receive any additional help from teachers or the school when they have difficulties in understanding the material. The problem with lack of the basic knowledge hampering progress in language learning is overlooked by teachers and institutions, and students have to deal with it on their own.

Teachers' authority, a positive evaluation of their knowledge and

involvement are present in most narratives. Students appreciate activities which, in their opinion, show that teachers treat them as adults. The fact that they can leave for personal reasons, take time off early, have a coffee during class, and that there are no unexpected tests or questions asked that count towards the grading is perceived as significantly different from the way children and young people are treated. Manifestations of being treated as a partner are perceived by the students as exceptional and worth emphasising, but they are rather superficial and fit into the canon of expected relations between adults. It is difficult to find significant manifestations of a more 'adult' treatment of pupils and the implementation of andragogical principles, apart from less control and criticism by the teachers.

Submissive attitudes are present also in the institution. Mature students, often burdened by an inconvenient schedule, assignments, and rules that are not adjusted to the needs of the adults, tend to accept them without questioning. The issue of support received from the educational institution in terms of organising the educational process and changes in its scope does not appear in the narratives of the respondents.

The didactic process itself duplicates patterns known from the initial education of the Polish school system. The dominant methods are teacher-centred instruction, other, more activating techniques such as group work or even the independent preparation and presentation of a topic is used sporadically. Respondents who have encountered such methods evaluate them positively, but it seems that the strongly imprinted ways of thinking result in a lack of expectations that classes differ from a typical school lesson. Teachers use well-known educational tools and didactic methods: solving assignments at the blackboard, selecting students for answers, 'cross-questioning', assigning homework, and finally giving grades, expressed in numbers, which do not indicate what contributed to a particular grade. When talking about their learning, students describe: taking notes, photocopying, organising materials, repeating from notes, and less frequently searching for additional sources on the Internet. The activities undertaken are reproductive in nature, while utilising one's own initiative, going beyond the minimum required by teachers, is rare.

They move within the framework set by the institution, taking for granted the existing norms and ways of doing things. Returning to education after a break—as someone with extensive life experiences, they unreflectively, and seem that even with satisfaction or relief, accept the reality of school, which does not differ much from what is remembered from the past (Freire, 1992).

Teachers encourage students to work on their own, to read, to prepare for classes, but the students themselves are responsible for their own motivation. Most of the respondents try to integrate self-directed learning into their daily lives, which is difficult given their professional and family responsibilities. The time set aside for learning is usually at the expense of leisure, late in the evening after other everyday tasks have been completed. It is adjusted to other personal responsibilities, generally does not occur at a fixed point in the day and depends on the opportunities at hand. Because adult education uses a system crediting all subjects taught at the end of a given semester, students have an accumulation of learning and assignments to be completed at that time. Especially in the first year, this stage is accompanied by negative emotions and stress, it is a critical moment, associated with a decrease in initial enthusiasm, anxiety and fatigue, evoking thoughts of resignation. According to our respondents, this is the moment when many people give up without even attempting to pass the courses.

Benefits from Learning

When discussing the benefits, we focus on both, those that are intended within the education system (primarily referring to the achievement of specific learning outcomes) and those that arise from hidden, often unintended, and unconscious functions of learning (Illeris, 2007). The opportunity to acquire new knowledge and expand one's cognitive horizons is a natural and intended benefit of the educational process, as perceived by the interviewees.

Acquiring new skills and knowledge enables the interviewees to perform their professional tasks more effectively, but also to apply them in everyday life situations (such as handling official matters or providing assistance to

family members). Developing communication skills, general knowledge, and self-confidence allows for a better understanding of the surrounding reality and social processes. Furthermore, strengthening an entrepreneurial mindset involves acquiring skills in organising time differently than before, often stemming from the need to balance household and work responsibilities with learning. Although this type of training can be demanding for the interviewees, it enhances and develops their ability to effectively manage their time and self-motivate, especially in situations of overwhelming obligations, requiring early morning mobilization for weekend classes.

In the process of learning, the interviewees not only acquire new knowledge and expand their cognitive horizons but primarily enhance their social competencies. 'I've got more self-confidence, one knows more, knows more about regulations, what is around. Relations for sure, getting to know new people, from different backgrounds, that's the first thing' (ID_U_2).

Engaging with a group that is diverse in terms of age, life experiences, and professional backgrounds allows for a better understanding of the surrounding reality and social processes. It provides an opportunity to broaden the range of cultural codes, enabling active participation in conversations, training in engaging in discussions and presenting arguments. This helps individuals feel more confident in various communication contexts, not only in school but also in their personal and professional lives. Usually, this phenomenon is called in the literature learning from one another or peer learning (Briggs, 2013; Gogus, 2012). However, it should also be noted that schools, to a limited extent, reinforce a learning culture that also respects informal and incidental learning processes, particularly in the development of the social competencies. These competencies usually develop unintentionally, and schools do not reinforce the peer learning process or validate these competencies.

Adult learning in the case of mature interviewees seems to be a tool for empowerment.

'We do support each other; my self-confidence has been boosted. It was always like that—you are only housewife, only children, home duties,

cleaning, washing to the fact that we support each other, I feel so valued. Here, I can notice I'm better than that, I can do something' (ID_U_15).

Learning strengthens the sense of control over their own life and encompasses various dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and social. Besides the perceived primary expansion of knowledge and skills, educational activities also contribute to expanding networks and developing social relationships. They open up new paths for personal development, provide information on navigating fewer familiar areas of social reality, including institutional dimensions, and can influence the overall well-being and confidence of individuals.

Discussion

The presented analyses are part of a growing body of literature concerning adult education, focusing on the perspective of motivations, expectations, obstacles that mature students meet during their learning process and benefits that they gain. However, from a Polish perspective studies on formal, secondary education of adults are scarce (Kurantowicz & Nizińska, 2012). We have focused on three issues: making the decision to start and to continue secondary education, the perception of the educational process and the benefits mature students get from it. In all of them the particularly influential factors are the experiences from compulsory education that are shaping attitudes towards school, learning, teachers, as well as expectations, concerns, and potential gains.

Our interviewees went through some kind of disturbance of their educational trajectory, which shaped on one hand the feeling of loss and longing for coming back to supplement the level of education, and on the other deeply rooted schemes of past experiences and picture of their own way of functioning at primary school. They have a strong need to turn back to the patterns from compulsory education with a central role and superiority of a teacher. They have a load of acceptance toward school rules copied from compulsory education. Mature students approve them without questioning

and even with relief, while at the same time they would like to be treated as adults. The schemes and roles best known to them from the past are vivid, the further analysis should be carried on, how to make the formal education comfortable for adult students, but at the same time moving on rebuilding the patterns to make the process more profitable for them.

At the beginning of the process mature students are enthusiastic, ready for the challenge, eager to give themselves a chance to learn and to make up for some failures from the past. Nevertheless, neither teachers, nor the institutions recognize their needs and assets that can be used to make the whole process more profitable. Deeply internalized, oppressive patterns are replicated what limits the opportunity to develop reflexivity and creativity (Freire, 1992). The sense of inferiority towards teachers and, in general, the institution of school, hampers their criticality and attempts to postulate changes that could bring some adjustments to the characteristics of the situation and competencies of mature students. Even though encountering many obstacles and burdened with work, home duties and attending classes, adult students are motivated to persevere till graduation. It might have some sources in the long decision-making process and strong belief that now they are mature enough to appreciate the possibility of getting knowledge. As A. Kolb and D. Kolb (2022) stated that the decision of re-entering formal education involves deconstruction of the self-perception as learners, especially leaving behind negative identities as former unsuccessful students or concerning insufficient cognitive abilities. Internal motivation, such as regretting not having good enough level of education and feeling ashamed or embarrassed because of it, the sense of it being the last opportunity to start education and the desire and need for personal development is also significant. In addition, the life stage seems to be an important factor, especially change in the scope of parental roles, creating a space for personal development.

Nevertheless, high motivation and dedication may decrease as a result of the challenges that students encounter during the education in secondary school. Especially, that there is no systemic, regular, adjusted support from

institutions, even in the situations that obviously are out of the control of the students, like schedule not matching working hours or timetable that suits teacher not considering the needs of students, or no chance for remedial classes when they need to catch up with some subjects. In problematic situations interviewees usually look for external but not institutionalised support—mainly partners, grown up children or new friends from school.

The most popular didactic method in formal education for adults is teacher-centred instruction, more activating techniques such as working in groups or even independent preparation and presentation of individual issues are used sporadically. The circumstances that explain this phenomenon should be explored in the further analysis. Even though the secondary school for adults does not recognise their needs and does not implement solutions supporting learning of the mature students, participation in the process is a source of satisfaction and development in many dimensions. Acquired skills and knowledge allows the respondents to better perform professional tasks, but also to use them in everyday life situations. Gaining communication competences, general knowledge and self-confidence allows them to better understand the surrounding reality and social processes, the expanded range of cultural codes enables engaging in conversations more freely, and the training of participation in discussions helps to feel more confident in many social situations. Some of those benefits are unintended and are the result of informal school situations such as getting to know new people and communication in a group that is diverse in terms of age, life, and work experience. Schools should strengthen this learning culture to a greater extent so that it also respects the processes and outcomes of informal and incidental learning, e.g. in shaping social competences. As Boud et al. (2001) stated, educational institutions, including adult schools, should establish frameworks for learning that enable and strengthen prosocial behaviours and validate the social competencies acquired by the learners. These institutions can shape their own learning cultures to respect informal and incidental learning processes among the participants, which could be especially beneficial for adult students at secondary schools.

References

- Boud, D., Cohen, R., & Sampson, J. (2014). *Peer learning in higher education: Learning from and with each other*. Routledge.
- Briggs, S. (2013). *How Peer Teaching Improves Student Learning and Ten Ways to Encourage it*.
<https://www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/features/peer-teaching/>
- Cellary, W. (2020). Edukacja w świetle pandemii [Education in light of pandemic]. In *Nauczanie po pandemii. Nowe pytania czy nowe odpowiedzi na stare pytania?* [Teaching after the pandemic. New questions or new answers to old questions?]. Instytut Problemów Współczesnej Cywilizacji im. Marka Dietricha.
- Crowder, M., & Pupynin, K. (1995). *Understanding Learner Motivation*. Department for Education and Employment.
- Czarnik, S., Górniak, J., Jelonek, M., & Kasperek, K. (2022). *Bilans Kapitału Ludzkiego 2022/2021. Raport z badania ludności w wieku 18–69 lat*. [Human Capital Report 2022/2021. Population Survey Report for Ages 18–69]. Polska Agencja Rozwoju Przedsiębiorczości.
- Duda, A. (2021). *Uwarunkowania efektywności kształcenia w liceum dla dorosłych* [Conditions of effectiveness in adult high school education]. Akademia Pedagogiki Specjalnej.
- Erikson, E. H. (1980). *Identity and the life cycle: A reissue*. Norton.
- Freire, P. (1992). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Gogus, A. (2012). Peer Learning and Assessment. In Seel N.M. (ed.). *Encyclopedia of the Sciences of Learning*. Springer, Boston, MA.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-1428-6_146
- Illeris, K. (2007). *How We Learn: Learning and Non-Learning in School and Beyond*. Routledge.

- Kolb, A., & Kolb, D. (2022). *Uczenie na podstawie doświadczenia. Podręcznik dla edukatorów, trenerów, coachów*. [Learning based on experience. A handbook for educators, trainers, coaches]. Dialogi i zmysły.
- Kurantowicz, E., & Nizińska, A. (2012). *Trajektorie uczenia się w instytucjach kształcenia ustawicznego* [Learning trajectories in lifelong learning institutions]. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej. <https://eurydice.org.pl/the-polish-education-system-in-brief/> <https://icein.gov.pl/>
- Kyriakides, L., Creemers, B., & Charalambous, E. (2018). *Equity and Quality Dimensions in Educational Effectiveness*. Springer International Publishing.
- Lee, P.L., Pang, V. (2013). Motivational factors in Continuing education an academic achievement of adult learners. *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction*, 10(1), 57–77. <https://10.32890/mjli.10.2013.7651>
- Niebrzydowski, L. (1989). *Psychologia wychowawcza. Samoświadomość, aktywność, stosunki interpersonalne*. [Educational Psychology. Self-awareness, activity, interpersonal relationships]. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe.
- Petelewicz, M., Pieńkosz, J., Piotrowska, K., Sobestjański, K., & Stankowska, J. (2023). *Uwarunkowania uczenia się w dorosłości*. [Conditions of learning in adulthood]. Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych.
- Shuller, T., & Watson, D. (2009). *Learning through life. Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong learning*. NIACE.
- Wojciechowska, Z. (2018). *Kobiece i męskie wzory (re)konstrukcji biografii w perspektywie zmiany zawodowej* [Female and male patterns of (re)construction of biography in the perspective of professional change]. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.

Chapter 4

Ricardo Simões & Natália Rego

Evolution of lifelong learning and M23 students at the Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave in Portugal

Introduction

The concept of lifelong learning first appeared in the 90s, as a strategy that, starting from the recognition of 'competence insufficiencies and inadequacies', in particular in the area of ICT (Information and Communication Technology), aims to meet the need to 'learn and acquire new skills, adapting to new challenges and situations' (Canário, 2003, p.194). It is in this framework of new knowledge, in a context of structural unemployment, that this new paradigm of the higher education system for the adult population emerges, as part of a set of measures for the 'European Employment Strategy' (Lisbon European Council, 2000), and which recognized the economic value of education (Commission of the European Communities, 2000).

In this scope, lifelong learning has been one of the drivers for our governments in the area of education, as a way of promoting employment, social inclusion, active citizenship, and personal development. The different

policies of the European Union (EU) on lifelong learning, over more than a decade, have been collated in a paper discussing the influence those policies had on competitiveness and social stability (Panitsidou, 2012). Namely, they conclude that the ambitious goals set in 2000 were hampered by the linguistic and cultural pluralism of the EU 'political formation', despite the positive convergence to a coherent policy framework. The need to progressively bet on the field of education, not only for the young unemployed, but for adults which seek, evermore, to match the needs and the Higher Education qualifications demands by the labour market, which is dynamic and in continuous evolution, is increasingly important in the face of the age of information technology (Holford, 2023). In a review of policies since the 90s, Holford (2023) highlights the role of lifelong learning in society, building tolerance and community resilience, and fostering communication and knowledge development. He also tackles the role of continuing education in providing workers with up-to-date skills and minimize labour market exclusion.

Ever since the aforementioned Lisbon European Council, the Portuguese government has been in line with European educational policies. These efforts by the government often have direct impact, such as the recent creation of the 'Professional Masters', through the reform of the juridic system of degrees and diplomas in Portugal, in 2018, and the recent Law Decree No. 27/2021, of April 16, which aims to modernize the incentive regime for cooperation between higher education institutions (HEI), the public administration, and companies, and support diversification of the formal training portfolio and lifelong learning.

In addition, the M23 access regime, imposed by the 2006 Bologna process, under the Portuguese Law Decree No. 64/2006, of March 21, modified the standard of students entering for the first time in the higher education system, allowing specific entry means for candidates over the age of 23. In this new access regime, applicants followed a selection process with a series of steps and criteria which are different from those of 'traditional' student applications. In this new process, the *curriculum vitae* of the applicant is taken into consideration, recognizing value in addition to their academic degrees,

namely their professional experience and complementary education, as well as their communication and argumentative skills and their motivation (evaluated through interviews).

Multiple factors have been identified to bring students to apply again to advanced studies in a later stage of their lives. Some studies (Cross, 1981; Monteagudo, 2008; Soares, Almeida & Ferreira, 2010) analysed a series of such factors. Among them, one can highlight the economic motivations, such as career promotion, change of career or job, or simply being currently unemployed. Also of remark are some social motivations, such as aiming to obtain a degree or diploma. Last, some structural motivations were identified, such as acquiring new knowledge/skills, specializing in a certain area, or even try new experiences.

Several authors (Canário, 2004; Jarvis, 2004; Knapper, 2000; Mark, 2006; Merriam, 2000; Pires, 2008, 2009), to mention only a few, appear unanimous in defending that the need of integrating an increasingly diverse and diversified group of students in higher education institutions will be a challenge for the near future. They demonstrate that integrating adult students in HEI has revealed a series of benefits, in addition to pursuing the previously mentioned system wide goals. These students feature some specific characteristics innate to their life experience, which usually translate to an active and critical stance, quite different from 'traditional' students. They manifest willingness to share personal experiences, and to express their opinions and critical thinking. The lower academic background is balanced by their higher experience in life (and, in particular, in the labour market), and the competences they acquired through practice, allowing in this way, for them to have a different and more critical perspective on the different curricular units, and over the balance within the degree between theory and practice (or lack thereof). Also, if their professional experience is allowed room to be shared within the classes, can greatly benefit the academic success of the curricular units.

However, when these students are admitted to the HEI, they face an academic reality characterized by a high degree of demand, for which they

typically are not accustomed. These difficulties are documented in some studies. One can cite, for example, Mark (2006) who has classified these barriers into 3 categories: (1) personal, when the individual has attitudes, perceptions, or expectations which affect their capability for participation, (2) situational, related with the personal situation of the adult student (lack of time, distance from home, lack of a conducive study environment, etc), and (3) institutional, the prevalence of a culture in the HEI targeted towards the 'traditional' student in terms of practices and evaluations.

Currently, the main difficulties of the adult student lay a lack of previous knowledge of some core concepts as well as the difficult balance between the social roles they perform as adults, their personal life, and their professional life. Although they typically feature high degree of motivation, these students often exhibit difficulties with certain advanced course content. This circumstance derives from the fact that many come from alternative education paths (compared to 'traditional' students) or having interrupted their studies for a long period of time, and this has an impact in terms of a deficit in core skills (such as written language and math). In addition to this shortcoming, many of the adult students have long lost study routines and strategies. Last, they always fight against available time, managing ongoing activities of both their professional and family life, which are both known to have increased over recent decades in terms of individual engagement.

In the study *Educação e Formação de Adultos: Políticas, Práticas e Investigação* (Ferreira, 2011), which is available only in Portuguese, but which can loosely be translated as 'Education and Training of Adults: Policies, Practices, and Research' (this proposed translation is of the responsibility of the authors of the present work), a diagnostic is provided on the transformation of Higher Education in terms of integrating adults. The author recognizes 'the clear need to integrate the specificities of adult students in the policies, development processes, and in the common practice of higher education institutions, going beyond the guarantee of access' (again, a free translation by the authors of the present work), calling for analysis and revision of the practices which are set in traditional systems.

In the face of the current scenario, it is thus vital that HEI create specific structures for supporting adult students, and even more so those who are admitted via the M23 regime. It is undeniable that the inclusion of these students brings a positive contribution to higher education, for the interesting dynamics within the classroom, as well as the creation of new opportunities for workers with enhanced qualifications in companies, fostering improved competitiveness/productivity, as well as innovation in the corporate and industrial worlds.

Methods

In order to identify critical aspects of lifelong learning strategies and foster the participation of adult students within Higher Education, the authors started with an analysis of the Skills Boost IPCA 2025 programme (detailed below). They participated in several institutional meetings that were scheduled with the goal of planning policy changes related to this specific programme, as well as meetings scheduled to decide details of its practical implementation. These meetings typically included degree directors as well as heads of department and/or scientific areas. Some additional discussions on these topics were held at several academic bodies:

- Scientific council of the School of Design
- Scientific council of the School of Technology
- Pedagogic council of the School of Design
- Pedagogic council of the School of Technology

Combining these different sources of information, the authors then extracted some consensual opinions, and some pros and cons of different suggested action points. Finally, the authors drafted a set of measures aimed at promoting the academic success of adult students, as proposed below. These potential measures are the authors' perspective and do not represent an institutional strategy/vision, nor do authors claim these are consensual within the institution,

but, nevertheless, the proposals are grounded on the aforementioned multiple opinions and suggestions of a significant number of relevant faculty members.

Results

The Skills Boost IPCA 2025 Programme

The offer of re-skilling, up-skilling and lifelong learning programmes falls under the Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave (IPCA) institutional strategy and its educational and scientific project. At IPCA a project was created in early 2022 entitled Skills boost IPCA 2025, under the Portuguese Program for Recovery and Resilience (PRR), which aims to contribute in the North region towards the national goals in post-pandemic transformation and recovery. This project is mostly focused on challenges and objectives of the Portugal 2030 strategy, among which are the increase of the number of students in the higher education system (in particular those in STEAM areas and digital competences), the increase of the participation from the adult population in lifelong learning, the decrease in school abandonment, and the increase of graduates from higher education.

Within the Skills boost IPCA 2025, some actions are particularly relevant in the scope of the 'IMPULSO ADULTOS'², a government strategic initiative focused on the transformation of the labour market and new employability requirements. Between 2015 and 2020, IPCA increased its total number of students from 3910 to 5704 (an increase of 46%), mainly due to an increase in the number of students in Masters and Higher Professional Technical Courses (TeSP) in STEAM areas. In 2020, 44% of the students attended IPCA in the evening (after working hours). To further improve this scenario, new educational offers are now being created (and others reformulated) in

² This programme was created within the scope of the Plan for Recovery and Resilience, after the COVID-19 pandemic, and was focused on supporting the conversion and updating of skills of active adults, through short-term training in higher education, at initial and postgraduate levels, in all areas of knowledge, as well as on-the-job training. Investment codes RE-C06-i03 of funding call 01/PRR/2021 of the Portuguese Republic. More information at <https://sites.google.com/view/prrprogramasimpulso/home>

terms of postgraduate educational offer, short advanced programmes, short courses designed with companies, and professional masters. The Skills boost IPCA 2025 programme thus targets the reinforcement of the educational offer which promotes new skills and knowledge throughout life, particularly aimed at the active population with a professional activity relevant in the area, mainly through two types of actions:

- (1) Professional oriented masters with the duration of 2 semesters corresponding to 60 ECTS (according to article 18, No. 2 of the Decree-Law No. 65/2018, of August 16), designed in collaboration with companies and aiming at recognition and accreditation of the students' professional experience. These degrees also aim at developing applied research skills, together with companies, technology and knowledge-transfer centres, and R&D units. These degrees must be evaluated and approved by the Portuguese Agency for Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES).
- (2) TeSP degrees for active population, that are mostly delivered in the evening (after working hours) so that students can attend classes and develop their academic work while maintaining a professional activity. These degrees are created in collaboration with social and business entities to respond directly to the needs of the labour market, with the accreditation of the professional experience of students being highly stimulated up to the limit of 50% of the ECTS (which is established by the legal framework). This action will boost the capability for re-skilling and up-skilling among the adult population without previous higher education, in compliance with the goals defined by the Portuguese Government and set in the PRR.

IPCA currently offers 19 (traditional) master's degrees. Through the SKILLS BOOST 2025@IPCA, 8 new Professional master's degrees are proposed to start in 2022/2023, which represents an increase of 42%. Thus, the overall number of students is expected to have a peak rise in just 2 years.

The list of Professional Masters includes:

- 3D Modelling and Additive Manufacturing
- STEAM Education Technologies
- Cybersecurity
- Logistics and Production Management
- Supply Chain Management and Logistics
- Fiscal and Tax Management
- Executive Management
- Tourism Accommodation Management

The list of TeSP (in the evening, after working hours) includes:

- Digital Audiovisual
- Injection Plastics Moulding
- Insurance Management
- Construction Preparation and Management
- Collaborative Robotics and Industrial Intelligence
- Advanced Welding
- Digital Marketing and Social Media
- Data Protection and Security for Information Systems

In these lists, two very important aspects can be clearly identified: the proposed study cycles cover all the major areas of activity of IPCA (namely, all its schools), and on the other hand, they deal with topics which are currently very relevant in industry and society (and which for the most part are publicly recognized as important competences). This reflects how the entire Skills boost IPCA 2025 program was created with a clear focus on the real needs of the job market. There is also a very clear distinction between the training at the TeSP level and the Professional Masters, which reflects the depth at which topics can be pursued and the very different target audience (namely as the Professional Masters require, by legislation, specific admission criteria in terms of several years of experience).

Discussion

Given all that was previously described, it is imperative to foster critical thinking about the role of HEI on promoting better integration and inclusion conditions for adult students, and which promote the academic success of this group of students. HEI must adapt to the changing features and needs of this population, not only for its role as an education institution, but because the paradigm of lifelong learning demands a reorganization to accommodate the target audience.

Here are some measures that can, depending naturally on the specific cases, contribute to promote the academic success of adult students, at all degree levels:

- 1) The possibility to enlarge the degree conclusion expected period by 1 year (from either a typical 2 or 3 years training period, e.g., 4 years for a 3 years bachelor), with no additional tuition cost for the first time they are enrolled in each class. This means a lighter load, and that the student might be taking only 3 curricular units per semester.
- 2) Setting a part-time frequency regime for the different degrees, based on the optimizing class size, available spaces, and reducing the weekly academic workload. For example, the possibility to be enrolled at a 50% dedication, which in practical terms implies the degree will take twice as long to complete, but for students with intensive professional careers, it could be the enabling factor for enrolling in a new degree.
- 3) Ensure that evaluation mechanisms are based on acquired competences, assigning high importance to practical (over theoretical) components.
- 4) Identify and implement content more adapted to building up from existing experience and adjust course programs to the needs that student highlight as required for their professional activities.

Specifically in the context of bachelor's degrees, there are additional measures that could cumulatively contribute to the aforementioned academic success:

- 1) Offer more evening (after working hours) schedules for bachelor's degrees where there is a high number of M23 students applying.
- 2) Increase the maximum number of admissions specifically for M23 students in evening (after working hours) study cycles.

Both in the case of bachelor's and master's degrees, one additional measure would be considered:

- 1) Create an extra (and optional) preliminary semester of classes, entitled 'Year zero'. In this semester, that would take place before the first year of regular classes, modules would be delivered with core content that is usually covered at the high school level, but which the student did not cover and is required to properly attend the bachelor's or master's degree. For example, basic mathematics, or introduction to programming, etc., depending on the specific profile of each school. As an alternative to having dedicated classes for these topics, in some cases this could be achieved through already existing curricular units in other degrees and allowing the students to attend those for a very low fee.

Conclusions

As HEI expand and restructure their degree portfolio in accordance with national directives, namely focused on lifelong learning and requalification of active professionals, critical thinking is needed to adjust norms and procedures to accommodate for the specificities of adult students, and particularly those admitted via the M23 regime. These students, when included in classes with students that come from the traditional access to

higher education, can foster very positive in-class dynamics and sharing of experiences. However, measures are required that consider either long periods of academic inactivity or the lack of background (core competences) in some fundamental area of the degree those students are pursuing.

With proper planning it will be possible to ensure the success of all new degrees being proposed, which will in turn have a significant positive effect on national competitiveness, and the quality of life, and well-being of active professionals. In the case of IPCA, the quantify and breadth of proposed new study cycles required a quick analysis of these aspects that will allow meeting the goals of the Skills boost IPCA 2025 project.

References

- Canário, R. (2003). A aprendizagem ao longo da vida. Análise crítica de um conceito e de uma política. In R. Canário (Org.) *Formação e Situações de Trabalho*. Porto Editora.
- Canário, R. (2004). Formação profissional: problemas e perspectivas de futuro. In L. Lima (Org.), *Educação de Adultos – Fórum III* (pp. 112–125). Unidade de Educação de Adultos – Universidade do Minho.
- Commission of the European Communities. (2000). A Memorandum for Lifelong Learning. European Communities. Directorate General Education and Culture.
- Cross, K. P. (1981). *Adults as Learners*. Jossey-Bass.
- Ferreira, A. M. P. (2011). *Estudantes adultos no ensino superior: contextos e desafios*. Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra. <http://hdl.handle.net/10316.2/31280>
- Gonçalves, T. (2012) *O Perfil dos Estudantes Maiores De 23 Anos na Universidade Do Algarve*. Tese de Mestrado em Educação Social – Universidade do Algarve
- Holford, J. (2023). Lifelong Learning, the European Union, and the Social Inclusion of Young Adults: Rethinking Policy. In J. Holford, P. Boyadjieva, S. Clancy, G. Hefler, & I. Studená (Eds), *Lifelong Learning, Young Adults and the Challenges of Disadvantage in Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14109-6_1
- Jarvis, P. (2004). *Adult Education & Lifelong Learning. Theory and Practice*. 3.ª Ed. RoutledgeFalmer.
- Knapper, C. K., & Copley, A. J. (2000). *Lifelong learning in higher education*. Kogan.
- Kwong, T. M., Mok, Y. F., & Kwong, M. L. (2006) Social factors and adult learners' motivations in reentering higher education. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 16(6), 518–534. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0260137970160605>

- Lisbon European Council. (2000). *Presidency conclusions of the Lisbon European Council 23 and 24 March 2000*. Retrieved on 29/09/2023 from http://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_en.htm
- Mark, R. (2006). Increasing adult participation in higher education. In R. Mark, M. Pouget, & E. Thomas (Eds.), *Adults in Higher Education: Learning from Experience in the New Europe* (pp. 29–48). Accessed on 18/05/2010.
- Merriam, S., & Clark, C. (2000). Learning and Development: The Connection in Adulthood. In A. Wilson & E. Hayes (Eds.), *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* (pp. 27–48). Jossey-Bass.
- Monteagudo, J. (2008). *Institucional and Cultural Perspectives in HE. Some reflections and ideas within the context of the Raulhe Project*. University of Seville.
- Panitsidou, E., Griva, E., & Chostelidou, D. (2012). European Union policies on lifelong learning: in between competitiveness enhancement and social stability reinforcement. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 46, 548–553.
- Pires, A. L. (2008). *Aprendizagem de adultos: contextos e processos de desenvolvimento e reconhecimento de competências*. Comunicação apresentada no Seminário Novos Públicos no IPS: Os Maiores de 23 anos, Setúbal.
- Pires, A. L. (2009). *Reconhecimento e validação das aprendizagens não formais e informais no ensino superior. Problemas e perspectivas*. Comunicação apresentada na Conferência Internacional sobre Creditação de Qualificações não formais no Ensino Superior, Lisboa.
- Soares, D. L., Almeida, L. S., & Ferreira, J. A. G. (2010) Percursos vocacionais e vivências académicas: o caso dos alunos maiores de 23 anos. *Psicologia, Educação e Cultura*, XIV(1), 203–214.
- Zosky, D., Unger, J., White, K., & Mills, S. (2004). Non-Traditional and Traditional Social Work Students. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 23(3), 185–201.

Chapter 5

Henrique M. A. C. Fonseca & Lucília Santos

Social environmental changes influence on the profile of mature students in higher education: An exploratory study

Introduction

The starting point for this study was the curiosity to know the general panorama of NTS23 at the University of Aveiro (UA), in Portugal. Our focus was on the time period 2010–2020 during which two major social and environmental crises occurred: 1) the economic and financial crisis of 2013, and 2) the COVID-19 pandemic since late 2019. Both had had significant impact. However, the COVID-19 pandemic imposed new rules and restrictions on the daily life worldwide (WHO, 2020) leading to structural consequences at the educational level. This precipitated profound changes in teaching and learning, hitting academia hard: *the lockdown*.

Academic actors were impacted differently based to their role in schools. Our focus is to analyse the impact of the lockdown on a specific population and context: non-traditional students older than 23 years (NTS23) at the UA, Portugal.

This cohort of students has been studied since 2006 when the national contest that regulates their access to higher education (HE) was implemented. Several studies (Bago, 2011; Fragoso, 2013) have been conducted, allowing the establishment of these students' profile, their evolution, reactions to the economic and financial crisis of 2013–2014, motivations to enter HE, expectations, encountered obstacles, academic performance, dropout rates, and how they face the labour market after graduation.

Now facing another crisis with a different impact on their livelihoods, families, jobs, etc., we were curious to know how they responded. After a brief incursion into the databases, we stumbled upon surprising information, leading us to the following facts: during the pandemic period, NTS23 experienced lower dropout rates and better academic performance compared to traditional students (TS), indicating higher resilience among NTS23 students. This situation is not new in the literature (Kimhi et al., 2020; Osam, 2017; Tinto, 1993) and is linked with the sociodemographic characteristics of the students. Thus, this study examined the evolution of those characteristics within the NTS23 cohort.

How can we explain such occurrences? What individual attitudes (from students, teachers, and other academic entities) helped to mitigate and, in some cases, overcome the effects of this anomaly?

Methods

To answer these and other questions, we conducted a mixed process analysis, utilizing university quantitative databases for simple statistical analysis and a qualitative, non-codified analysis of survey responses from students and their teachers. The survey covered parameters similar to previous research and on new parameters directly linked to the pandemic situation. This blended method provides a broad and deep understanding of NTS23's perceptions, and the strengths in each approach outweighing the weaknesses in the other, rendering a more robust understanding of non-traditional student perceptions (Creswell, 2014). Note that we won't explore the field of Adult Learning Theory, as it is beyond this study's scope.

Quantitative data for this study were collected in July 2021. The response rate (24.4) was affected by the lockdown, reflecting resulting changes in procedures to comply with data protection and confidentiality. Answers were obtained online, duly anonymised, and treated with strict confidentiality under the General Regulation for Data Protection of UA, with students' consent and approval of UA's academic authorities.

The survey participants included: a) NTS23 students enrolled at the University of Aveiro in 2022, who had attended classes in the academic years 2019–2021; and b) teachers who were in contact with these students during the same time course.

For NTS23 students, the survey covered their academic experiences since the fall of 2019, motivations to attend university, expectations regarding their degree, and obstacles or barriers encountered in their academic trajectory.

The factors defining the NTS23 profile in the UA included: gender, age, academic graduation status, employment status, profession and its relationship with the undergraduate course applied for, and their enrolment status. A relevant parameter of this study is the number of effective enrolments versus the number of vacancies available for these candidates at the UA. After becoming students at UA, the focus shifted to their academic performance and dropout rates. Other parameters relevant for characterizing this cohort, according to some authors (Choy, 2002; Radford et al., 2015), such financial independence, having dependents, single mother status, and late enrolment were addressed in a different study (Fragoso et al., 2013).

Following the listing of curricular units (CU) attended and their logistic context (face-to-face or at distance), students were asked to rate their final attainment in comparison with their expectations and to identify any adjustment in the teaching and learning processes implemented by the teacher. If adjustments were noticed, students were asked whether they are beneficial and why.

UA's teachers assumed various roles such as course director, CU coordinator, and/or teacher of curricular units with at least 5% NTS23 attendees in their total number. We inquired about the changes implemented

to teaching and learning processes to mitigate the transition from face-to-face to at-distance situations. This included understanding the motives behind the changes, the outcomes of those changes, or the reasons for not implementing any changes at all. Additionally, we explored their preparedness to move to an at-distance situation and the impact of their decisions on present 'normal' academic context.

Background Information

The following overview presents information obtained within two main domains: data obtained from UA's Lifelong Learning Centre, that integrates a NTS23 *one-stop-shop*, and Academic Central Services university registries. We conducted a simple statistical analysis on this data and carried out a qualitative analysis to understand the time evolution of key indicators for the NTS23 cohort at UA over the last 10 years. We paid particular attention to possible pattern alterations due to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic during the second semester of the 2019–2020 academic year and the entire scholar year of 2020–2021.

Enrolments in the 2019–2020 academic year (January to February of 2019) occurred under pre-pandemic conditions when the implications and effects of the disease were not yet known. Additionally, some parameters have information dating back to 2006. However, there is a singularity in the data regarding the year of 2014, where the available numbers appear odd when considering the time evolution. Currently, this singularity can only be attributed to a clerk error.

Results and Discussion

NTS23 Characteristics

Considering the diverse understandings of who non-traditional students are (Chung, 2014), a set of common parameters is often used to characterize them. In this study, we specially focused on a group of students that entered UA through a dedicated gateway, the NTS23 (for details see Bago, 2011 and University of Aveiro, <https://www.ua.pt/en/m23>).

Previous research by Bago (2011), Gonçalves et al. (2011) and Fragoso et al. (2013) identified the profile of NTS23 at UA. The findings revealed that these students are predominantly older than 34 years, with 50% being female. They have parents with basic education, family responsibilities and children. Their spouses have HE studies, and family income is over 2k€. Most NTS23 completed secondary school but had up to a 20-year interruption in formal education. The vast majority (>80%) are employed and work full-time. More than 51% use the special status of worker-student and enrol full-time in their degree.

Despite the increase presence of NTS in HE in some countries (Chen, 2017), this is not the case at UA, where NTS23 make up less than 5% of the total student's population.

Gender

The gender parameter is seldom analysed under non-traditional student's prism regarding its (in)balance (Chung, 2014). While significant research exists on gender issues, particularly on females in HE (Webber, 2020), both as traditional and/or non-traditional students (Bayrak, 2015; Carney-Crompton, 2002; Carol et al., 2021; EIMorally et al., 2022), but not on its weight within the NTS cohort.

When observing NTS23 candidacies to UA from 2006 to 2020 in terms of gender distribution, women comprised an average of 46% of NTS23 population, with no shift in the overall pattern seen on the 2019 and 2020 (47% women). Interestingly, however, there was a slight predominance of females over males from 2015 to 2018 (52% women). This inversion disappears in 2019. An overall perspective confirms a tendency of near equal distribution of gender throughout the years. A recent paper (Martin, 2022) addressed the percentages of NTS of both genders, showing a strong predominance of females over males, with increasing matriculation rates of both genders in 2018 and 2019, maintaining the same tendency. As the only study found no comparative analysis can be made.

After an initial increase in the number of candidates from 2006 (first year of implementation of the NTS23 gateway) to 2009, a decrease took place due to the elimination of access constraints to HEIs, resulting in a re-equilibrium on the gender ratio. From 2013 onwards, the number of candidates gradually increased, a trend not disrupted during the pandemic years (Figure 1).

The final enrolment number at UA is conditioned by the *numerus clausus*, which varied over the years according to projections managed by the university's central offices. Only in the years of 2008 to 2010 and 2016 to 2017 all places were filled. In the last 10 years, an annual average of 31 vacant places were made available, with the pandemic years of 2019–2020 accounting for more than 100 vacancies that were not filled, denoting the optimistic nature of the projections. This evolution could be analysed with other variables, such as the number of candidates versus the number of approved candidates in the contest, and at national level, with the national employment rate and Well-Being Indicators. However, there is no national statistical database available, so a nationwide study could be conducted.

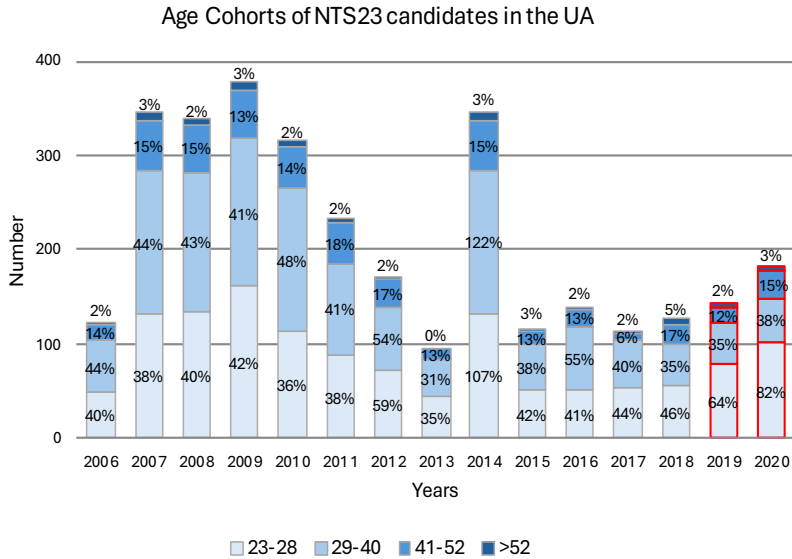


Figure 1 – Yearly evolution of the number of candidates to the NTS23 contest in UA. Columns are colour coded denoting the different age cohorts. Boxed in red are the years with pandemic conditions. Data from 2014, that must be taken with reservation, shows a range singularity that can only be attributed to a clerk error.

Age

The candidates' age distribution, divided into age groups: 23–28, 29–40, 41–52 and older than 52 years old, is presented in Figure 1. During the first 5 years of HE contests for access through the NTS23 gateway, there was a visible numeric predominance of more mature students. However, in the last nine years, the dominant cohort has been the 23 to 28 years old group. This trend was not affected by the COVID–19 pandemic.

These age intervals, also utilised in other studies (Chung, 2014), allow for some interpretation, focusing on two subsets: younger (23 to 28) and older (+29) NTS. A similar tendency has been reported in another HEI (Martin, 2022), showing a prevalence of younger students, although both subsets are increasing at different rates. This analysis may reflect the changes in characteristics (age) attributed 'exclusively' to NTS compared to those of traditional students (Kasworm, 2018).

Employment status

Throughout the editions of the contest (2006 to 2020) the majority of the NTS23 candidates are employed, a common characteristic shared with other NTS cohorts in different HEIs (Chung, 2014). This contrasts sharply with the fact that most of these candidates become full-time students. They use worker–student status and negotiate with their employers to take advantage of continuing professional development legislation. As a result, they may not attend all classes, but employers are legally obligated to allow them to attend exams. The data reveals a linear trend in the yearly evolution of the employed *versus* unemployed rate, excluding the singularity of 2014 (Figure 2). Interestingly, 2014—the year of the financial crisis—can be seen as a turning point in this ratio.

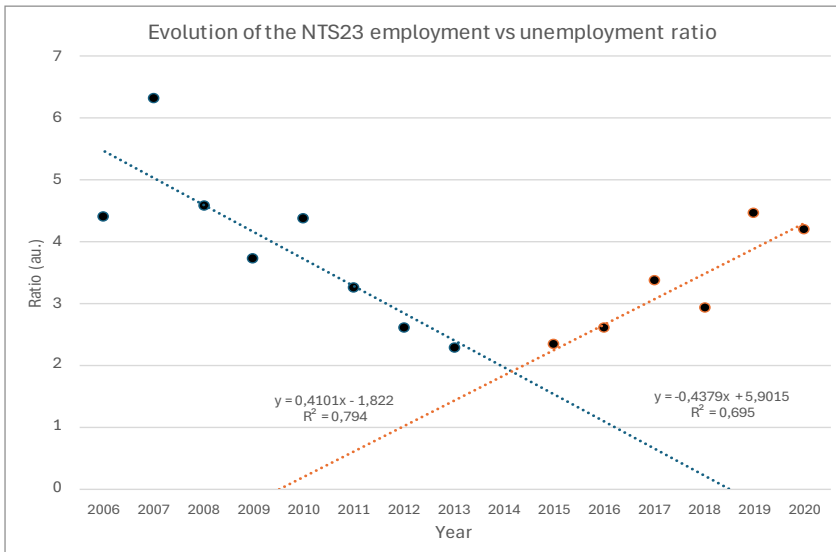


Figure 2 – Evolution of the employed vs. unemployed ratio in NTS23 showing two distinct tendencies with their inflection moment between 2013 and 2015. There is no reliable data for 2014.

Initially, the majority of NTS23 were employed, the ratio of employed vs. unemployed decreased until 2014 ($m = -0.43$). However, it then increased with similar intensity ($m = 0.42$). One could argue that the financial crisis marked a turning point in mentalities, a change that prevails until today, despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

The data also indicates that there is no direct relationship between the undergraduate course NTS23 candidates enrolled in and the profession of the employed candidates. This tendency is confirmed by the motivations that lead these adults to entry HEI (Table 1): the strongest motivation is the *acquisition of knowledge* (94.6%), followed by *personal fulfilment* (91.9%), and in third position, a *degree achievement* (86.5%). *Career progression* ranks as the 9th motivation out of the 14 proposed. Therefore, for NTS23, entering HE is a choice from the heart rather than the wallet, directly linked to well-being, quality of life, and livelihoods.

Table 1 – How NTS23 students perceive themselves in terms of motivation, obstacles/barriers, and factors contributing to academic success. The answers are here presented in percentiles, sorted and colour coded.

| | Very strong | Strong | Weak | Very weak |
|---|-------------|--------|------|-----------|
| What were the main motivations for joining the University? | | | | |
| Personal achievement | 62% | 34% | 3% | 0% |
| Job change | 66% | 24% | 7% | 3% |
| Acquire knowledge | 48% | 48% | 3% | 0% |
| Salary increase | 62% | 31% | 0% | 7% |
| Employability | 45% | 48% | 7% | 0% |
| Diploma | 38% | 52% | 10% | 0% |
| Professional specialization | 45% | 34% | 14% | 7% |
| Develop self-confidence | 34% | 48% | 10% | 7% |
| Continuity of studies | 41% | 34% | 14% | 10% |
| Career Development | 52% | 21% | 7% | 21% |
| Improve self-esteem | 34% | 34% | 14% | 17% |
| Develop critical reflection | 17% | 41% | 17% | 24% |
| Develop interpersonal relationship | 17% | 34% | 31% | 17% |
| Higher social status | 14% | 14% | 39% | 32% |
| Good grade in secondary | 11% | 14% | 43% | 32% |
| Because spouse/colleagues/friend(s) are licensed | 7% | 17% | 28% | 48% |

To what extent did the following factors constitute obstacles or barriers to your learning, in your path at the University?

| | | | | |
|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Physical and emotional exhaustion | 34% | 52% | 10% | 3% |
| School-work-family conciliation | 41% | 38% | 17% | 3% |
| Time management | 21% | 59% | 21% | 0% |
| Difficulty reconciling work and university | 21% | 57% | 11% | 11% |
| Absence of studies methods | 17% | 52% | 17% | 14% |
| Incompatibility with family and/or professional schedules | 24% | 34% | 28% | 14% |
| Lack of specific support for NTS23 | 21% | 41% | 17% | 21% |
| Distribution/Structuring of curricular units | 17% | 38% | 24% | 21% |
| Lack of study | 17% | 34% | 28% | 21% |
| Articulation with colleagues to carry out group work | 17% | 31% | 31% | 21% |
| Difficulties understanding certain concepts | 14% | 31% | 41% | 14% |
| Attendance | 18% | 25% | 32% | 25% |
| Financial difficulties | 3% | 34% | 48% | 14% |
| Attitude of teachers towards NTS23 | 18% | 21% | 21% | 39% |
| The work you perform is distinct from the course | 11% | 21% | 32% | 36% |
| Worker-student status | 7% | 19% | 44% | 30% |
| Attitude of traditional students towards the NTS23 | 14% | 7% | 38% | 41% |
| Academic Failure/Failures | 7% | 17% | 34% | 41% |
| Lack of motivation | 3% | 17% | 38% | 41% |
| The course does not meet my expectations | 7% | 3% | 48% | 41% |
| Lack of structural conditions (equipment, etc.) | 0% | 7% | 55% | 38% |
| Discrimination | 0% | 7% | 34% | 59% |

To what extent have the following factors contributed to your academic success?

| | | | | |
|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Support-Motivation-Incentive | 59% | 33% | 7% | 0% |
| I like and interest in learning | 48% | 48% | 4% | 0% |
| Capacity for self-determination and persistence | 44% | 44% | 11% | 0% |
| Sense of personal accomplishment | 37% | 52% | 7% | 4% |
| Good job performance | 37% | 48% | 15% | 0% |
| Obtained classification | 33% | 48% | 19% | 0% |
| Class attendance and follow-up | 22% | 56% | 19% | 4% |
| Ability to manage time | 30% | 41% | 30% | 0% |
| Academic work and learning strategies | 4% | 74% | 22% | 0% |
| Management strategies carrying out the work | 19% | 48% | 33% | 0% |
| Articulation between theory and practice | 11% | 59% | 30% | 0% |
| Teachers' support | 4% | 70% | 22% | 4% |
| Articulation with TS | 22% | 44% | 26% | 7% |
| Characteristics and manual help among NTS23 | 27% | 42% | 8% | 23% |

NTS23 represents a steady, but small percentage (3.4%) of UA students, distributed across 63 different courses. Once NTS23 students enter UA, they integrate regular classes just like TS, meaning there is no distinction or dedicated treatment from other classmates. However, they can access dedicated support on campus through the Lifelong Learning Centre.

In essence, these students are scattered throughout the academia, and only eight courses (Nursing, Public Administration, Accounting (off-workhours), Accounting (Distance Learning), New Communication Technologies, Basic Education, Marketing (off-workhours), and Languages and Business Relations) have above 5% of the total of NTS23s.

Dropout

Dropout is a concept that has been defined in different ways (Grau-Valldosera, 2014; Tinto, 1975). However, for this study, it is assumed as the failure of student to enrol for a definite number of successive semesters (Xavier & Meneses, 2020).

The profile of academic dropout of NTS23 is presented in Figure 3. Percentage analysis indicates that NTS23 students show an average 2-fold higher academic dropout rate compared to their course TS colleagues. Among those, an average 58% dropout occurred during the first academic year.

Student dropout behaved differently during the economic and financial crises and the COVID-19 pandemic. The highest average percentage was observed in 2014, and since then, values have stabilised at figures. Notably, no visible changes were observed during the pandemic period. A similar pattern can be observed among their classmates.

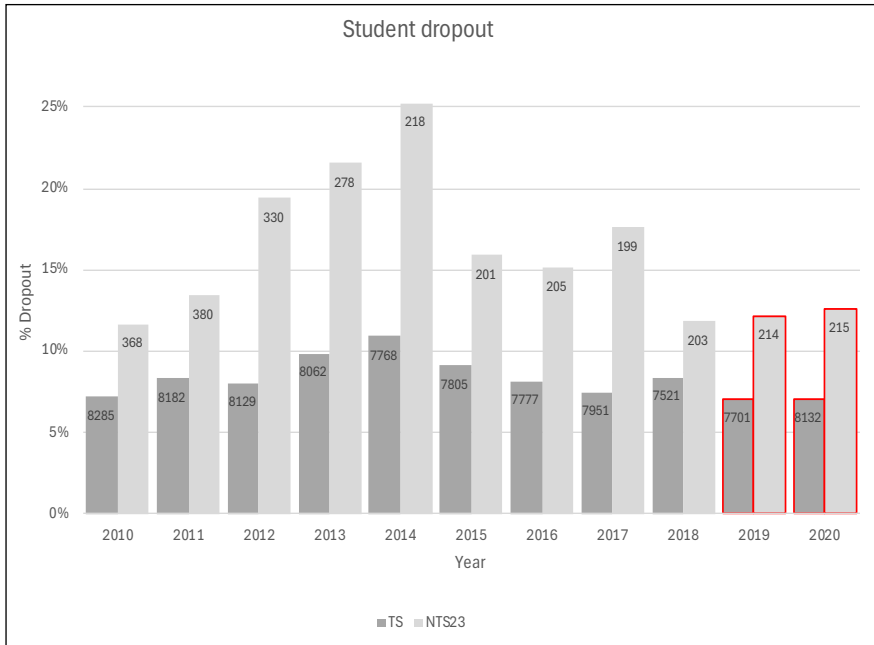


Figure 3 – Dropout profile of traditional (TS) and non-traditional (NTS23) students attending the same degree courses. Boxed in red are the years with pandemic conditions. The number over the bars indicate the yearly number of enrolled students.

Academic performance

As stated above, the present work began with our curiosity about the impact of two major events on the academic progress of NTS23 students. We formulate the hypothesis that the economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the academic success of our students and particularly of NTS23. To validate this proposition, we consulted the academic records of the UA and conducted surveys with the NTS23 and their teachers.

Before proceeding, we must clarify that in the present analysis, we used a simplified concept of academic performance: the average grades recorded annually in the university database for curricular units, which may overlook the multiple qualitative aspects of student's training in the University (Darolia, 2014).

To our astonishment, the students exhibited a steady, moderate increase

in their average performance (TS, green lines: $m = 0.0857$ from 2010 to 2020 and $m = 0.0965$ during the pandemic years) as shown in Figure 4. No visible impact of the 2013 crisis and the 2019 pandemic is present on TS student grade.

On the other hand, when considering the performance of the NTS23 in the same period, there is almost a 'plateau' until 2018 (blue line: $m = 0.0165$) with scores below those of their TS colleagues.

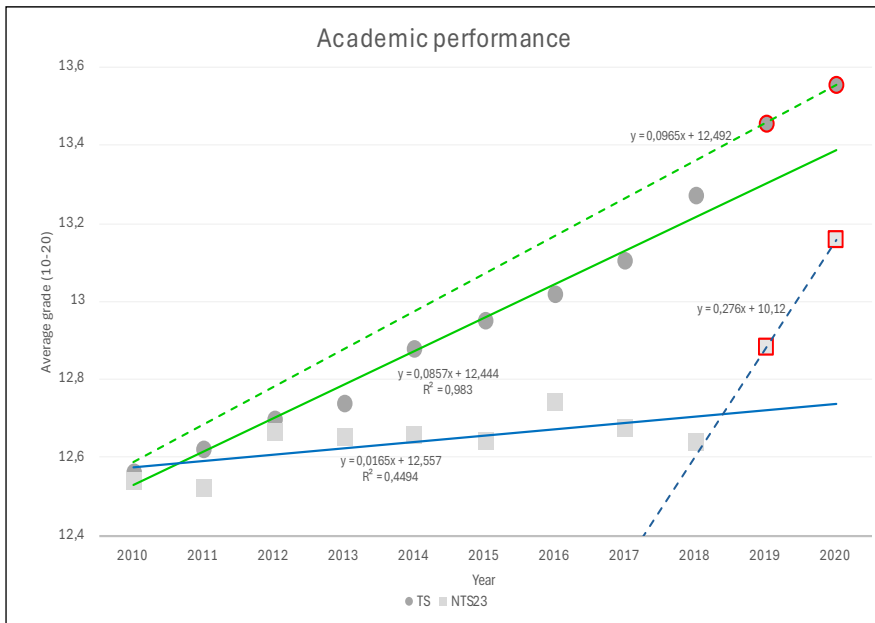


Figure 4 – Annual academic performance (arithmetic mean) of students in undergraduate courses. The points highlighted in red, and the dashed lines correspond to years with pandemic conditions. The green lines are adjusted to traditional student (TS) mean grades. The blue lines are adjusted to the MTS23 student grades.

Generally, NTS23 'students demonstrate high resilience. Although some show more difficulties at the outset, they have a greater ability to manage time, being more focused on the goals they want to achieve' [teacher]. The opinion of this teacher/course director is broadly perceived by those that contact with these students, including the NTS23 themselves, 'the way of

thinking, goals and attitudes can be very different from 18-year-olds, which makes it a very big shock at the beginning' [NTS24-male-25y].

The social and environmental changes from 2019 onwards seemed beneficial for NTS23 students, as their performance improved considerably ($m = 0.2760$), and their average grades approached those of traditional students. Surprisingly, the evolution of NTS23's academic performance during the pandemic years was better than that of their classmates. They show a different behaviour pattern regarding academic performance, particularly among first-year students, hence, higher resilience. According to the American Psychological Association, 'Resilience is the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences' empower by 'resources and skills associated with more positive adaptation' and that includes resources found in basic human adaptational systems (Masten, 2001).

Research on the resilience of both traditional and non-traditional students (NTS) provides some insights, although they are not specifically directed towards the COVID-19 pandemic, but rather a non-crisis scenario. Chung et al. (2017) found that NTS characteristics such as age, employment and parental responsibility have a positive impact on the level of resilience when compared with income and cultural background. In these later parameters, the levels of resilience of NTS does not differ much from TS. Life experiences, such as being a mature-aged student, having a job, and a family mindset, may contribute to higher resilience.

To understand the nature of observed resilience among NTS23 and how they perceive their motivation to join the University, the obstacles, or barriers they face, and the advantages and disadvantages impacting their success, a set of questions were prepared and presented to the NTS23. As Quintas et al. (2014) states, for NTS23 the decision to enter the university is a major change in their lives, with implications on their families, profession carriers, and budget. They must conciliate a difficult triangulation of family, job, and university.

The six main motivations for joining the University include: personal achievement, job change, acquisition of knowledge, salary increase,

employability, and to obtain the diploma (Table 1). These motivations reflect attributes and skills that are a long-term investment in their personal and professional carriers. The main obstacles faced by these students are physical and emotional exhaustion, school-work-family conciliation, and time management, closed related to the difficulty reconciling work and university, which is amplified by their absence of study methods.

To understand MTS23 one must not forget that most of these students experienced a substantial hiatus in their study paths that they are now, in a sense, reinitiating. They attribute their academic performance, their success, mainly to the support-motivation-incentive they experience and their like and interest in learning. This view is shared by teachers that recognise:

'MTS23 students demonstrate high resilience. Although some show more difficulties at the outset, they have a greater ability to manage time, being more focused on the goals they want to achieve. Due to their life experience, they also tend to be more participatory than the rest in the context of theoretical classes' [teacher].

During the pandemic period, under confinement, NTS23 particularly valued the possibility that online classes allowed them to better manage their time, adapting their study time to family and professional activities. They emphasised the ready online availability of teachers, colleagues, and study materials (Table 2.a). Conversely, the absence of face-to-face practical and theoretical-practical classes was the biggest disadvantage reported by them. The strong digital literacy of many students, and particularly their TS peers, creating a conducive environment for social media applications and other eLearning platforms, empowering students to contribute to academic success.

NST23 marked as less positive the changes implemented in the evaluation methods (Table 2.b). They complain about the length, available time and rigid *modus operandi* of exams, 'exams were often very extensive (...) The logistics that teachers asked for during exams (filming, screen sharing, microphone-on became a source of nervousness and fostered a lack of attention during

the exam' [NTS23-female-26y] and 'not being able to go back to review exam questions impaired many people, something that does not happen in classroom assessments' [NTS23-male-28y].

Table 2 – How NTS23 see the advantages/disadvantages regarding (a) remote teaching and (b) what explains their academic performance during the pandemic. The answers are here presented in percentiles, sorted and colour coded.

| (a) In your case, what were the advantages and disadvantages of remote teaching | | | | |
|--|-------------------|----------------------|--|--|
| | Advantages | Disadvantages | | |
| Study time management to my profile | 88% | 12% | | |
| Adequacy of study time with family life | 88% | 12% | | |
| Adequacy of study time with professional activity | 85% | 15% | | |
| Availability of teachers | 81% | 19% | | |
| Availability of study materials suitable for the new demands of teaching/learning | 77% | 23% | | |
| Theoretical classes | 58% | 42% | | |
| Ease of contact with classmates | 50% | 50% | | |
| Practical and theoretical-practice classes | 27% | 73% | | |
| (b) What are the main changes in teaching and learning that explain the success you achieved during the pandemic? | | | | |
| | Positive | Negative | | |
| Use of social media applications in contact with teachers and colleagues | 96% | 4% | | |
| Using the elearning.ua platform | 92% | 8% | | |
| Availability of teachers for individualized tutoring sessions whenever necessary | 81% | 19% | | |
| Implemented evaluation methods | 69% | 31% | | |
| | | | | |

Conclusion

In this work, we examine a specific cohort of undergraduate students, the MST23, during two potentially disruptive periods, the financial crisis o 2013–2014 and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2019–2020. Both teachers and the MST23 themselves acknowledge their differences from TS in terms of resilience, objectives, and determination. One teacher provides a comprehensive comment on this aspect and given here in full:

'NTS23 students, not in their entirety but in large part, reveal a high adaptability and much more resilience than other colleagues. Their training is weaker, but they make up for it with a sense of responsibility and work. I feel their presence in the classes as an important element for

the other students, as an example of maturity and knowing how to be in the classes (aspects that are starting to be lacking in some students who are coming to the University via the general entrance exam). NTS23 students are often more involved, and as they have longer professional experiences, they make an important contribution to the classroom' [teacher].

A NTS23 student also shares his perspective:

'As a student you will always be behind others. You will see people who can get much better grades than you but who do almost nothing compared to you. Persistence and not comparing yourself to others (which can be very difficult) is what will make you successful. Always studying, doing all the work, understanding the reason for many things, and managing time very well will—in principle—be enough to get where you want to be' [NTS23-male-25y].

As a result, the university data shows that NTS23 had an overall lower than expected dropout during the COVID-19 pandemic period. Moreover, and over the same period, the average annual grades for NTS23 students show an increase of more than 2.8 times compared to their TS peers. We can therefore infer that a combination of self-perception, life/professional experience, well-defined goals, and determination create the necessary cocktail that explains the otherwise unexpected success shown by these NTS23 students.

References

- Bago, J., Fonseca, H. M. A. C., & Santos, L. (2011). Back to University: a first glance on the transitions of non-traditional students. In Portugal, ESREA Book of Proceedings, *Transitions and identity in learning life* (pp. 134–145), Ed. UINFOC, Universidade de Aveiro & ESREA, European Society for Research on the Education of Adults. ISBN978-989-97618-0-3.
- Bayrak, T., & Gulati, A. (2015). The role of gender on student success. *International Journal of Information and Communication Technology Education (IJICTE)*, 11(4), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.4018/IJICTE.2015100101>.
- Carney-Crompton, S., & Tan, J. (2002). Support systems, psychological functioning, and academic performance of non-traditional female students. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 52(2), 140–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713602052002005>.
- Chen, J. C. (2017). Non-traditional adult learners: The neglected diversity in postsecondary education. *SAGE Open*, 7(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017697161>
- Choy, S. P. (2002). *Findings from the condition of education 2002: Non-traditional undergraduates* (NCES 2002–012). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/2002012.pdf>
- Chung, E., Turnbull, D., & Chur-Hansen, A. (2014). Who are “non-traditional students”? A systematic review of published definitions in research on mental health of tertiary students. *Educational Research and Review*, 9(22), 1224–38. <https://academicjournals.org/journal/ERR/article-full-text-pdf/FE9A0F748686>

- Chung, E., Turnbull, D., & Chur-Hansen, A. (2017). Differences in resilience between 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' university students. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 18(1) 77–87.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787417693493>.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications. ISBN978-1-4522-2610-1
- Darolia, R. (2014). Working (and studying) day and night: Heterogeneous effects of working on the academic performance of full-time and part-time students. *Economics of Education Review*, 38, 38–50.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2013.10.004>.
- ElMorally, R., Wong B., & Copsey-Blake, M. (2022). Is science, technology, engineering and mathematics in higher education sexist and racist? All surface, no substance. *Equity in Education & Society*, 1(2), 216–236.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/27526461221105591>.
- Fragoso, A., Gonçalves, T., Ribeiro, M., Monteiro, R., Quintas, H., Bago, J., Fonseca, H. M.A.C., & Santos, L. (2013). The transition of mature students to higher education: Challenging traditional concepts? *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 45(1), 67–81.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2013.11661642>.
- Grau-Valldosera, J., & Minguillón, J. (2014). Rethinking dropout in online higher education: The case of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 15 (1).
<https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v15i1.1628>.
- Gonçalves, T., Fragoso, A., Ribeiro, C. M., Monteiro, R., Quintas, H., Bago, J., Fonseca, H., & Santos, L. (2011). Who are they? Making non-traditional students visible. *Between Global and Local: Adult Learning and Development, Positioning and Conceptualizing Adult Education and Learning within Local Development*. Turkey, Istanbul, 29–30 of April.
<https://doi.org/10.13140/2.1.4965.7600>.

- Goulet, C. L., Wells, K., Szymanski, L. A., & Thieman, T. J. (2021). *Gender-specific social support and resilience in non-traditional female college students*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2021.1908300>.
- Kasworm, C. E. (2018). Adult Students: A Confusing World in Undergraduate Higher Education. *J. Contin. High. Educ.* 66, 77–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2018.1469077>.
- Martin, T., & Davies, R. (2022). Student Retention and Persistence in University Certificate-First Programs. *Educ. Sci.* 12, 525. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12080525>.
- Masten, A. S. (2001). Ordinary magic: resilience processes in development. *American Psychologist*, 56, 227–239. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0003-066X.56.3.227>.
- Osam, E. K., Bergman, M., & Cumberland, D. M. (2017). An integrative literature review on the barriers impacting adult learners' return to college. *Adult Learning*, 28(2), 54–60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1045159516658013>.
- Quintas, H., Gonçalves, T., Ribeiro, C. M., Monteiro, R., Fragoso, A., Bago, J., Santos, L., & Fonseca, H. M. (2014). Estudantes adultos no Ensino Superior: O que os motiva e o que os desafia no regresso à vida académica. *Revista Portuguesa De Educação*, 27(2), 33–56. <https://doi.org/10.21814/rpe.6245>.
- Radford, A. W., Cominole, M., & Skomsvold, P. (2015). *Demographic and enrollment characteristics of nontraditional undergraduates: 2011–12 (NCES 2015–025)*. Web Tables. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015025.pdf>.
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89–125. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543045001089>.

- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving College: rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. London: University of Chicago Press. ISBN-978-0226804491. Universidade de Aveiro. <https://www.ua.pt/en/m23>.
- Webber, L., & Dismore, H. (2020). Mothers and higher education: balancing time, study and space. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. 45(3), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2020.1820458>.
- World Health Organization. (2020). *Mental Health and Psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 Outbreak*, p. 18, March 2020 (No. WHO/2019-nCoV/MentalHealth/2020.1) <https://WHO/2019-nCoV/MentalHealth/2020.1>.
- Xavier, M., & Meneses, J. (2020). *Dropout in Online Higher Education: A scoping review from 2014 to 2018*. ELearn Center, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya.

Chapter 6

Samantha Broadhead & Sharon Hooper

Learning Returns: Experiences of mature students in art and design captured through YouTube

Introduction

Learning Returns is a project that seeks to document and celebrate the benefits adult learning in the arts have for individuals, communities, and civic societies. The project is based in a small specialist institution. There is a large body of research that has employed qualitative methods to investigate the experiences of mature students (Broadhead & Gregson, 2018; Crozier et al., 2008; Fowle, 2018; Reay et al., 2002). However, some researchers have begun to draw upon arts-based methods to capture narratives about widening participation issues (Broadhead, 2021; Dickson, 2020; Farenga, 2018). This project is informed by Duckworth and Smith's (2018) *UK Further Education Transforming Lives* where people were filmed telling their stories about the impact education has on their quality of life. Other sources include Mumtaz (2015) and Walsh et al. (2013) where multimedia art forms combine storytelling with digital media revealing personal stories that enhance our

understanding of human experiences. *Learning Returns* is developed by a team comprising an educational researcher and a documentary filmmaker. Other practitioners, such as a technical editor and a graphic designer have made valuable contributions to the project.

The research was devised during the COVID-19 pandemic when national lockdowns led to fundamental shifts in people's working and leisure lives as well as how they engaged with formal and informal learning. Many had to quickly learn new skills and new pursuits that complied with the constraints that were being placed on their activity. This can be seen in the increase, in the six weeks after lockdown was introduced in March 2020, of online learning, fitness classes, and crafting sessions broadcast through free-to-access videos such as YouTube (Bakhshi, 2020).

The potential for YouTube to be an informal learning tool has been widely explored, but the research team wondered whether it could also be an application that could be used in practice-based research and also as a means of showing research impact.

Learning Returns' overall, long-term aim was to demonstrate the benefits adult learning in the arts has for the individual, their community, and for civic societies. However, in the initial phase of the project there were two objectives, firstly, to investigate the ways in which four people who had previously been art and design students, spoke/connected with an audience of imaginary prospective students beyond institutions who were considering returning to education. The second was to evaluate YouTube as a means of conducting research with older people about their learning experiences.

Learning Returns is a work-in-progress. The initial findings revealed how previous students were able to talk confidently about their own experiences on camera, and that the topics they considered important to communicate could be broken down into a series of themes. The meanings of the stories were co-constructed between the participants and the researchers. The interpretation of the words was influenced by the aesthetics of YouTube and the aesthetics the participants themselves brought to the filming. Using the YouTube platform did raise some challenges. COVID-19 restrictions did

impact on the filming to a great extent. Thus, the progress was and is much slower than anticipated. Also, time was needed to build an audience for the films, and this could take months or years. As viewers experience the content of YouTube asynchronously the predictability and linearity of the research process can be disrupted. There is also the potential for YouTube to unsettle some of the pre-pandemic rhythms and episodes of adult learning (Alhadeff-Jones, 2016).

YouTube Context

YouTube is a video-sharing site where audio-visual material can be uploaded and viewed (Spyer, 2011). Audiences can watch content and/or create it themselves, so the division between producers and viewers can become blurred. YouTube practices lead to an obscuring of the distinction between amateur and professional 'YouTubers' who regularly post content to attract large audiences and subscribers which can lead to sustainable income. There is also a social network aspect to the platform (Lange, 2007; Spyer, 2011; Kousha et al., 2012). Boyd and Ellison (2007) comment that:

We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (p. 2)

YouTube allows users to create a 'channel page' so they can curate their content and enables viewers to like or dislike individual videos, give feedback, react to feedback, subscribe, and share videos in their network (Kousha et al., 2012). YouTubers seek to create an audience that will return again and again to view future videos, ideally by subscribing to their channels (Johnston, 2017; Medvedeva, 2019). Therefore, it is important for producers of content to be actively engaged with their audiences. Muller (2009) claims, 'YouTube is first

and foremost a cultural space of community building and shared experience' (p. 126).

Medvedeva (2019) considers YouTube as a space that facilitated the creation of aesthetic objects. However, Sweeny (2009) argues that producers, 'who are using social media as a medium challenge the authenticity of the art object, the authorship of the artist and the authority of the museum/gallery system' (p. 201). Dewey's important text, *Art as Experience* (1987) examines the aesthetics of pragmatism. He argues that art and life are intricately linked to each other. Medvedeva (2019) follows this line of reasoning when arguing that media aesthetics can and should be applied to art and everyday life. Art and life are not only interconnected, but also interdependent, '[m]edia has become a part of our daily lifelong time ago, but this daily routine also has its own aesthetics, its own creative laws, according to which they influence and emotionally influence us' (Medvedeva, 2019 p. 969). Therefore, any understanding of meaning created from YouTube videos needs to consider aesthetics. Even though aesthetics are integral to constructing the meanings of YouTube videos, they are not necessarily those forms associated with high art but those from popular and vernacular culture. The role of aesthetics in constructing meaning in YouTube videos can be applied to the content of videos, but also to the context in which the videos are curated, distributed, and viewed across social media platforms.

The researchers consider the aesthetics of YouTube to be a fusion of various visual, audio, graphic, and cinematic styles that move and oscillate together whilst vying for audience attention. Colour, text, design, sound, movement, and pace mimic or reproduce genres from popular culture. At the same time, content can have high production values or have 'home-made' qualities. YouTube aesthetics are mostly experienced as fleeting 'bite-sized' flashes of moving image, framed by the white background, and grid structure of the platform. They evoke emotion and construct meaning. Aesthetics evoke a response in the audience that could be emotional, spiritual, physical, and cognitive. The audience could be awake to these aesthetic responses, or they may not be conscious of them.

Furthermore, Spyer (2011) understands internet platforms such as YouTube as decentralising group communication and subverting how reality is understood, leading to the creation of value through new kinds of aesthetic objects. Exchanges between producers and viewers are not synchronous; time and place are no longer constraining factors in group communication. Videos and channels may attract an unpredictable range of spectators who construct unpredictable readings of the materials on offer. Boellstorff (2008) suggests this mode of communication also changes the way people perceive the world.

YouTube and Academia

There is a body of research that has investigated YouTube itself (Cheng et al., 2013; Snelson et al., 2012; Thelwall et al., 2012). For example, Kousha et al. (2012) identified six categories associated with academia in their analysis of YouTube videos. These were 'scientific demonstration, public dissemination, education, talks to academics, information about scientists, and comedy' (p. 1712).

Research studies have focused on how academic use YouTube videos as educational applications. Some studies have used YouTube videos as a dataset for research in specific areas such as medicine, public health, and marketing (Kousha et al., 2012). YouTube is used as a means of disseminating research to other academics and the general public, and potentially could be effective in demonstrating the impact of research findings beyond academia.

YouTube as a Tool for Pedagogy

YouTube is not only linked to everyday life, but more particularly it is inextricably connected to education. It holds many types of educational videos for both formal and informal learning activities. These may be implicitly or explicitly intended to educate their audiences. At the same time, YouTube can be used strategically by university marketing

departments to publicise their institutions. The experience of viewing YouTube material as an educator or learner can be disorientating. There is a discordant and contradictory mix of content such as mainstream advertising, niche advertising, special interest content, celebrity culture, and experimental or transgressive material collaged together that rubs up against overtly educational or academic videos.

Many researchers and practitioners conceptualise social media platforms including YouTube as being for the young learner (Martínez & Alonso, 2015). Wilson (2003) suggests that a third educational space would be appealing to young people, in much the same way Freedman et al. (2013) conceive virtual, Visual Culture Learning Communities (VCLCs) attracting young learners. This would be distinctive from the first space of formal schooling and the second space of open, self-directed learning. Staikidis (2006) describes examples of educational third spaces as after-school programs, community programs, or lunchtime informal activities. However, these forms of learning play out in linear time whereas YouTube offers an asynchronous third space for learning. Duncum (2011) sees platforms such as YouTube facilitating the teaching of relevant skills, and at the same time bridging the transgressive space between youth culture and the institutional requirements of formal knowledge production. Sweeny (2009) noted that there were pedagogical implications in the visualities such virtual technologies construct. Learning identities can be formed in virtual environments related to the particular epistemologies that develop from social media.

Toffler (1980) coined the term prosumer as someone who creates goods and services for their own consumption. This extends to social media as Jenkins (2006a) argues that everyone potentially can create their own content for their own use that can be shared with thousands of others via platforms like YouTube and MySpace. Martínez & Alonso (2015) have investigated social media behaviour in young students, identifying six types of prosumers with varying propensities to co-create and innovate. Since the pandemic there have been studies that show how teachers have become prosumers, creating, and sharing their own YouTube content, not just through

necessity, but because they identify with a new digital professionalism and its values (Triviño-Cabrera, 2021; Zavyalova & Galvin, 2022).

YouTube can be understood as a space where potential peer-to-peer and participatory informal learning can take place, Jenkins (2006b) notes that social media platforms can facilitate a 'peer-to-peer culture' (p. 38) and a 'participatory culture' (p. 1). Jenkins (2009) refers to 'distributed cognition', where users have the technological and social skills to access the knowledge of others (p. 70). Gee (2003) also talks about 'distributed knowledge' where knowledge resides not in any one individual, text, or technology, but is distributed across networks of people, texts, and technologies (p. 184). Levy (1997) similarly refers to 'collective intelligence', where knowledge is pooled and compared with other forms of knowledge in order to fulfil common goals. Virtual communities arise from interaction with YouTube, 'they operate as self-sustaining systems out of mutual interests and a reciprocal exchange of knowledge and acknowledgement' (Duncum, 2011, p. 27). Bernstein's model of learning can also be applied where individuals develop their own repertoire of strategies for successful learning by drawing up the reservoir of knowledge held by their learning group/cohort. Bernstein (1999, p. 60) made the point, 'Clearly the more members are isolated or excluded from each other, the weaker the social base for the development of either repertoire or reservoir'. For those who cannot relate to their physical learning group for social, political, or practical reasons, then virtual learning communities possibly could offer a learning network supplying a virtual reservoir of strategies, skills, and knowledge.

Methodological Approach

The approach is aligned to practice-based research because the resulting insights come from the creative practice of making the YouTube videos. New knowledge is gleaned from the means of practice (reflection on the process) and the outcomes of the practice (the content of the YouTube channel) (Candy, 2006; Candy et al., 2021). At the same time the videos also tell

the participants' stories who also contribute to the making of the content. The research was practice-focussed and fluid whilst being driven by the video-making process (Candy et al., 2021; Rolling, 2014). Insights are gained from a reflection on the creative process which included the participants' contributions through their verbal and visual participation (Akella et al., 2021; Schon, 1984). The *Learning Returns* project was developed through considered introspection that was shared between the researchers (Brown & Patterson, 2021; Dallow, 2003; Xue & Desmet, 2019).

Frayling et al. (1997) argued that as part of the dissemination of the work, practice-based researchers are, 'obliged also to map for his or her peers the route by which they arrived at their product/s' (p. 13). The design process of *Learning Returns* is therefore explained as part of the method. The practice-based approach was applied to this project because as Dallow (2003) has noted, 'It allows the research work of the creative practitioner to ask questions not only...about work...but through work' (p. 59). An example that is similar to this approach can be seen in the work of Duckworth and Smith (2018), *UK Further Education Transforming Lives*, people were filmed telling stories about the impact Further Education had on their lives. The films were shared through various social media platforms such as Twitter.

Methods

The research explores the experiences of those who had previously studied the arts as mature learners and how they could communicate that to a virtual audience. It also evaluated the possibility that a video-sharing website could be a fruitful space for developing *Learning Returns* as an arts-based research project. Broadhead's (2021) interrogation of filmmaking as a method for researching mature graduates before the pandemic was a precursor to this work.

As well as considering work that has explored film-making and digital storytelling as a means of capturing educational life experiences (Duckworth & Smith, 2018; Walsh, Rutherford & Crough, 2013; Mumtaz, 2015) the

researchers identified a successful YouTube channel that had an educational focus. *Bob & Brad* was identified as successful because it had a large number of subscribers and had been active for over 10 years. The interaction with the audience was very apparent through its publicly visible feedback comments, where viewers asked questions and commented on what they had learned from the channel.

Bob & Brad – A Short Case Study

An analysis of a successful YouTube channel was undertaken. Bob Schrupp and Brad Heineck created the educational YouTube channel *Bob & Brad* in 2011. Their tagline is 'the two most famous Physical Therapists on the internet (in their opinion)'. *Bob & Brad's* mission is to 'get fit, stay healthy, and pain-free' and is designed to reach people from 0 to 101 years old. Together they have over 60 years of combined experience in the physical therapy field and their YouTube channel alone has over 2 million subscribers. They utilise many forms of social media to reach a wide audience, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter (*Bob & Brad*, 2022). On viewing their output from different years, it could be seen that their approach to YouTube had been finely crafted over time through a reflective process directed towards improvement.

When analysing their videos, it can be seen that they clearly have extensive expertise in physiotherapy based on research and practice which they communicate through demonstration, storytelling, and humour. *Bob & Brad* frame their content in a particular way that enables them to connect with their audience in a non-threatening, inclusive, and engaging manner.

- 1) The videos are not overly long being between 5–10 minutes at the most.
- 2) The videos are structured with a clear introduction, middle and end.
- 3) During the start and finish of the videos *Bob & Brad* are a double act repeating familiar humorous phrases that enhance a connection to an expectant audience (who is in on the joke).

- 4) There is a sophisticated sense of 'knowingness' as *Bob & Brad* play with the expected conventions of the medium that is directed to and includes the viewer. At the same time, they share personal stories of experience that feel authentic.
- 5) Genuine, useful information based on medical research is openly shared with a sense of care and attention to the audience's health and wellbeing.
- 6) The visual identity of the channel and videos are consistent, coherent and reflect their mission to get fit, stay healthy, and pain-free (as does the intro and background music).
- 7) The video is filmed with a single point of view from a static camera that captures *Bob & Brad* against a simple background and their logo.
- 8) They aim to post every day and encourage their audience to take part in competitions on their website as well as using the resources that are available there.
- 9) They refer to and use other forms of social media and podcasts.
- 10) Viewer comments are consistently liked by the *Bob & Brad* team and where appropriate viewers get one-to-one advice through the feedback/comments section.
- 11) There is *Bob & Brad* merchandising, but this is linked to physiotherapy and solutions that do not need specialist equipment are always the focus of the demonstrations.

What is significant about the *Bob & Brad* example is that they attract a diverse audience. Some of the viewers share their ages in the comments section and many are in their 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s. Bob often reflects that he is in his 60s and Brad is in his late 50s. This suggests that older people do engage with YouTube cultures that drive informal adult learning every day and on a global scale. *Bob & Brad* provide a service about maintaining health and well-being that is of interest to older viewers, much like the function of programming from public television. For example, Hopman-Rock et al. (2005) discovered that age was a factor in the participation in a health education

and exercise program on public television that appealed to over viewers over 55. The engagement of mature people could be to do with particular subject matter, formats, and aesthetics that attract certain audiences. A large part of the *Bob & Brad* output is educational in focus. Physiological issues are explained using anatomical models and 'Sam the Skeleton'. Then exercises designed to correct any physical problems that cause pain or immobility are demonstrated. The structure is based on a simple theory/practice dichotomy which is communicated efficiently and effectively within a few minutes. The response from viewers in the comments section is overwhelmingly positive.

The analysis of the *Bob & Brad* case study informed the design and format of the *Learning Returns* project. Attention and care were given to key elements such as the opening and closing titles that would be repeated in the films. A *Learning Returns'* visual identity could be built so that audiences become familiar with it. This was conceived as a practice-based project and in response to research that indicates that the aesthetics of YouTube videos and the project's channel were important in constructing meaning. A substantial amount of time was taken in designing the visual identity of the *Learning Returns'* social media presence. A graphic designer was employed to design a series of coherent 'assets' that could be used on the project's YouTube channel and Twitter page. Assets are visual designs that could be used as banners, titles, and idents. Typography and labels were also designed that could be used in the individual videos. The project team felt it was important to design an appropriate visual and audio identity for *Learning Returns* based on its mission to be informative, inclusive, and fun. Royalty-free music was then sourced that could be used sparingly at the beginning and end of each video. The contributions of adult students could then be framed within a format which was non-threatening, familiar, and engaging.

The designer's response to the brief was negotiated with the research team. It culminated in a style of type and colour palette chosen because it would signify a slightly nostalgic style of mid-century animation such as *Top Cat* (1961), *The Pink Panther Show* (1963) and *Scooby Doo, Where Are You!* (1969–70). Characters were designed that were based on different animals to

evoke a sense of diversity. They were drawn engaging in a series of activities such as reading, examining, and measuring to suggest that learning is not a passive activity. These assets were then used for constructing the Twitter and YouTube pages and in making videos for the *Learning Returns* channel. The aim was to upload learning stories from those who had returned to education later in life to YouTube then publicise them through social media. In the much longer term, it is hoped that *Learning Returns* will gain some momentum and the impact of the project can be measured through audience feedback in addition to viewing metrics. It is anticipated that this may take a few months and possibly years, and that the project needs to be open ended to some extent to deal with the asynchronicity and unpredictability of social media.

Recruitment of Participants

Mature graduates from arts courses in the North of England during the previous seven years were asked if they would like to be part of a research project that would involve being filmed telling their stories that would be uploaded onto the *Learning Returns* channel. Consenting participants (Gemma, Hafifa, Terence and Frances) were contacted through email so they could be informed about the aims and objectives of the research and told that it would contribute to a greater understanding of the motivations and achievements of mature students. Before the filming took place, participants were asked to prepare themselves for talking about their educational and life experiences. They had control over the kinds of topics they felt it was important to share with prospective adult arts students. There was no rehearsal time, the participants were able to talk straight to camera as they were told anything they were not happy with could be edited out.

It was very important for the wellbeing of contributors to be very open and transparent about the project because of the public nature of YouTube. The project information given to participants asked them to think carefully about whether or not they wanted their film to appear on a video-sharing site. The project team would monitor any feedback comments posted in response to the

films so that offensive or hurtful material could be deleted. Participants could pull out of the project and have their films withdrawn at any point.

Filming days were arranged with the participants and were carried out in an arts university. Care was given to the background and context of the shots, keeping in mind the visual identity of *Learning Returns*.

After filming, the subsequent footage was edited in the first instance to 10 minutes. This was perceived on first viewing as being far too long as there was a lot of repetition, and the pace did not work. So, the first film was cut to two minutes, and this was very effective.

Editing and Analysis

The editing process was undertaken between the two researchers and a technician and was a means of identifying, developing, and consolidating the themes.

The analysis was undertaken in three main stages. The first, considered the raw footage (which was gained from 30 minutes of filming for each participant). The stories found in the footage were disentangled and represented in a series of 10-minute films; the importance of this was that participant contributions could be understood in context. On viewing the 10-minute films it was noted that ideas were often repeated, and significant points were lost in some of the descriptive explanation. It was also suspected that the attention span of a YouTube audience may be shorter than 10 minutes.

The second, conceptual and interpretive stage, was where the stories were broken down into two-minute films. At this point the researchers drew upon reflective practice and experience to interpret the stories that were being told, whilst identifying important themes that needed to be represented in the shorter films.

The third stage of analysis and interpretation was to identify important themes that ran across the stories. The results were then written up where the researchers aimed to provide an account that comprised, 'transparency, inclusion of participant voice, aesthetic qualities, verisimilitude and utility'

(Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 31). Through the process of editing the themes became distilled and were used to structure the final versions that would be uploaded onto the *Learning Returns* channel.

Butler-Kisber (2010) points out that there is a danger that research process appears to be linear and in clearly defined stages, for example, collecting data, carrying out the analysis and then writing up the findings. However, within practice-based research the process can be much more fluid and iterative or cyclic. It could be argued that the analysis goes on throughout all the stages depending on what the researchers bring to the process. In practice, the analysis of the themes was iterative, developed through a de-contextualising and re-contextualising cycle (Duckworth & Smith, 2018). The editing process proved to be very important because it enabled themes that could be revisited and reviewed.

Results

The two-minute films construct meanings through the aesthetics inherent in the films constructed by the backgrounds, the lighting, the framing, the graphics, and the music. The participants also construct the aesthetics through their choice of clothing, at least two of the participants shared that they had been thoughtful about the colours of their outfits. The way that the participants spoke was also very influential, the rhythm of their speech, the emphasis on words, and the subtleties of body language all influenced the interpretive decisions made by the researchers when identifying the themes.

The participants were all seated and were represented as portraits or 'talking heads'. This placed a focus on what they were saying; future work could involve action and movement which would create new meanings and levels of interpretation.

Each participant's story was presented in a relatively coherent way during the films, and the points they were making were contextualised within their particular narrative. However, there were some themes that ran across the films.

Table 1 – Cross-cutting themes

| Themes | Cross-cutting themes |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ecology and used clothes. • Learned that need to make things for a purpose. • Connection to the groups sharing through group crits, very helpful. • Learned skills. • Find out about participatory arts. • Education got ideas flowing. | <p>Previous learning experiences</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full-time work since 1979 apprenticeship technical. • Engineering background making moulds for glass bottles. • Did not have opportunities when younger. • 18 years old interested but dissuaded from art into the sciences. • My art practice is Arabic calligraphy. • Wanted to be in the arts but degree too expensive and therefore decided to do an MA. • As a mother of two education is not your place. | <p>An understanding of own positionality</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realised already had the skills to make and do something. • You can do it. • Encouragement to return to education. • Others should 'jump in'. • Experienced no difficulties or prejudice in education due to age. • If unsure, just try it. • It's empowered me. | <p>Encouraging others</p> |

| | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move away from technical digital project management to organising creative projects. • 'Unbolt the door' to the art world. • Working with a group of older South Asian women who are isolated, bringing them together through art. • My main purpose is to make art that reflects life. • I have been doing work at festivals and in exhibitions for some years now. | <p>Future projects undertaken after formal education</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need Evening Access and Education courses for developing confidence. • Older people give it 100%. • Passion and curiosity – education as affirming. • Art keeps you mindful and giving joy. • Through networking on my course, I am able to collaborate on commissions. | <p>Valuing returning to education</p> |

Discussion

Previous Learning Experiences

Without prompting from the researchers, the participants were keen to give clear accounts of what they had learned, whether this be skills, concepts, or new practices. They reflected on the benefits of their previous learning experiences. Certain moments or critical incidents had stuck in their memories that they felt were significant enough to share.

An Understanding of Own Positionality

All the participants identified themselves as primarily creative practitioners, but also in terms of the reasons why they had returned to education later in life. They constructed a particular identity for themselves and for their imagined audience. Part of their identity was formed by their parental

status or their previous careers. There was also a notion that their identities included whether or not they had been encouraged or enabled to go into higher education when they were younger. There was a knowingness about their representation as people who had returned after years out of formal education.

Encouraging Others

The participants demonstrated an empathy for what older, prospective arts students watching their films might be worried about; prejudice, having the ability to succeed, fitting in. There were also lots of encouraging words shared to suggest that people could and should make the leap and return to education, that this would be a positive experience.

Future Projects Undertaken After Formal Education

All the participants had either a plan for future work in the arts using their creative skills or were actually already engaged in projects. Most of their creative practices had a socially engaged perspective to them. One of the participants was active as a sculptor and this was in sympathy with his previous work making moulds.

Valuing Arts Education

There were many statements given about the value of an arts education. It had given practical benefits, such as developing networks and social capital as well as developing skills. There were also benefits for well-being and confidence. Mature learners themselves were also valued as being engaged and curious.

It was striking that the contributors to the YouTube films could construct coherent stories about their own past experiences and weave in their thoughts about the value of arts education and the plans each had for the

future. Their performances were enhanced by the editing process so it must not be forgotten that these stories were mediated by the interpretations and values of the researchers. However, there was an awareness tacitly held by the participants that can be 'read' in the films about the audience, about their concerns and desires. It was this that led to the encouragement that was freely given by the speakers.

Conclusion

The *Learning Returns* project has begun to show the benefits adult learning in the arts has for some individuals, their communities and for the wider social context. However, it is a work in progress, and it is hoped that additional data will be gleaned as the *Learning Returns* channel grows its audience and subscribers.

Currently, the four participants who had previously been art and design students spoke/connected with an audience of imaginary prospective students beyond institutions who were considering returning to education. It is hoped that this imaginary audience may become more concrete as the project progresses. The participants were confident in sharing their stories that linked their past learning experiences with future aspirations related to their creative practices. They also sent out positive messages about the value of adult learning in the arts.

Secondly, the *Bob & Brad* case study suggests that it is possible to reach mature audiences through YouTube. So far, on a very small scale, YouTube has been an effective means of conducting research with older people about their learning experiences. Progress has been slow, as time is needed to build up an audience for *Learning Returns*. In some ways the research process is unpredictable and non-linear due to the nature of social media.

The project highlights the importance of aesthetics, which is of particular concern to creative practitioners. However, YouTube functions as a melting pot of many aesthetic realms, that of popular culture, everyday life as well as personal visual and audio styles. The researchers, the graphic designer, the

participants, and the YouTube platform all influence the aesthetics of *Learning Returns*, and this influences the interpretive aspects of the research.

Finally, the boundaries between informal learning, research method, and research impact become blurred during the *Learning Returns* project as it appears to operate in all those arenas. Research data can be gleaned from both the content of the films and the metrics and feedback of the audience. Impact has yet to be established but is possible through the same platform's feedback mechanism.

Acknowledgements: Bobby Rae; Henry Gonnet.

References

- Akella, D., Gibbs, A., Gilbert, B., Henry, B., Lee, V., Mathis, D., & Williams, V. (2021). Critical reflection and communities of practice as professional development strategies for educators. *International Journal for Cross-Disciplinary Subjects in Education*, 12(1), 4339–4349.
- Alhadeff-Jones, M. (2017). *Time and the rhythms of emancipatory education: Rethinking the temporal complexity of self and society*. Taylor & Francis.
- Bakhshi, H. (2020). *Digital Culture – Consumer Tracking Study. Wave 1 of 6*, Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre Led by Nesta. <https://www.pec.ac.uk/assets/publications/Digital-culture-consumer-tracking-study-2020-Week-1.pdf>
- Benjamin, W. (1996). *A Work of Art in the era of its technical reproducibility*. Translated by S. Romashko, Moscow, Medium.
- Bernstein, B. (1999). Vertical and horizontal discourse: An essay. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 20(2), 157–173.
- Bob & Brad. (2022). *About Us*. <https://www.bobandbrad.com/about-us>
- Boellstorff, T. (2008). *Coming of age in Second Life: An anthropologist explores the virtually human*. Princeton University Press.
- Boyd, D. M., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer mediated Communication*, 13(1), 210–230.
- Broadhead, S. (2021). Exploring adult learning and its impact on wider communities through arts-based methods: An evaluation of narrative inquiry through filmmaking. *Dyskursy Młodych Andragogów / Adult Education Discourses*, 22, 41–59. [http://www.dma.wpps.uz.zgora.pl/index.php?journal=DMA&page=article&op=view&path\[\]=594](http://www.dma.wpps.uz.zgora.pl/index.php?journal=DMA&page=article&op=view&path[]=594)
- Broadhead, S., & Gregson, M. (2018). *Practical wisdom and democratic education: Phronesis, art and non-traditional students*. Palgrave Macmillan.

- Brown, S., & Patterson, A. (2021). Me-search? Search me! A new twist in the tale of introspection. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 37(13–14), 1343–1373.
- Butler-Kisber, L. (2010). *Qualitative inquiry: Thematic, Narrative and Arts-informed Perspectives*. Sage Publications.
- Candy, L. (2006). Practice based research: A guide. *Creativity Cognition Studios Report*, 1(2), 1–19.
- Candy, L., Edmonds, E., & Vear, C. (2021). Practice-based research. In Vear, C. (Ed.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Practice-Based Research* (pp. 27–41). Routledge.
- Cheng, X., Liu, J., & Dale, C. (2013). Understanding the characteristics of internet short video sharing: A YouTube-based measurement study. *IEEE Transactions on Multimedia*, 15(5), 1184–1194.
- Crozier, G., Reay, D., Clayton, J., Colliander, L., & Grinstead, J. (2008). Different strokes for different folks: Diverse students in diverse institutions – experiences of higher education. *Research Papers in Education*, 23(2), 167–177.
- Dallow, P. (2003). Representing creativeness: practice-based approaches to research in creative arts. *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education*, 2(1), 49–66.
- Dewey, J. (1987). *The later works, 1925–1953: Volume 10 art as experience*. Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dickson, N. (2020). What I wish I'd known then: My three top tips for engaging 'vulnerable' women in arts-based research. In D. E. Clover, S. Dziulhifi, H. Geldvmus, & K. Sanford, K. (Eds.), *Feminist Adult Educators' Guide to aesthetic, creative and disruptive strategies in museums and community* (pp. 254–260). The Gender Justice, Creative Pedagogies and Arts-Based Research Group, University of Victoria, Canada.
- Duckworth, V., & Smith, R. (2018). Breaking the triple lock: Further education and transformative teaching and learning. *Education + Training*, 60(6), 529–543.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-05-2018-0111>

- Duncum, P. (2011). Youth on YouTube: Prosumers in a peer-to-peer participatory culture. *The International Journal of Art Education*, 9(2), 24–39.
- Farenga, S. (2018). Early struggles, peer groups and eventual success: An artful inquiry into unpacking transitions into university of widening participation students. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 20(1), 60–78.
- Fowle, W. (2018). Supporting adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds into higher education. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 20(3), 90–108.
- Frayling, C., Stead, V., Archer, B., Cook, N., Powell, J., Scrivener, S., & Tovey, M. (1997). *Practice-based doctorates in the creative and performing arts and design*. UK Council for Graduate Education.
- Freedman, K., Heijnen, E., Kallio-Tavin, M., Kárpáti, A., & Papp, L. (2013). Visual culture learning communities: How and what students come to know in informal art groups. *Studies in Art Education*, 54(2), 103–115.
- Gee, J. P. (2003). What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy. *Computers in Entertainment (CIE)*, 1(1), 20–20.
- Hopman-Rock, M., Borghouts, J. A., & Leurs, M. T. (2005). Determinants of participation in a health education and exercise program on television. *Preventive medicine*, 41(1), 232–239.
- Jenkins, H. (2006a). *Convergence culture. Where old and new media collide*. New York University Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2006b). *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: exploring participatory culture*. New York University Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2009). What happened before YouTube. In J. Burgess & J. Green (Eds.), *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (pp. 109–125). Polity Press.
- Johnston, J. (2017). Subscribing to sex edutainment: Sex education, online video, and the YouTube star. *Television & New Media*, 18(1), 76–92.
- Kousha, K., Thelwall, M., & Abdoli, M. (2012). The role of online videos in research communication: A content analysis of You Tube videos cited in academic publications. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 63(9), 1710–1727.

- Lange, P. G. (2007). Publicly private and privately public: Social networking on YouTube. *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication*, 13(1), 361–380.
- Levy, P. (1997). *Collective intelligence: Mankind's emerging world in cyberspace*. Plenum Trade.
- Medvedeva, A. R. (2019). Postmodern aesthetics of videos on YouTube. In *Proceedings of the 21st International Congress of Aesthetics* (pp. 968–975).
- Muller, E. (2009). Where quality matters: Discourses on the art of making a YouTube video. In P. Snickars, & P. Vonderau (Eds.), *YouTube Reader* (pp. 126–139). National Library of Sweden.
- Mumtaz, N. (2015). Participatory action-based design research. In: D. Conard & A. Sinner, (Eds.), *Creating Together: Participatory, Community-Based, and Collaborative Arts Practices and Scholarship across Canada* (pp. 51–68). Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Reay, D., Ball, S., & David, M. (2002). 'It's taking me a long time but I'll get there in the end': Mature students on access courses and higher education choice. *British Educational Research Journal*, 28(1), 5–19.
- Rolling, Jr, J. H. (2014). Artistic method in research as a flexible architecture for theory-building. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 7(2), 161–168.
- Schön, D. A. (1984). The architectural studio as an exemplar of education for reflection-in-action. *Journal of architectural education*, 38(1), 2–9.
- Snelson, C., Rice, K., & Wyzard, C. (2012). Research priorities for YouTube and video sharing technologies: A Delphi study. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 43(1), 119–129.
- Spyer, J. (2011). Making up art, videos and fame. The creation of social order in the informal realm.
https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Juliano-Spyer/publication/220039683_Making_up_Art_Videos_and_Fame_The_Creation_of_Social_Order_in_the_Informal_Realm_of_YouTube_Beauty_Gurus/links/0912f51150caf9fe79000000/Making-up-Art-Videos-and-Fame-The-Creation-of-Social-Order-in-the-Informal-Realm-of-YouTube-Beauty-Gurus.pdf

- Staikidis, K. (2006). Visual culture in Mr. Higgins Fifth grade class. In P. Duncum (ed.), *Visual Culture in the Art Class: Case Studies* (pp. 12–23). Reston, National Art Education Association.
- Sweeny, R. W. (2009). There's no I in YouTube: Social media, networked identity and art education. *International Journal of Education through Art*, 5(2–3), 201–212.
- Thelwall, M., Sud, P., & Vis, F. (2012). Commenting on YouTube videos: From Guatemalan rock to El Big Bang. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 63(3), 616–629.
- Triviño-Cabrera, L., Chaves-Guerrero, E. I., & Alejo-Lozano, L. (2021). The figure of the teacher-prosumer for the development of an innovative, sustainable, and committed education in times of COVID-19. *Sustainability*, 13(3), 1128.
- Toffler, A. (1980). *The Third Wave*. William Morrow & Company.
- Walsh, C. A., Rutherford, G., & Crough, M. (2013). Arts-based research: Creating social change for incarcerated women. *Creative Approaches to Research*, 6(1), 119.
- Wilson, B., (2003) Three sites for visual cultural pedagogy: Honoring students' interests and imagery. *International Journal of Arts Education*, 1(3), 107–126.
- Xue, H., & Desmet, P. M. (2019). Researcher introspection for experience-driven design research. *Design Studies*, 63, 37–64.
- Zavyalova, K., & Galvin, C. (2022). Teachers as media creators and prosumers: exploring the reasons & values behind their YouTube pedagogical activity. *Irish Educational Studies*, 41(1), 187–200.

Chapter 7

Anne Gaëlle Dorval, Eric Bertrand & Jérôme Eneau

The social and cultural issues revolving around changes in the workplace and in training: the place, and changing face of research in the field of adult education

Introduction

How may one address the major transformations happening in the world today, transformations arising in the wake of multiple crises—health, ecological, economic, but also existential—and affecting many people? These multifaceted crises appear to be systemic, and they have an impact at both the macro- and micro-social levels. They influence:

- The highest policymaking level, in other words, the level concerning work, health, and education.
- The organisations in which individuals learn, work, train, and receive care.
- Social groups, their identity, their professionalism, etc.
- The daily lives of individuals who must overcome new challenges if they wish to survive.

What, then, is the role of adult education and research in the field of education and vocational training in this constantly changing world? What role do the different actors (adult learners, facilitators, researchers) play? This chapter revolves around these questions. It focuses on the projects undertaken by our research team at Rennes 2 University, France, which, over the past ten years, has been working on the question of crises as a process and as a moment of the construction of meaning, inherently linked to individual and collective change processes, which one may have chosen or been subjected to.

First, focusing on the fields of work, training, and research, we will analyse crisis as an experience and as a social production of reality. Second, we will present our multi-referential analysis grid of the crisis experience and its dimensions; we seek to show the extent to which this approach makes it possible to shed light on the reciprocal links between the different crisis levels (macro-, meso-, and micro-sociological). Third, we will present the theoretical approach used to support and shed light on the process and meaning of the transformations observed. Fourth, an analysis of the research-action-training approach and its system will reveal a cooperative and transformative approach. Lastly, we will present several salient elements drawn from our experiences during the COVID-19 crisis and highlight their impact. These elements show a transformation of practices in professional fields, changes in researchers' support practices, and a transformation of both learners' profiles and their learning practices. We conclude, in terms of openness, on how these developments lead us to consider new perspectives for research, training and action.

The Meaning of Crisis as a Crisis of Meaning and a Crisis of Projection

The authors of this chapter consider that the world is a psychosocial construction rather than a 'given'. They therefore examine the conditions under which research and training help all actors, in the fields of work and adult training, jointly to develop their power to take action and to influence

the ongoing changes. In this chapter, we refer to 'joint transformations' rather than to 'mutations' or 'changes'.

Crises are at the heart of the multiple processes of transformation that affect all living things, notably humans. Irrespective of whether they are referred to as health, economic, oil, employment, meaning, or even existential crises, all crises are linked to specific fields of practice or to disciplines that help to explain them. We argue that the process and meaning at the heart of the crisis promotes profound and 'major' transformations under certain conditions, irrespective of the disciplines that analyse them (psychological development, transformative learning, cultural transformations, identity, and so on). These transformations affect uses, practices, representations, skills, know-how, knowledge, material forms, and even tools.

We focus on the phenomenon of the crises that individuals experience, which we place in the field of practice, i.e., adult education, and more specifically, a master's degree programme targeting professions in the field of work and training. We also pay attention to the role of education and training research (in the same field) and to the transformative processes observed.

What is the relationship between the political crisis in Ukraine, the global health crisis, the ecological crisis, energy price inflation, and the life stories of women and men enrolled in a higher education programme to acquire specific professional skills in France?

At first glance, the answer to this question appears to be rather complicated. However, conceptualising human experience around three dimensions, and using a multi-referential approach to analyse the 'crisis' object at the heart of all experiences that one must overcome, helps us to see things more clearly.

Our work has led us to perceive individuals' experiences as 'capital', composed of a set of representations (practices, knowledge, know-how, beliefs, etc.) which are more or less shared, but which are unstable. This capital is comprised of cultural features specific to societies and social groups at a given moment in their history, and of more universal elements such as births, deaths, and travel. This container and its contents form an interpretative matrix that explains individuals' relationships with themselves, with others, and with

the visible and invisible world. They also shape individuals' relationship to time, participation, and commitment, meaning the various themes or 'salient objects' that constitute the representations that are discernible, and which may be observed through the analysis of social and language practices.

Experience, however, is more than merely this stable, reassuring, structuring capital for individuals and social groups. It is also relentlessly experienced and challenged by the crisis phenomena, defined here as a 'test' of the relationship between individuals, groups, and the world of things. These 'tests' constitute the second dimension of experience, in other words the transformation of previously 'normal situations' into a crisis. They require individuals to think critically and to cast aside their beliefs and their ready-made thinking. When the ordeal experienced leads neither to the suspension of pre-thought actions, nor to the questioning of what makes individuals perceive the world as they do, then the crisis becomes chronic and harmful. This activity, which one is often subjected to, and which is unpredictable by nature, requires individuals and social groups to engage in critical and potentially transformative reflective work. A test, as a crisis of meaning, thus involves a dual motion for the individuals and the social groups within formal and non-formal organisations. The first involves a reconfiguration of the contents of one's experiential capital and, above all, the second requires individuals to restructure their representation of the third dimension of experience, i.e., the 'projects' dimension (personal, professional, political, etc.). This third dimension is present in various social theories and in the theories of action and learning; these dimensions are also aligned with the three dimensions of lived experiences which are interconnected (past, present, and future). Capital is referred to as the 'paradigm' and the critical approach to science essentially questions the project targeted by the production of new knowledge.

A multi-referential Approach to Reality that Requires Analysis

Building on Arduino's work (1993), we will focus on different units of analysis corresponding to what the author refers to as 'interacting levels of reality'.

Subjects, groups, organisations, and institutions all comprise a system. To these categories may be added the elements of the physical, natural, and cultural world. These are made up of material elements which may be real, but also imaginary and symbolic. The strength of the model lies in the observation and analysis of the reciprocal relationships at work between these different levels.

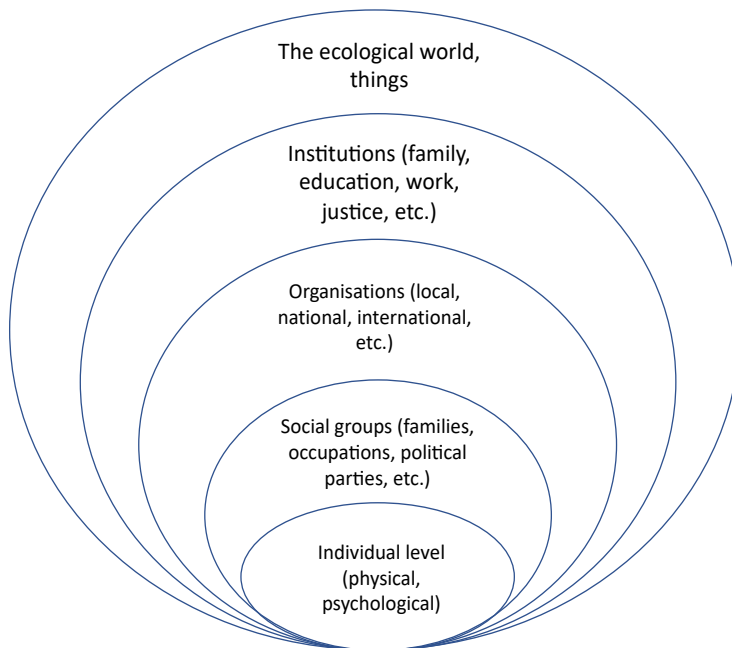


Figure 1 – The different levels of reflexivity according to Ardoino (Bertrand, 2007)

As an example, France, like many countries across Europe, is currently experiencing a severe shortage of labour in certain sectors facing hardships (the restaurant industry, IT, construction, among others). The question here is whether one may refer to the institution of work as a meeting of the instituted (those who are already in place) and the institutions (all the actors who work tirelessly to support the transformation of the institution of work,

which also involves transforming the laws that define it). For example, major phenomena—such as the ‘uberisation’ of the economy—have an impact on the world of work. They also influence how individuals relate to work (the desire for ‘self-employment’ and independence) and the accompanying tension at the heart of a social model which seeks to ensure that all individuals achieve self-fulfilment, while at the same time proposing a model of social protection beneficial to the majority. Many professional networks (individuals/groups/organisations) focus on leading individuals towards change after experiencing a moment of crisis (employment and work crisis), thus questioning the traditional model rooted in the representations of the majority (wage labour). Another example is the emergence of ‘slashers’, with multi jobs careers, which has forced the community of entrepreneurs, researchers, policy actors, guides, and trainers to reconsider traditional forms of work in order to invent new ones. The development of teleworking and the four-day working week are political and social responses, in France, resulting from negotiations between different actors. This example shows the extent to which the different levels of reality are intertwined and the extent of their influence on each other via a random movement of a transformation that is somewhat synchronised and somewhat interdependent. Organisations are also caught up in these processes: what should they make of the changes taking place in the organisation of work, and of how young people relate to these changes to overcome a crisis phenomenon at a time of collective transformations?

The adult learners that we guide are themselves faced with these different types of crises at both the personal and professional level. These crises are also at the heart of the issues on which they focus: training policies and strategies, and the various programmes aimed at enabling professionalism, adapting them to changing skill demands within professions but also helping them to develop their autonomy, i.e., their ability to take control of their destiny.

Theoretical Approaches that may Help to Shed Light on Joint Transformations in a Crisis Context

When facing a major and long-lasting crisis, how can one propose forms of support that pursue individual and collective learning aims, the production of scientific knowledge, and organisational and social transformations? Around which objects and according to which processes? At Rennes 2 University, we are working on a 'transformative support process'. It is the object of the practice that the professionals we teach develop in the specific context of lifelong learning at the university. This is also a practice that we use at the university and in our research team with a strong emphasis on one feature, i.e., conceiving transformation in terms of how it relates to education, work, and research. This means analysing our object and attempting to understand it in all its complexity. It also means affirming the need to design this programme, together with all the actors involved, with a certain ethics of discussion based on both the development of a reflexive and critical capacity (the ability of actors to re-examine their views, to question a situation) and a capacity for decentration.

As Habermas (1987) argues, these activities are themselves at the heart of any process seeking mutual understanding. Indeed, mutual understanding is the necessary condition for any communicative rationality, i.e., an axiological rationality, based on a discussion of a plural, instrumental, and emancipatory rationality (Bertrand, 2007; Bertrand et al., 2014). This complexity is accompanied by a creative dimension to allow individuals to think and experience at the same time the necessary interactions between the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of the educational, training, or evaluation approaches across different time frames: the lengthy periods of policies and strategies, the often more pressing times involving the organisation and functioning of the approaches, and the even shorter periods of their implementation and their outcomes for actors. In the context of the continuing education system proposed at the university (i.e., our master's degree for adult returning to studies), reflecting on this complexity

therefore means simultaneously taking these three levels into account. How can one reflect on a form of support that adapts to these three levels of reality that are far too often addressed separately, these three-time frames that combine the imperative nature of everyday life in the support proposed and a long-term strategic vision that is not always shared? In times of crisis, how can one resist the urgency called for by the context and the need to 'project' oneself in a distanced and non-imperative manner? The absence of a forward-looking and political vision (in the long term), in relation to the changes affecting major sectors and professions (such as the health sector), is amplified by the crisis and, in many professions, leads to labour shortages.

Guiding adult learners requires one to respond to these different levels of interaction and challenges. In the university context, all forms of guidance unfold within an educational project anchored in an institution with its own values, a specific form of work organisation, and a set of heterogeneous social worlds. In this context, advocating a project based on promoting 'transformative learning' (Mezirow, [1991] 2001; 2009), in an attempt to help to develop learners, teams, and organisations, is a difficult undertaking: such a project also implies allowing actors (learners, professionals, teachers) to take action in complex environments, to develop a specific position and 'professional ethos' (Jorro, 2009), to develop both a singular identity and efficient modes of socialisation, and last but not least, to construct meaning *in* and *for* action (Eneau et al., 2012; Eneau et al., 2014). This approach thus presupposes a conception of interpersonal relationships, based not on competition alone and on the urgent nature of situations, but also on reciprocity, parity, and mutuality, which also presupposes a contract-based educational approach (Eneau, 2005). Do the current crises allow these possibilities?

While this view is necessary, it nonetheless appears insufficient. There is an apparent paradox that characterises the system formed by training actors and the communicational activities that connect them at all levels: adapting, mastering, streamlining approaches, at significant risk, which has been borrowed from Habermas by the proponents of transformative learning. This is the risk of establishing practices marked primarily by instrumental actions

and acts that help one to manoeuvre, at the expense of communicative acts that are more reflective and more critical (Donaldson, 2009; Mezirow, [1991] 2001). The question, then, in a crisis context, is whether there is a greater risk that manoeuvre measures can develop? In the context of higher education, we know that, when the instrumental logics of the objective world alone guide action (increase the number of participants in lifelong learning programmes, record the number of students accessing sustainable employment, measure exam success rates, etc.), there is the risk that the support measures, implemented at all levels, develop in a way that resembles a social world 'colonised' by arrangements, themselves guided by 'banking logics', to use Freire's words, thus preventing all forms of distanced and conscious action, and therefore, ultimately, all forms of 'critical learning' (Brookfield, 2005). Conversely, in the transformative perspective, support measures suggest that one must start from the experiences of learners, teachers, and other actors (experiences are here understood as 'capital, challenges and projects', cf. Bertrand, 2014) and compare them so as jointly to construct and produce meaning, within a perspective of both individual and collective change; or, in other words, to connect self-directed and co-constructed dimensions with transformation in mind (Mezirow, [1991] 2001; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009).

Has the crisis undermined this necessary cooperation between the various social worlds of training and research? To respond to this question, considering the 'tensions' experienced between the different forms of 'self', the others, and the environment, and the action of each learner and the trainers (in work situations, the courses pursued, the research approach developed, etc.), it appears necessary to reflect on the personal and professional stance and on the construction of an identity rooted in both personal and collective experiences. Ultimately, it is a question of engaging in an ethical reflection based on acceptance of distancing oneself and of drawing on critical knowledge. As an approach to constructing epistemic knowledge, the transformative perspective of support measures is therefore based on dialogue and intersubjectivity in an attempt to relate, identify, and describe the contexts in which the action is inserted. The aim is to deconstruct the normative meaning of these contexts and to gain a

better perception of the inferences, roles, logics, and particularly the modes of interpretation that guide action (Mezirow, [1991] 2001; Donaldson, 2009).

In times of crisis, a critical perspective, echoed in the transformative learning perspective, could help us to better distinguish, while connecting, the instrumental and communicational actions and the mechanisms of instrumentalization (or even of the manipulation of the environment and of others) and to observe how these actions and their mechanisms might be combined to promote the mechanisms of dialogue and mutual comprehension (including with regard to the feelings, beliefs, and values of others). Support—as an integrated practice—is thus focused on this process. Put differently, and drawing on Freire's words ([1996] 2006), this critical perspective in adult education makes it possible to envisage guidance, in a dialogical and interpretative approach, through different stages of conscientisation, distancing, and reflexive hindsight, in the deconstruction of beliefs and previous representations, and thus to aim at empowering learners and the system of actors by transforming their foundations and perspectives of meaning (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). To this end, a 'truly' transformative approach aims not only to make learners (and the actors involved in the educational process) more autonomous by enabling them to act as professionals capable of taking independent action from an instrumental and situational perspective (mastery of the tools, codes, and expectations of the environment), but also—and above all—to make them more self-reliant from an epistemological point of view. In other words, this means making them capable of questioning the merits of actions, of making informed judgments, and—ultimately—of influencing the environment in which they act in terms of values, ethics, and even ideologies (Eneau, 2005).

This process, which targets learners, ultimately implies transformations for all the actors involved in the educational system. Indeed, while the transformative perspective makes it possible to reflect on how to help learners to navigate personal and social change, a systemic approach must focus on all these dimensions. Given support in this perspective is dynamic, it cuts across action (work), training (learning), and research (knowledge production), and is therefore the result of an approach that is necessarily interactionist and

pragmatic, rather than deterministic (Figari, 1994). This encounter between the instituted and the institution ultimately seeks to help individuals to become aware of how their 'meaning schemes' are shaped by the environment, by individual histories, and by culture (Mezirow, [1991] 2001).

A Training–action–research Approach as a Dialogical Space for Support

To reflect on these support measures and implement them, we draw on a 'training–action–research' (TAR) approach. This is a complex, constructivist, and transformative approach, both from a scientific and an educational perspective. Support measures adopting a transformative approach must consider both an establishment's project (political orientation) and an educational project (pedagogical model). The approach revolves around critical reflexivity and has been developed by researchers at the University of Rennes 2 since 2009 within the framework of a Master's programme³. This 'training–action–research' (TAR) model, initially borrowed from Charlier (2005), has been gradually adapted (Eneau et al., 2012; 2014). More recently, we have enriched Charlier's analysis model for research, using a 'design-oriented' research approach (Sanchez & Monod-Ansaldi, 2015), as an adaption of 'design-based research' (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012), in which all actors are encouraged to participate in the different phases of the design of a training programme or a tool such as a prospective mechanism.

Between training *for* action, training *for* and *through* research, action research approach and research *on* training action, this specific programme is not merely about conforming to, or freeing oneself completely from, a normative institutional framework. Nor is it one of simply considering the demands for professionalisation or employability or even for a 'toolbox' that workplaces or learners themselves may request, especially when they are expected to learn to create or manage complex mechanisms and to respond to

³ The SIFA Master's degree (*Stratégie et Ingénierie en Formation d'Adultes*) is a two-year educational program aimed specifically at adult education professionals, offering them a professional qualification as well as a post-graduate academic diploma.

instructions in constantly changing contexts. On the contrary, the educational approach developed within the framework of these training programmes for the various partners, consists of creating conditions of mediation through dialogue, in which consciences are expressed and deployed, coming together to be transformed and to transform uses and practices.

The SIFA Master's Programme: Evolving Professionalisation in Adult Education

At Rennes 2 University, the SIFA Master's programme receives 20 learners per year (approximately 40 learners when the first and second years of the Master's programme are combined). Most of these learners are professionals resuming their studies in order to validate their experience and obtain a higher education certificate. The programme therefore pursues instrumental aims of access to—and preservation of—employment, through the acquisition of skills attested by a certificate. But, above all, it aims to support learners in their personal and professional development. It thus makes it possible to help students to develop a 'stance' and a professional identity by offering them a dialogical space for personal, social, and institutional transformation (Eneau et al., 2012).

The training takes place on a work–study basis. Different training units focus on the construction of the professional project and the analysis of practices. A professionalisation booklet (a shared information tool on the approach, the expectations, the role of the different actors, the global course schedule, the tools, and the evaluation process) makes it possible to lay the foundations of a contract–based approach through which students' projects (and their priorities in terms of the professional skills to develop), those of the university (in relation to its training framework), and those of the host structures (in relation to their institutional projects) must converge *in* and *through* dialogue and exchange. To promote this dialogue, opportunities allowing discussion by all parties are organised in the form of meetings between university internship coordinators, tutors, and students. The professional coordinators help students to construct the activities that they will undertake by helping them

to develop the specifications. Based on a 'pedagogical contract' model (Eneau, 2005), and borrowing from the tools used by professionals in the sector, this document makes it possible to negotiate the objectives, means, and 'deliverables' expected at the end of the internship period. The tutors therefore participate in these different forms of dialogue, in a 'problematic meeting' of different experienced worlds, with different interests that can be strategic, communicative, and even emancipatory.

Moments and Spaces for Mediation through Dialogue

The training units in general, and the analysis of practices in particular, are spaces in which students explore and explain lived experiences through discussion; they are spaces for dialogic learning. These training spaces and moments make it possible to adopt a reflexive approach not only with regard to the experiences encountered in the workplace, but also to past experiences and to students' 'frames of reference' (Brookfield, 2005; Mezirow, [1991] 2001) in all their uniqueness and diversity. The training programme is thus part of a training approach *in and through* research, involving reflection *in and on* action. The programme is intended to provide a platform allowing the questioning of training, of situated action, and of research, with the aim of producing both experiential and generalisable knowledge.

While learners are most affected by the effects of transformative learning, the educational teams, as well as the various partners (workplaces, fields of professionalisation, sites where interns are hosted, encounters during on-site meetings between tutors, learners, and coordinators), all experience the same processes. Indeed, following Mezirow's constructivist logic, transformative learning presupposes involvement and possible changes in training environments, for both facilitators and trainers, in the context of formal training (evaluation, for instance), but also for the various actors involved in the different actions (for instance, they share their views and participate in the construction of portfolios, or engage in empirical work that contributes towards the preparation of professional documents or

dissertations). Similarly, educational teams (through 'improvement boards', for instance) are also affected by these support measures which are based on educational reciprocity among the various training actors (academics, professionals, etc.). In such transformative projects, places of work, internships, or apprenticeships are also explored, analysed, and evaluated by the learners themselves.

Illustration of the Collective Implications of a Transformative Support Approach Based on the Lived Experiences of Actors (learners, trainers, and researchers)

How, and to what extent, do periods of crisis challenge our transformative approach? What are the consequences for the 'training-action-research' perspective, in this Master's programme?

The recent health crisis offers a good example: it is clear that the relationship of subjects to the world and to themselves has become more complex, and that the paradoxes at work and in training (instrumental and emancipatory aims) have increased. These phenomena have not altered the principles of parity, mutuality, and reciprocity at work in social and professional relationships. They have nevertheless shown that individuals need to develop their capacity to view events from a distance and to increase their awareness in order to overcome the challenges encountered. In this way, the team has perceived new challenges resulting from the COVID-19 crisis. There has been a collective restructuring of the meaning of lived experiences. This has taken the form of significant changes in the profiles of learners and in their expectations, which now differ from those that they previously held. These transformations have had an impact on the learning system, the training programme, and the support methods. In the dual role played by the team (teaching and research), the development of new models to understand the phenomena and processes experienced during the crisis is necessary. These models involve transformation of the forms of access to training, work, and research locations, which are themselves struggling with

major transformations, and the development of other methods to analyse, understand, and overcome these phenomena.

- Since 2020, more particularly, we have seen the profile of learners evolve and three main types have emerged:
- 'Traditional' learners (1/3), who are continuing their education after initial higher education cursus (i.e., 'emerging professionalism') or who are evolving in line with their careers and have a strong professional identity.
- So-called 'non-traditional' learners, who are changing their professional position (1/3): they are subjected to changes in their professional identity (the resumption of studies after a burnout, the need to see things from a distance, the desire for a reflexive break).
- New learners (i.e., new profiles, for us), referred to as 'profession-based', whose approach and project aims to support changing professional needs (1/3): the professionalisation of professions that differ from those to which we are accustomed in our adult education programme. While we habitually train students working in the fields of adult education, popular education, non-formal education or social work, today's public comprises industrialists, architects, notaries, and so on.

These new profiles reveal the ongoing changes in the workplace and the newly emerging need for support to address the emerging forms. Globally, it is clear that work and its different forms are changing in developed countries, and similar changes have been observed in students. There is a need to take into account individuals' new expectations and to pay particular attention to the meaning of work. But the health crisis has led to different forms of desynchronisation (personal, professional, and training times) and to a blurring of times and spaces (disappearance of alternating schedules and moments; loss of informal learning time; blurring of the boundaries between private and professional life; working and learning from home; etc.).

This has raised challenges for training and support approaches. Psycho-affective phenomena have emerged, revealing a new need for support from individuals facing a significant loss of reference points, some of whom are even encountering specific forms of professional and social isolation. This example illustrates the urgent need to rethink co-development practices and to develop collaborative tools. Educational teams have not been spared and they too are calling out for help and support.

Opening and Future Perspectives

Does this context of an almost never-ending crisis pose a threat to teaching and research in the field of adult training and in the professionalisation of the actors involved in training? Is there an essential and increased need to face these new challenges? Or does this context, on the contrary, present an opportunity? If so, what tools or incentives can help to address these reconfigurations? In the light of our shared experience, as a teaching team and as researchers in adult education, it is clear that there is some form of tension between what we value, i.e., the team's level of academic requirements, and the expression of the needs of the field, which are today more than ever aimed at the usefulness of research (even instrumentalization). How can one maintain the dual objective of professionalisation and emancipation? Our team makes the assumption that the connection between professional knowledge and academic knowledge will be reinforced and confirms the need to pursue the project to maintain the connection between the three areas of work, training, and research, in a context where the boundaries of time and space are blurred. There is also an apparent need for more in-depth work on the ethical dimensions of research and support.

In this perspective, our main objectives stay the same: to help adult learners gain a better understanding of the world (the ability to analyse complex and changing situations); to help them choose how to transform work, their own 'agency', and the conditions of personal and professional activity (ethical dimensions); to analyse the processes by which researchers,

policy actors, and professionals learn and grow simultaneously. But the lessons of the recent health crisis show us that these ideals are becoming increasingly difficult to uphold, so much so that our learners, their study, living and working conditions, and even their expectations have changed. This leads us to reconsider our initial 'training-action-research' model, inspired by the researchers who preceded us, who sought to make it possible to organize the production of knowledge, its transmission, and its application in professional fields (Barbier, 1996; Brémaud, 2011; Pineau, 2012). From now on, we are taking a closer look at design-based research (Sanchez & Monod-Ansaldi, 2015), because it formalises researcher-practitioner relations around the idea that this collaboration involves the sharing of a praxeology, meaning the development of a common discourse on practice. One of the avenues to be explored also leads us to the paradigm of 'participatory action-research' which involves producing knowledge in collaboration—and not 'in the name of'—and also promoting the need to consider the diversity of knowledge of the people who participate in the research process, as well as the ownership of the knowledge produced during this process (Heron & Reason, 2008; Yorks, 2005). Finally, these new paths would probably also enable us to return closer to an 'emancipatory learning' tradition, where the role of knowledge is not simply to make learners and the actors involved more autonomous in their ability to take action from an instrumental and situational perspective, but to help them become more autonomous from an epistemological point of view (Engeström & Sannino, 2013; Joffredo-Le Brun et al., 2018).

Given their barely tangible nature, analysing the multi-referential dimensions of the experience of the crisis and the undergoing transformations is far from easy. At least three reasons may help to explain this. The first relates to the scope of the three fields jointly analysed: the field of work and organisations (here in professions related to training which are observed notably through the work-study programme that we manage), the field of adult education and the support programmes proposed (here our Master's programme), and the field of research in education and vocational training (in connection with analyses in this field, with professions and with continuing education practices).

Second, from a theoretical point of view, there is an increasing need, in all probability, for a multidisciplinary approach to the concept of transformation in relation to different units of analysis, from different epistemological points of view (the analysis frameworks are drawn from the fields of adult education, psychosociology, sociology and economics, among others). Third, there is a need for a methodological approach that considers the experience in both the short and long term and relies as much on documentary exploration, on the observation of the ongoing experience, particularly through exploration and analysis of the spoken word during meetings with professionals, while in class with students, and during commissions seeking to improve the skills of the educational team. From this point of view, the time spent analysing practices with students and the reflective writings that they produce are fundamental resources for research and action, but we cannot do without, from now on, finding praxeological tools to also examine longer-term transformations, from the profound changes that the labour market is experiencing to the increasingly recomposed paths of our own students, before their resumption of study, during their master's years at university, and the way in which they are equipped to face future changes, crises and 'recompositions'.

This clearly shows the importance of paying more attention to methodological and practical issues, right from the research and design phases of training projects. In our view, a transformative and collaborative approach presupposes that researchers and actors are aware of these issues, are capable of epistemological vigilance, and are conscious of the highly disparaged shortcomings of action research, where research adopts an ill-defined position and is content simply to produce knowledge that goes no further than the instrumental field. It also implies considering research results when designing projects and acknowledging that any research project that focuses on adult learning must succeed in going beyond an undeniably reductive socio-technical application and take into account the relationship between research and decision-making. It is also why, in these times of ever-renewed crises, epistemological and praxeological issues, as well as ethical and political ones, must continue to be constantly reconsidered.

References

- Anderson, T., & Shattuck, J. (2012). Design-based research: A decade of progress in education research? *Educational researcher*, 41(1), 16–25.
- Ardoino, J., & Barbier, R. (Dir.). (1993). L'approche multiréférentielle en formation et en sciences de l'éducation, *Pratiques de formation/Analyses*, 25–26.
- Barbier, R. (1996). *La recherche action*. Anthropos.
- Bertrand, E. (2007). *L'expérience formatrice à La Poste: Vers une dialogique entre autoformation émancipatrice et coformation instrumentale*. Thèse de Doctorat en Sciences de l'Éducation. Université Paris 8.
- Bertrand, E., Denoyel, N., & Parlier, M. (Eds.). (2014). Formation expérientielle et intelligence en action. Construire l'expérience. *Éducation permanente*, 198.
- Brémaud, L. (2011). Vers quelles recompositions de 'l'archipel de l'ingénierie de la formation'? *TransFormations-Recherche en Education et Formation des Adultes*, 5.
- Brookfield, S. D. (2005). *The Power of critical theory. Liberating adult learning and teaching*. Jossey-Bass.
- Charlier, B. (2005). Parcours de recherche-action-formation. *Revue des sciences de l'éducation*, 31(2), 259–272.
- Donaldson, J. F. (2009). Fostering transformative learning in leadership development. In J. Mezirow, E. W. Taylor, & Associates (Eds.). *Transformative learning in practice. Insights from community, workplace and higher education*. Jossey-Bass.
- Eneau, J. (2005). *La part d'autrui dans la formation de soi. Autonomie, autoformation et réciprocité en contexte organisationnel*. L'Harmattan.
- Eneau, J., Bertrand, E., & Lameul, G. (2012). Se former et se transformer: perspective critique et formation universitaire aux métiers de la formation. *Revue internationale de pédagogie de l'enseignement supérieur*, 28(1) [online: <http://ripes.revues.org/585>].
- Eneau, J., Lameul, G., & Bertrand, E. (2014). Place du stage et rapport au stage en formation universitaire: ce que nous disent les documents réflexifs d'accompagnement à la professionnalisation. *Éducation & Socialisation – Les Cahiers du CERFEE*, 35 [online: <http://edso.revues.org/689>].

- Engeström, Y., & Sannino, A. (2013). La volition et l'agentivité transformatrice: Perspective théorique de l'activité. *Revue internationale du CRIRES: innover dans la tradition de Vygotsky*, 1(1), 4–19.
- Figari, G. (1994). *Évaluer: quel référentiel?* De Boeck.
- Freire, P. (1996/2006). *Pédagogie de l'autonomie. Savoirs nécessaires à la pratique pédagogique* (1st édition: *Pedagogia da Autonomia: Saberes necessários à prática Educativa*, 1996). Érés.
- Habermas, J. (1987). Théorie de l'agir communicationnel. Rationalité de l'agir et rationalisation de la société. Tome 1. Fayard.
- Heron, J., & Reason, P. (2008). Extending epistemology within a co-operative inquiry. *The Sage handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*, 2, 366–380.
- Joffredo-Le Brun, S., Morellato, M., Sensevy, G., & Quilio, S. (2018). Cooperative engineering as a joint action. *European Educational Research Journal*, 17(1), 187–208.
- Jorro, A. (2009). La construction de l'éthos professionnel en formation alternée. *Travail et apprentissages*, 3(1), 13–25.
- Mezirow, J. (1991/2001). *Penser son expérience. Une voie vers l'autoformation* (1st édition; *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*). *Chronique sociale*.
- Mezirow, J., & Taylor, E. W. (2009). *Transformative Learning in Practice. Insights from Community, Workplace and Higher Education*. Jossey-Bass.
- Pineau, G. (2012). *Histoire de vie et formation de soi au cours de l'existence. Sociétés*, 118, 39–47.
- Sanchez, E., & Monod-Ansaldi, R. (2015). Recherche collaborative orientée par la conception. Un paradigme méthodologique pour prendre en compte la complexité des situations d'enseignement-apprentissage. *Éducation et didactique*, 9(2), 73–94.
- Yorks, L. (2005). Adult learning and the generation of new knowledge and meaning: Creating liberating spaces for fostering adult learning through practitioner-based collaborative action inquiry. *Teachers College Record*, 107(6), 1217–1244.

Chapter 8

Ana Cristina D. Lopes & Maria Natália P. Ramos

Educational and cultural challenges: Digital technologies in higher education

Introduction

Humanity has evolved over the last few years into a multicultural society where we all have gone through a process of acculturation, if not as active participants, at least as spectators. Technologies brought to us (new) cultural realities that exists in varied places in the world and facilitated the contact between cultures. As digital technologies became part of people's daily lives, and, in particular, of student's life, it was more than expected that they would become part of education. There so, the inclusion of digital technologies in education was an arising need, leveraged with the real possibility of adverse situations, such as the pandemic, but that can also be extended to any other, such as a war scenario. Its importance goes beyond the need for intercultural communication and integration. The introduction of technologies allows greater cross-cutting accessibility to education for students around the world, regardless of the level of development of their own country. As long as students can have access to a computer with a camera and microphone connected to a reliable internet

connection, they can attend an e-learning course in another country (Byram, 1997; Ramos, 2011, 2016; Williamson et al., 2020).

In Portugal, over the last three and a half decades, the traditional classroom teaching has coexisted with a different method of teaching, the model adopted by the Universidade Aberta. The model of Universidade Aberta has evolved through the years and is nowadays mainly an asynchronous and collaborative model that promotes interaction based on the Anderson's 'Equivalence Theorem' (2002) (Pereira et al., 2012, p. 3017) that defines three pillars of interaction: between student-teacher; between student-student; and between student-content. Nevertheless, the model of Universidade Aberta is much more complex as it has a high focus on the students (promoting an active learning), allowing flexibility (students can learn when and where they want, without no time or geographical restrictions) and favouring digital inclusion once it stells in digital technologies. Also, Universidade Aberta is more than just an e-learning higher education institution, as it provides three dimensions: open (open resources and educational practices), on distance and online learning. It is important to highlight that the absence of presence is not synonym of lack of proximity. Even within a non-presential teaching approach, it is possible to ensure proximity through dynamic activities, debates on chats in among others (Mendes et al., 2018; Pereira et al., n/d).

This brief explanation on the methodology implemented in Universidade Aberta allows us to understand that there is a huge difference between Universidade Aberta methodology approach and what has been implemented during the confinement, designated as 'emergency remote teaching'.

Despite the advantages that online learning and the use of digital technologies can provide, the intend of this article is not to transform face-to-face teaching into distance learning, we believe that face-to-face learning in higher education is essential for most of the students.

Nevertheless, it is indispensable to emphasize the importance of incorporating a technological evolution in traditional teaching and also re-think global education. There are still students currently unable to follow face-to-face teaching, due to personal, organizational, professional, or

cultural limitations, and is important to integrate them in higher education avoiding marginalization.

In this debate it is also important to keep in mind that the pedagogical model implemented must take advantage of the information society and the global knowledge in which we live. Also, it should be valued by solidifying the relations between knowledge and society, allowing social integration, and favouring the establishment of intercultural relations, as well as an open, inclusive, digital, and networked education (Aires, 2007; Dias, 2013; Ramos, 2007, 2008, 2016; Ramos & Lopes, 2021b).

Digital Technology in Higher Education

Through the last decade, there has been an increasing preoccupation of the European Commission in including a more digital approach in teaching (Mendes, 2010; Ramos, 2016). Introducing technology has the aim of improving teaching, but naturally this can only be achieved if there exists a previous preparation, in terms of resources and in terms of training. This highlights the importance of training sessions, that according to Vidal and Mercado (2020), should start on initial training and be continuous throughout the teaching career.

With the aim to integrate technology in teaching, Koehler and Mishra (2005) developed a model named TPACK – Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge. This model integrates content knowledge, with technological knowledge and pedagogical model. Naturally, in order to introduce any innovation, it is necessary to overcome teachers' resistance. Torres and Brocado (n/d) defined a five stage model that should be followed in the process of training. First, there is a need of recognition, followed by acceptance, adaptation, exploration, and advanced. By recognizing the importance, future application is enhanced.

This is one of the aspects that was positive due to 'emergency remote teaching'. Despite all the aspects that did not evolve as they should, it became clear that technology was essential and could allow teaching despite advance

circumstances. There so, we now have an opportunity to discuss potential new approaches, more active, more inclusive supported by technology. One important aspect is that technology individually does not contribute to the improving of teaching, it is the correct use of technology that can innovate and contribute to deepening learning and improving teaching.

In a global society, such as the one we live today, when the number of students from different nationalities in higher education is increasing, the need for training also extends to intercultural and communication competences. For a teacher, having intercultural and communication competences means being able to accept diversity and adapt activities ensuring the understanding of the message. A knowledge of this areas contributes to break down barriers while improving an approach of proximity that increases social cohesion and a positive integration (Oliveira, 2021; Purnell & Palanka, 2010).

Methods

The present research was carried out through a mixed method approach, with a qualitative initial phase followed by a quantitative phase.

Study Phases and Data Collection

Qualitative Phase

The qualitative data was collected through in-depth interviews conducted between July and December 2021, and the subjects were higher education teachers. All the interviews to teachers were held via Zoom in the aim of a doctoral research.

The teachers were asked to identify the main difficulties experienced at the level of the 1st cycle of higher education.

The collected qualitative data was analysed using content analysis (Bardin 2014). Throughout the analysis, defined codes/ categories, and dimensions were compared.

Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase was collected through an online survey between November 2021 and February 2022, and the subjects were degree students, in at least their second year in higher education.

The instrument used in collecting the data was an anonymous online questionnaire, to allow responses from different locations, as long as they attend Higher Education in Portugal.

The students were invited to: identify the implemented changes during the confinement due to the COVID-19 pandemic; evaluate the measures adopted for cultural inclusion; share their own expectations regarding their life in the university. It is important to remember that traditional academic experiences were cancelled or reduced to minimum and instead students lived a conditioned reality at a social, relational, and academic level.

Collected data was object of descriptive, multivariate, and inference statistical analysis, using the support of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Characterization / Data Sample

Qualitative Phase

The answers of 24 teachers were recorded. For this study, teachers from Universities and Polytechnic Institutes from the North to the South of the country and from different areas of knowledge were invited to participate.

As can be seen in next figure, the characterization of teachers was very diverse:

| | North | Centre | Great Lisbon | South | Universidade Aberta |
|----------------------------|----------|----------|--------------|----------|---------------------|
| One year experience | - | - | 1 | - | - |
| 1 to 5 years of experience | - | - | - | - | 2 |
| Over 5 years of experience | 3 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 10 |
| Total | 3 | 2 | 5 | 2 | 12 |

Figure 1 – Qualitative data sample

In particular, the teachers interviewed were from the following institutions: University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro (UTAD), Polytechnic Institute of Viseu (IPV), University of Minho, University of Beira Interior (UBI), University of Coimbra (UC), Polytechnic Institute of Lisbon (IPL), NOVA University Lisbon, Piaget Institute, Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre (IPP), University of Algarve (UAlg), and Universidade Aberta (UAb).

Quantitative Phase

In addition to the contacts established regarding the qualitative phase, there has also been established contacts with other institutions, such as: Polytechnic Institute of Castelo Branco, Polytechnic Institute of Setúbal and University of Évora to collect their students' opinions. Aside the collected answers by institutional means, responses were also collected from students who shared the link of the online questionnaire in their network of friends. In total, 322 validated responses were collected from degree students in their second year at higher education, characterized as followed in the following figures:

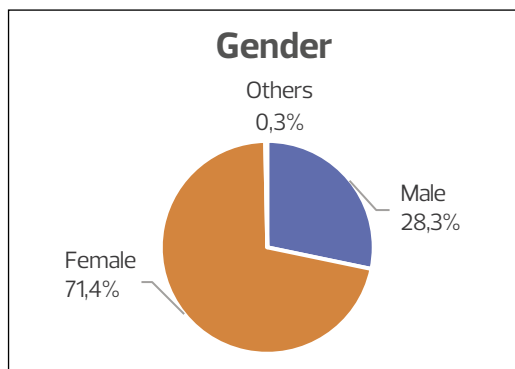


Figure 2 – Gender characterization of the students

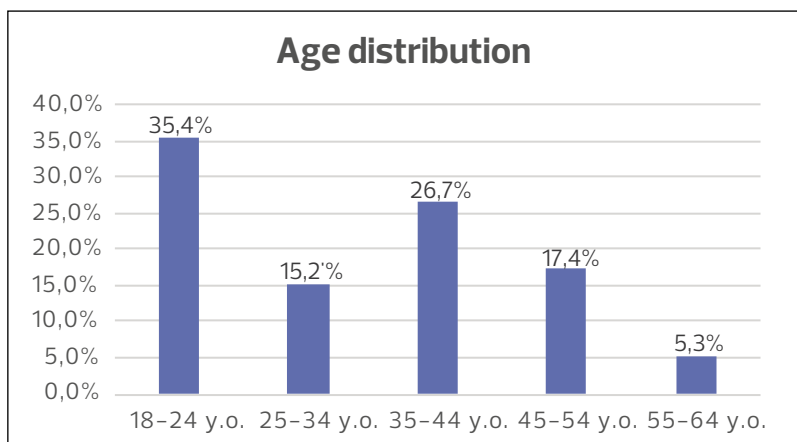


Figure 3 – Age distribution of the students

In this group, there was a subsample of students that attend Universidade Aberta (e-learning) and students that study in a traditional regime: face-to-face learning.

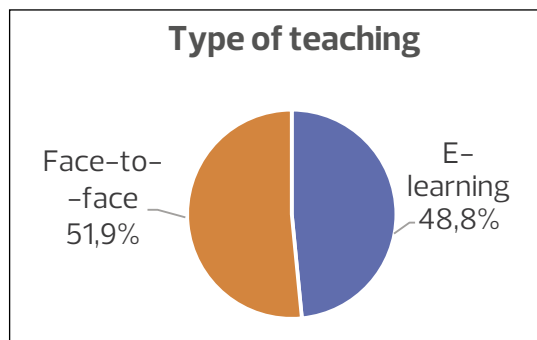


Figure 4 – Type of teaching

As one of the aims of the study was to understand the impact of technologies, in higher education, to overcome several difficulties with the focus on intercultural integration, by identifying whether there are differences in attitudes among the surveyed population, it was important to ensure both sub samples representativity as showed in Figure 4.

As the social condition of the students and their personal life impacts in the willingness to study was also important to characterize the type of student interviewed (Figure 5).

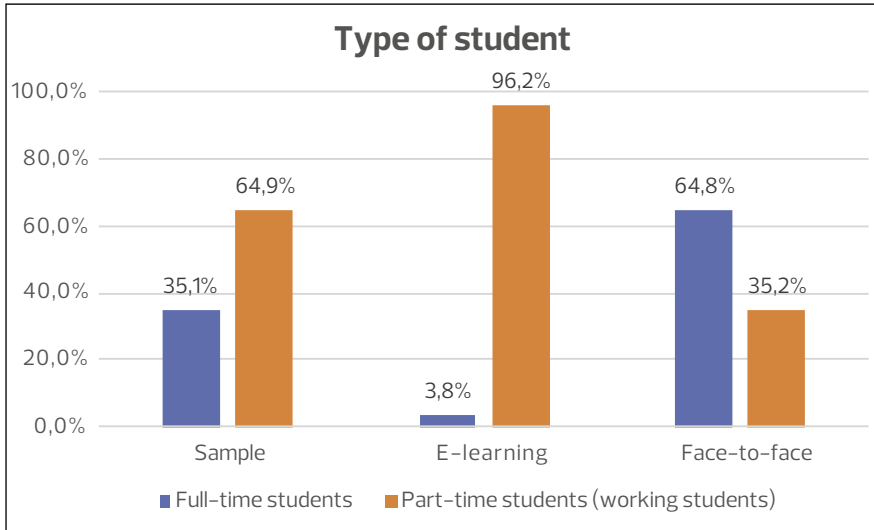


Figure 5 – Type of student

Results

The study revealed a very broad set of results, both in the qualitative and quantitative phase. Only some of the aspects will be addressed in this article, focusing the perspective of the changes imposed and their impact. With this aim, at the level of the students, the results were separated by type of teaching: classroom vs. e-learning and by the type of student: full-time student vs. part-time student.

The first objective of this study was to identify the respondents' relation to technology.

Teachers' Relation with Technology

When asked about relation with technologies most of the teachers assumed to use it daily, and all said they were used to include PowerPoint presentations in their routines. Also, some referred they already used more dynamic

approaches, nevertheless, the classroom teachers had to make some adjustments in their methodology's approaches during the confinement, supported by departments or directly with the help of other teachers.

Regardless of whether they were used or not to include digital technology, some teachers stated that the obligation of maintaining an online life, which meant they've had to do everything online, caused psychological impacts, such as anxiety, because they did not feel prepared for this unexpected and imposed change. The negatives impacts had been overcome with some difficulties, with the help of their support network.

This raises the veil on the importance of constant training of teachers, so that teachers are always up-to-date and prepared to support any eventuality. This aspect will be detailed on the results discussion. If teachers had, in the past, frequent training sessions on digital technologies or in digital approaches, they would have been more prepared to overcome the imposed transformation that occurred in Higher Education.

Students' Relation with Technology

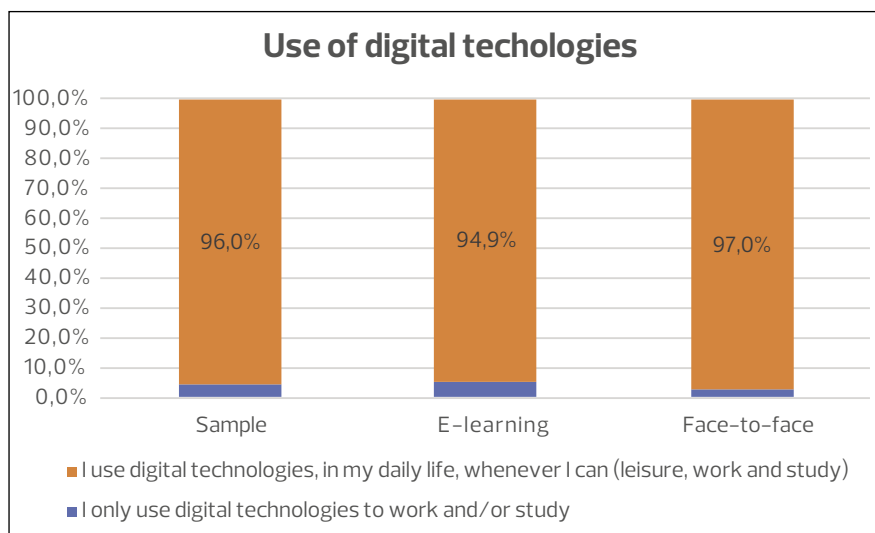


Figure 6 – Use of digital technologies

Around 96% of the interviewed students use digital technologies, in their daily life, whenever they can (leisure, work and study), as observed in Figure 6. This is an expected result as we observe that everybody is always connected worldwide, showing an evident necessity for interaction on social media, or on searching for daily updates.

When students were asked about the difficulties that they have felt and would like to see overcome, the aspect more highlighted was that they need training on 'how to research in repositories, meaning, on how to conduct credible bibliographic research', aspect referred by 11% of the student's sample (Figure 7).

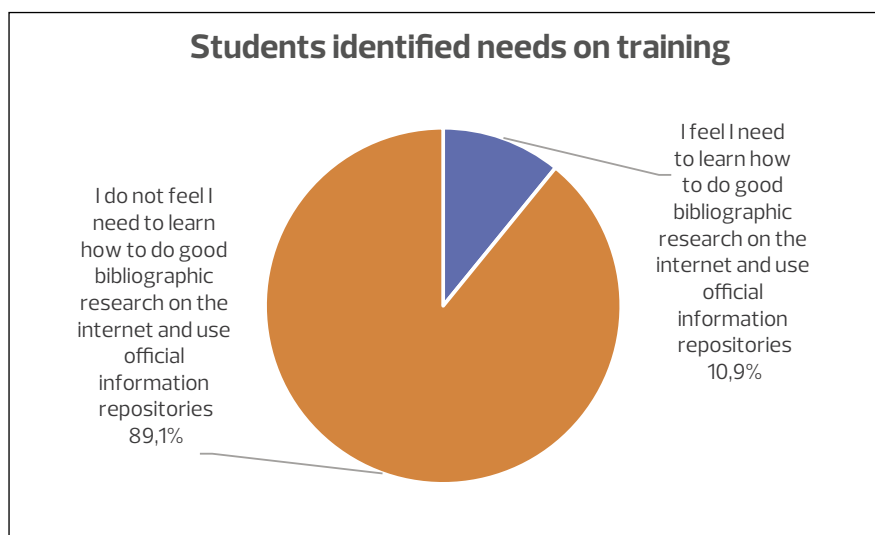


Figure 7 – Evaluation of the necessity of training to learn how to do bibliographic research

Regardless of all the difficulties, as showed in Figure 8, the balance resulting from the inclusion of technologies was positive, according to the evaluation of the students of face-to-face teaching, who were the students most affected by this new reality. In this case, for the two compared groups of respondents, a significant different was recorded from a statistical point

of view ($p\text{-value}^4 < 0,05$). The obtained results showed that the respondents who were part-time students considered that the inclusion of digital technologies helped them improve their academic performance.

This question, as it is, was not done to e-learning students, as they already attended distance learning—already based on digital technologies. To those students the changes implemented were minimum, only final evaluation happened online.

It is also considered by the face-to-face students that digital technologies contribute positively to a more integrative and equitable teaching due (Figure 8). Also in this case, for the two compared groups of respondents, a significant different was recorded from a statistical point of view ($p\text{-value} < 0,05$). The obtained results showed part-time students agreed more with this aspect.

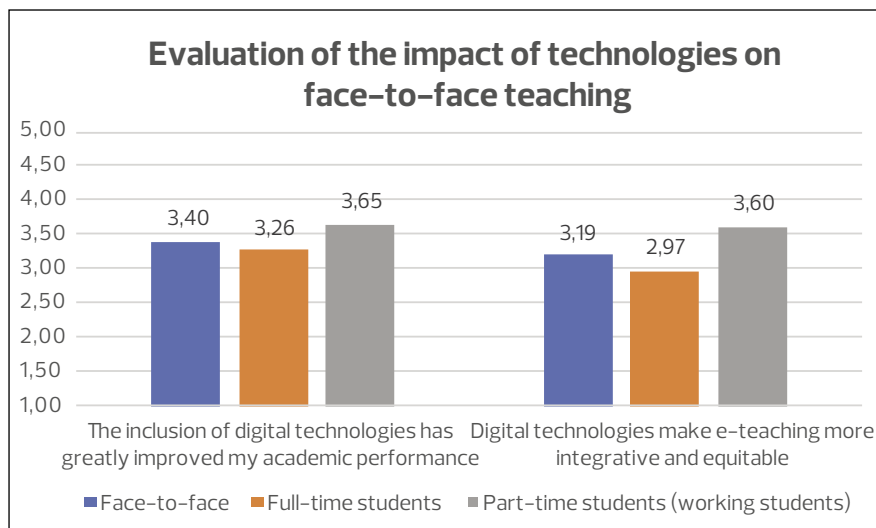


Figure 8 – Evaluation of the impact of technologies on face-to-face teaching

4 The p-value is the probability of obtaining the observed results of a test, assuming that the null hypothesis is correct.

Teacher's Training

The second objective of the research was to identify the teachers needs on training, considering the point of view of teachers (qualitative phase) and the students (quantitative phase).

When the teachers were asked about what they thought there were their needs of training (in the qualitative phase), the tendency of response was that they did not need additional training. After exploring this aspect, it was possible to understand that most of the teachers did not have regular formal training. Also, almost none have had training in technological literacy or in aspects related to cultural integration; nevertheless, regarding inclusion of foreign students, they have been introducing some strategies with their students to avoid marginalization independently from the cultural or social origin of the students.

Due to the importance of this aspect, this same theme has been aborded on the quantitative phase, in order to understand the point of view of the students.

To deepen this theme, we began by asking the students about visible impact of teachers' actions on the student's integration. Questioned about this aspect, the students answered, using a scale from 1 to 5, in which 1 means 'I don't agree at all' and 5 'totally agree', that on average 4,4 recognize this importance. The average was slightly higher in the case of distance learning students, although the difference in between the perception of both group of students (e-learning and face-to-face) was not statistically significant ($p\text{-value} > 0,05$).

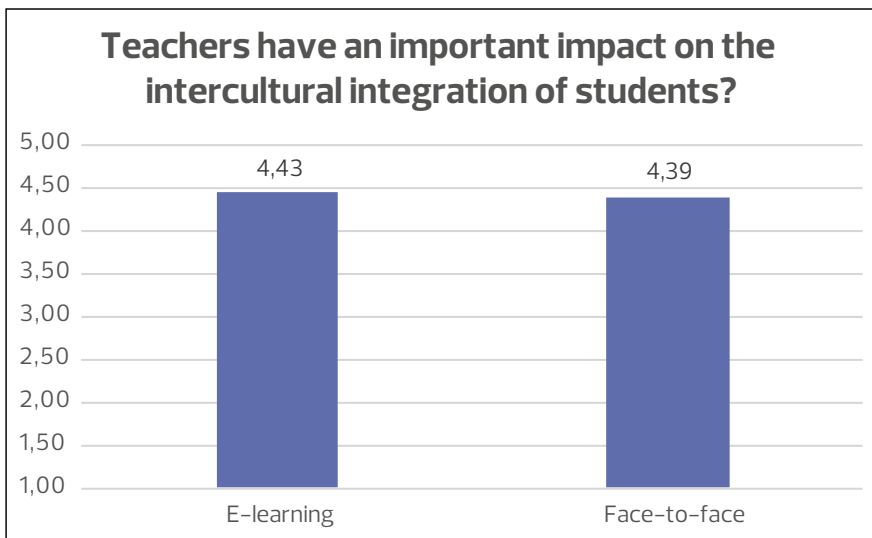


Figure 9 – Accordance with the sentence that: 'teachers impact on students' intercultural integration'

Next, the need for additional training has been evaluated. In detail, the students were asked to analyse teachers needs of training, using a scale from 1 to 5, in which 1 means 'I don't agree at all' and 5 'totally agree'. The average obtained in this question was not so high, but it was still visible as a necessary improvement (Figure 10).

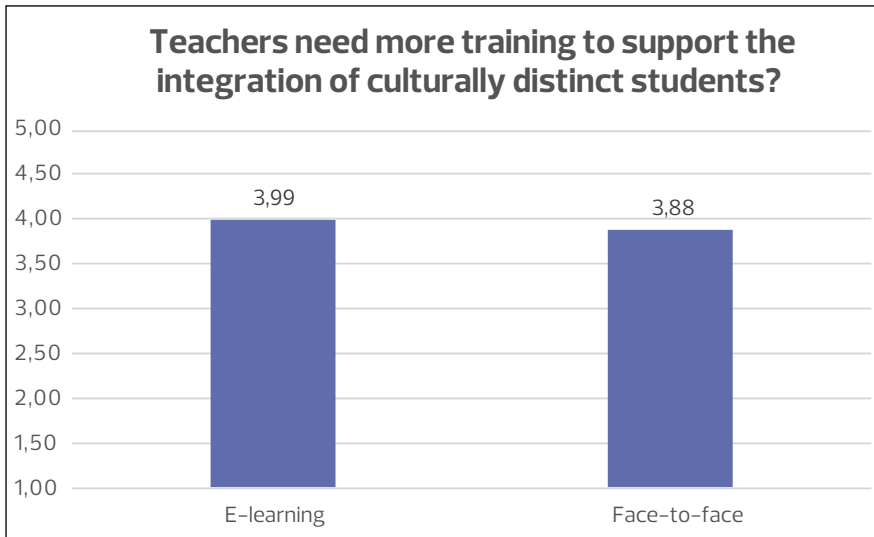


Figure 10 – Accordance with the sentence that: 'teachers need more training to support the cultural integration of the students'

Comparing the 'need of training' with the 'importance of training', it is noticed that the average is slightly lower on the need (Figure 10) regarding the importance (Figure 9), meaning that the students possibly recognized the integration actions of the teachers, but the need for training is still evident.

Post-pandemic Education

The third and last objective was to identify possible changes in the future approaches in order to improve education, regarding face-to-face students' expectations.

When questioned about what they (the students) would like to see changed (quantitative phase), some aspects were highlighted. It was clear (as shown in Figure 11) that there was a significant difference in the expectations of full-time students vs. working students. The first group desired a more integrative and personal experience, in contradiction to the

working students that value the improvement of 'free time' they gain due to the implementation of technologies in education. Avoiding having to travel to higher education institutions, students gain time they could use to study, or to rest or to be with their family and friends.

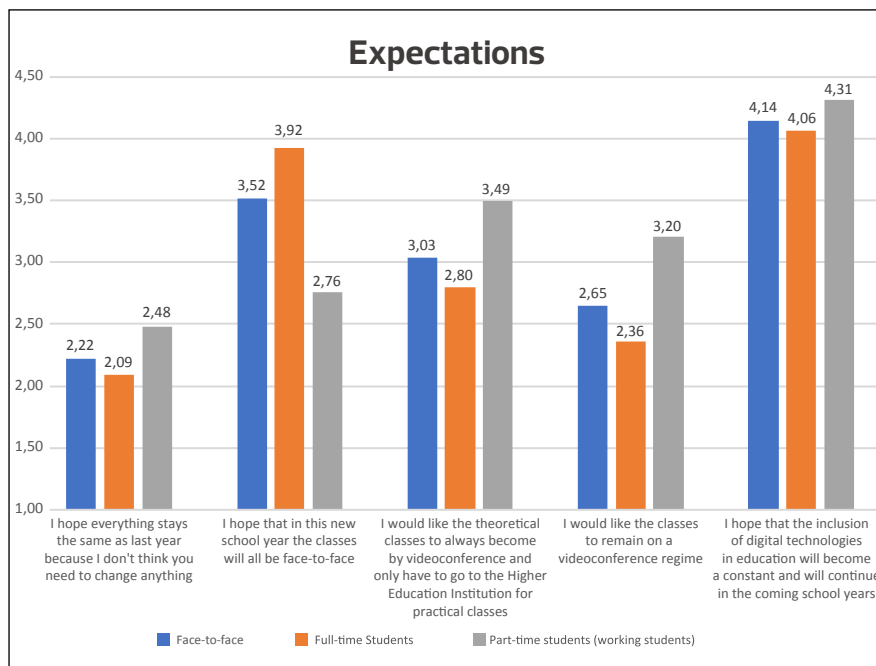


Figure 11 – Students expectations/desire changes

In concrete, face-to-face students agreed on the necessity of being implemented changes. Particularly full-time students wanted to return to a total face-to-face regime, with a significant difference from a statistical point of view (p -value $<0,05$) to the part-time students' opinion that do not manifest it so explicitly. Regarding the intention of maintaining videoconference classes, there was some students that agreed on the hypothesis of having theoretical classes on this regime. Independently on the differences observed in both groups, all believed and agreed on the importance of including technologies as a resource to improve learning.

Discussion of the Results

Technology Impact on Higher Education

Most of the students used technology in their daily life, and so, it has not been noticed difficulties in the use of technologies, fact confirmed by the teacher's that referred that most of the students did not have any type of difficulty in the adaptation to a more technologic relation. Naturally, this issue was addressed mainly to face-to-face students, as they were the most affected with this change. Despite this fact, there were a few students attending Universidade Aberta that stated they have felt some anxiety on final evaluation days due to some fear of losing the internet connection during the exams.

Regarding face-to-face students, some issues have been highlighted by the teachers on how they evaluated the student's integration during 'emergency remote teaching'.

The first point indicated was the fact that the students that normally use technology, did not necessarily have the necessary conditions to follow a virtual class (computer with a camera and microphone connected to a reliable internet connection), as some of them used the available computers at the institute to study or do their works during the semester. There so, became clear that there were many cases of students who did not have a computer at home, or that the computer did not have a camera or microphone, which conditioned their access to virtual classes. The access to a stable internet connection was also a challenge, and another difficult, shared also by some teachers that did not have a reliable internet connection at their homes. This aspect was even more noticeable in families, specially the most vulnerable who did not have financial capability to have a stable internet contract. This conditioned was not exclusive from Portuguese reality and has also been highlighted in other countries (Gonzalez et al., 2020).

In addition, the fact that the whole family was confined to the same space, showed the lack of conditions in some households, impacting the

level of concentration that attending a class requires, highlighting again the marginalization of the most vulnerable groups that already are the ones that need more support to maintain their student path.

The teachers also referred that some of the non-Portuguese students that lived and studied in Portugal, and that already live on precarious conditions, felt deeply these impacts which committed their performance during evaluation.

From the previous analysis it became clear that the pandemic situation revealed the most unprotected students and allowed us to identify the greatness of cases of students who need support to continue their studies.

Here, and once again the educational community was tireless, joining forces to share second-hand material (such as computers, cameras, among other means) with the most disadvantaged students. There were teachers who stated that in addition to material donations, there were also people who donated money to acquire new computers/cameras to equip students, allowing them to continue studying, avoiding their marginalization.

Aside vulnerability issues already stated, there are also some other aspects that need to be overcome before technology becomes an aspect of full success and integration of all students. The following aspects are transversal even to more mature students that already chose an e-learning model. There so, it is also important to highlight that some students, despite having regular access to the internet and use it as a research source, do not use it correctly. The majority of the students don't know how to use reliable sources and need training on research in open-source resources such as universities repositories or in credible scientific publications (Figure 7). This lack of knowledge is reflected in the work received from students in which sometimes they just copy and paste any information collected, without verifying the source or its scientific validity.

To overcome these difficulties the documentation services at Universidade Aberta provide regular training on this theme, training that remains relevant either by the point of view of teachers and students, and that continue to be necessary to overcome the manifested difficulties This

is an aspect that should be transversally implemented in all higher education institutions.

Moreover, and in a more practical way, the fact that the students normally use social networks does not necessarily give them the knowledge they need to attend online teaching. For example, some students revealed performance difficulties of an online final evaluation test, not due to the content but due to the application. These difficulties impact negatively on their evaluation score.

However, and despite the highlighted difficulties, teachers observed that the students were pleased with the inclusion of technology, even though a small group of the older students, who entered higher education at a later stage of their life, and who were not so familiar with technologies, have had some difficulties that either themselves or the colleagues help overcome.

Psychological Impact

Full-time students had joined the higher education with more expectations regarding social activities. This group is normally younger students that need more support from their network, obtained due to presential attendance to classes by socializing with their peers. They are always connected online, even outside their home, but when forced to stay at home they felt more anxious, and so it was possible that in a certain way, they started to associate technologies to less personal support. This association may have reduced their enthusiasm to a more technological teaching, in opposition to part-time students that revealed positive impact on this measure and believe that technology improves inclusion and contributes to a more integrative education (Figure 8). Thus, in negative terms of the impacts that occurred, and in line with what was observed in other realities than the Portuguese one, it is necessary to highlight the stress, anxiety, and psychological exhaustion that social isolation has created (APA, 2020; WHO, 2020).

Systematizing, anxiety affected teachers, because in some cases they could not guarantee the necessary conditions to teach classes, and because they observed in first-hand the students lack conditions and the negative

impact on their academic performance. Also affected students who in many cases had no conditions in their homes, nor technological, nor for the necessary concentration to attend classes (Ramos & Lopes, 2021b).

In addition, it should be noted that, and in a very curious way, and because the students are constantly connected through the internet, they seem to feel demotivated, anxious, and less integrated in the group when they were prevented from leaving their houses and just contact their network friends through the internet. Some of the students felt they have less support as they could not talk in person with the colleagues. Naturally, this affected more people that were already shy and with more difficulties of integration. Also, non-national students, that return to their homes in a foreign country, were also more affected as they did not attend the regular integration activities provided by the higher education institutes or sometimes were in a time zone that prevented them to even attend virtual classes. Nevertheless, it is also important to refer that integration activities were not yet universal, and the measures implemented were very different among the universities, also stressing that some universities do not implement any inclusion measures.

Substantialising, feeling lack of support is one of the factors that correlates strongly with the experience of anxiety in students, and this support in the traditional students is related to physical presence on classes, and presential contact with teachers and other students (Irawan et al., 2020; Thompson et al. 2016; Salman et al., 2020).

How did the students overcome the negative impact?

Increasing the incidence in social media was one of the ways to overcome the symptoms of anxiety and stress (Al-Tammemi et al., 2020; Weiss & Murdoch, 2020). Nevertheless, some teachers stated, during their interviews, that some psychological support to overcome the negative symptoms of their students was provided by themselves or the universities. According to Garfin this was an essential strategy to avoid the burnout of the students (Garfin et al., 2020).

The Importance of Teacher Training

The (un)success of teaching is based on three aspects: the student, the social environment, and the school institution. Based on the established relationship among teacher and student, implying that learning should go beyond the predefined contents (Ramos & Lopes 2021b; Silva, 2010).

Considering these facts, it is important that the teachers keep evolving and keep updating their knowledges as this is fundamental not only for the success of the students, but also for their integration and evolution as human beings.

This need is not exclusive of a pedagogical model, it is a necessity of all teachers regardless the type of teaching. Update skills, both technological and cultural is indispensable in today's global society (Ramos & Lopes 2021b; Sales, 2018).

Post-pandemic Education

It is not simple to think about the world, about the education after the pandemic, as it is not yet overcome. Nevertheless, life goes on, as is communally said, so the education evolved even though many of the aspects are now exactly as they were before the pandemic crisis.

Despite this fact, what has really changed?

The classrooms were equipped with systems to allow the students to attend virtual classes, and according to one of the teacher's testimonies, there are still some universities that divided the classes in a b-learning model, allowing the students to stay at home in some specific cases. Also, there was still a possibility of a student to attend a class from home when is sick. The number of courses e-learning or b-learning has also increased, aside the ones provided by Universidade Aberta.

Several conferences are still occurring online, or at least in a mixed way, online and presential, allowing a more varied access to students and a more frequent interaction with teachers from other countries.

All these aspects are positive and allow integration, equality, and knowledge improvement and have a positive impact on education. Probably this is not yet enough, and this topic needs to be on the teachers' agendas. There has been a huge investment in technology that needs to be monetized, not only for the financial impact, but because the global and current uncertainty exists and universities need to be prepared for any eventuality.

Limitations

Although this study provides some answers to several questions regarding the comparison of e-learning with face-to-face learning, it has some limitations. The Great Lisbon students' sample is substantially higher than in the rest of the country, when we know that the reality is very different among regions, especially in the interior of the country. Starting with these results is important to conduct another research focusing on specific aspects that need to be more detailed, conducted with institutional support to be able to be distributed proportionally throughout the country.

Conclusion

We live in a global world, facing a migratory crisis. There is a need to adapt and develop strategies, competences, and policies to integrate multi/intercultural diversity while ensuring an equity in education for all genders, regardless of their age group, social and cultural backgrounds.

To improve education, it is important to identify substantial pillars based on the testimonies of teachers and students. This will allow us to understand what should be maintained and what needs to be changed to improve the quality of higher education and make it more equitable and egalitarian, both from an educational and intercultural point of view.

From what was observed in the results, it is important to evolve, define strategies that are adapted to all different targets of students and allow the inclusion not only cultural, but also social. Each university needs to analyse

these results according to its reality, as the difference between regions and local realities exists and is important.

As we have started by emphasizing, (un)success of teaching depends on the ability to integrate not only individual, social, and cultural diversity, but also adaptable to unforeseen, adverse, and atypical situations by taking advantage of the identified opportunities.

It became clear that there are still some aspects that do not generate consensus, and the outcome of its implementation depends on the social context and individual characteristics of the students. There so, it is fundamental to keep on discussing solutions to be implemented in the higher education institutions. Nevertheless, regular training for teachers, including content, pedagogical, and digital skills (as defined in TPACK) associated to intercultural and communication skills is imperative and fundamental, as the teachers are one of the pillars to promote open and inclusive education (Ramos, 2016; Ramos & Lopes, 2021a).

We live in a changing, open, digital, transnational society, where it is important to monitor and produce innovations, particularly in the context of education, which is fundamental to the evolution of society (Dias, 2013; Ramos & Lopes, 2021b; Sales, 2020).

Data availability

Due to the nature of the data, it is not possible to allow public availability in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). Specific access to some data can be evaluated according to the GDPR.

Informed consent

All the participants were adults (more than 18 years old) and gave permission for their data to be used in this study.

References

- Aires, L. (Coord.). (2007). *Comunidades virtuais de aprendizagem e identidades no ensino superior*. Universidade Aberta.
- Al-Tammemi, A. B., Akour, A., & Alfalah, L. (2020). *Is it Just About Physical Health? An Internet-Based Cross-Sectional Study Exploring the Psychological Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on University Students in Jordan Using Kessler Psychological Distress Scale*. MedRxiv. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.05.14.20102343>.
- American Psychological Association. (2020). *Pandemics*. APA.
- Bardin, L. (2014). *Análise de Conteúdo*. Edições 70.
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Multilingual Matters.
- Dias, P. (2013). Inovação pedagógica para a sustentabilidade da educação aberta e em rede. *Educação, Formação & Tecnologias*, 6(2), 4–14.
- Garfin, D. R., Silver, R. C., & Holman, E. A. (2020). The Novel Coronavirus (COVID-2019) Outbreak: Amplification of Public Health Consequences by Media Exposure. *Health Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/hea0000875>
- Gonzalez, D., Karpman, M., Kenney, G. M., & Zuckerman, S. (2020). *Hispanic Adults in Families with Noncitizens Disproportionately Feel the Economic Fallout from COVID-19*. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/102170/hispanic-adults-in-families-with-noncitizens-disproportionately-feel-the-economic-fallout-from-COVID-19_0.pdf.
- Irawan, A. W., Dwisona, D., & Lestari, M. (2020). No Title. *KONSELI: Journal Bimbingan Dan Konseling (E-Journal)*, 7(1), 53–60
- Koehler, M. J., & Mishra, P. (2005). What happens when teachers design educational technology? The development of technological pedagogical content knowledge. *Journal of educational computing research*, 32(2), 131–152.

- Mendes, J. R. (2010). *Museu de arte popular (MAP): Tecnologias de Informação e Comunicação (TIC)*. Instituto Politécnico de Tomar: Centro de e-learning.
https://ubibliorum.ubi.pt/bitstream/10400.6/705/1/MAP_JRMENDES.pdf
- Mendes, A., Bastos, G., Amante, L., Aires, L., & Cardoso, T. (2018). *Modelo Pedagógico Virtual Cenários de Desenvolvimento*. Universidade Aberta.
- Oliveira, R. C. (2021). *Indicadores de Integração de Imigrantes*. Relatório estatístico anual 2021 da Coleção Imigração em Números. Observatório das Migrações.
- Pereira, A., Quintas-Mendes, A., & Morgado, L. (2012). Educação On-line no Ensino Superior: um programa de doutoramento em educação a distância e e-learning na Universidade Aberta (Portugal), *Revista Teias*, 13(30), 313–333.
- Pereira, A., Mendes, A., Morgado, L., Amante, L., & Bidarra, J. (n/d). *Modelo Pedagógica Virtual da Universidade Aberta para uma Universidade de Futuro*. Universidade Aberta.
- Purnell, L. D., & Paulanka, B. J. (2010). *Cuidados de saúde transculturais: Uma abordagem culturalmente competente*. Lusociência.
- Ramos, N. (2007). Sociedades multiculturais, interculturalidade e educação. Desafios pedagógicos, comunicacionais e políticos. *Revista Portuguesa de Pedagogia*, 41(3), 223–244.
- Ramos, N. (Coord.). (2008). *Educação, Interculturalidade e Cidadania*. Milena Press.
- Ramos, N. (2011). Educar para a interculturalidade e cidadania: Princípios e desafios. L. Alcoforado et al. (Org.), *Educação e Formação de Adultos. Políticas, Práticas e Investigação*. Ed. da Universidade de Coimbra, 189–200.
- Ramos, N. (2016). Tecnologias digitais de informação e comunicação, interculturalidade e formação docente. EDAPECI, *Revista de Educação a Distância, Práticas Educativas, Comunicacionais e Interculturais*. Aracaju, UFS, 16(1), 9–30.

- Ramos, N., & Lopes, A. (2021a). Desafios da Educação a distância em tempos de pandemia. In Oliveira, A.; Schütz, J. and Amaral, M. (Eds.) *Vozes da Educação*. Editora Ilustração, 117–138.
- Ramos, N., & Lopes, A. (2021b). Tecnologias digitais na comunicação e na integração educacional e intercultural. In Pina, H.; Remoaldo, P. and Ramos, C. (Eds.) *The Overarching Issues of the European Space*. Univ. do Porto: Faculdade de Letras & Milena Press.
- Sales, J. (2020). Ensino a distância e Semi-presencial. IN: G4 (coord.). *Ciclo de 3 Simpósios sobre o Ensino Superior Presencial vs. Semi-Presencial e a Distância*, Angola, UAb.
- Sales, M. V. S. (2018). As tecnologias no contexto educativo: perspectivas de inovação e de transformação. In Sales, M. V. S. (Org.), *Tecnologias e Educação a Distância: os desafios para formação*. Eduneb, 79–102.
- Salman, M., Asif, N., Mustafa, Z. U., Khan, T. M., Shehzadi, N., Hussain, K., Tahir, H., Raza, M. H., & Khan, M. T. (2020). *Psychological Impact of COVID-19 on Pakistani University Students and How They Are Coping*. MedRxiv. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.05.21.20108647>.
- Silva, S. (2011). Itinerários de Aprendizagem Colaborativa Cooperativa. *Contexto Online*. Lisboa: Universidade Aberta.
- Thompson, G., McBride, R. B., Hosford, C. C., & Halaas, G. (2016). Resilience Among Medical Students: The Role of Coping Style and Social Support. *Teaching and Learning in Medicine*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10401334.2016.1146611>.
- Torres, J. & Brocardo, J. (s/d). *As tecnologias digitais na aula de matemática conceções e práticas de ensino de professores*. Escola Superior de Educação do Instituto Politécnico de Setúbal.
- UNESCO. (2020). *A Comissão Futuros da Educação da Unesco apela ao planeamento antecipado contra o aumento das desigualdades após a COVID-19*. Unesco. https://pt.unesco.org/news/comissao-futuros-da-educacao-da-unesco-apela_ao-planejamento-antecipado-o-aumento-das.

- Vidal, O., & Mercado, L. (2020). Integração das Tecnologias Digitais da Informação e Comunicação em Práticas Pedagógicas Inovadoras no Ensino Superior. *Revista Diálogo Educacional*, 20(65), 722–749. <https://doi.org/10.7213/1981-416X.20.065.DS10>.
- Weiss, P., & Murdoch, D. R. (2020). Clinical course and mortality risk of severe COVID-19. *The Lancet*, 395(1022), 1014–1015. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30633](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30633)
- Williamson, B., Eynon, R., & Potter, J. (2020). Pandemic politics, pedagogies and practices: digital technologies and distance education during the coronavirus emergency. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 45(2), 107–114.
- World Health Organization. (2020). *Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak*. WHO.

Chapter 9

Carol Thompson & Elaine Battams

Postcards from the Edge – developing a professional identity for trainee teachers in English education

Introduction

Professional Identity (PI) has been described as the way in which one might combine values, attributes, and experiences in terms of a profession (Ibarra, 1999). It is an important aspect of seeing ourselves *within* the profession, rather than simply being associated with it. When compared with other professions (such as law or medicine), teachers do not seem to have a strong sense of professional identity (Thompson & Hopkins, 2019). In the Further Education and Skills sector (FE), which encompasses education beyond schooling, vocational training, and transition to university, this is even more noticeable as teachers often come into the job from a previous vocational area, for example, hairdressing or engineering. In this case, teaching is very much a second career and close identification with previous roles can impact on individuals' abilities to see themselves as teachers. It could also be argued that the education sector in England has been compliant to the demands of

others and as a result, exploring what it means to be a professional has not been high on the agenda for most teachers. External bodies demand continual improvements and the increased focus on 'evidence-based' approaches continues to drive practice (Thompson, 2018), making professional identity something which is often prescribed rather than acquired. This is even more challenging for teachers in training as they are very much on the periphery of established groups and may not have the opportunity to reflect on their role and what it means to be a teacher.

Review of Literature

As stated by Suarez and McGrath (2022) teachers work within ever-changing contexts, a situation which was reinforced by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Disruption to 'business as usual' required the adoption of new ways of working as well as new ways of *being* a teacher, making the need for a well-developed professional identity (PI) even more important. As previously mentioned, teachers, compared to other professionals, do not have a strong sense of identity, yet, through their work, they play a fundamental role in human and economic development and in facilitating the learning of other professional groups. If taking a 'grass roots' approach, it could be argued that without teachers, there would be no other professions and that teachers should be viewed as the midwives of a knowledge society (Hargreaves & Goodson in Sachs, 2010).

Given the wide-reaching impact of the role, it is surprising that there is any debate around whether or not teaching should be defined as a profession, yet questions remain and are further complicated by differing views on teacher professionalism (Sachs, 2010). Demands from stakeholders have influenced teacher education as well as the ways in which teachers are judged when they are in post. In addition, changes to policy and guidelines around practice have created a compliance culture, often condensing the complexities of the role into formulaic approaches (Coe et al., 2020). Given such constraints it is not difficult to see why teachers often struggle to define their professional

identity, yet, as Sachs suggests, teacher identity is at the core of the profession: 'It provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of 'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' within their work and in society' (2005, p. 15).

Within this literature review we will explore the ways in which pre-service teachers within FE, develop their PI. We will consider the barriers which present themselves and question how, through teacher education and communities of learning, these can be overcome.

Barriers

Teacher PI *should* be at the core of what teachers do in order to create a shared understanding of the role and provide a framework for practice. In English Further Education, this aim was supported by the production of a set of professional standards (ETF, 2014) providing an architecture for professional practice. The 20 standards are housed within three domains; professional values and attributes, professional knowledge and understanding, and professional skills and within these categories, offer specific guidance in relation to what it means to be a teacher within the sector. They also form a pathway to qualified teacher status, known as QTLS (Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills). Ostensibly this is a very positive step towards a more collective approach. However, whilst the professional standards are embedded into programmes of teacher education, their impact outside of this arena is limited. A pertinent point here is that teaching within FE in England became de-regulated after the publication of the Lingfield Review (DBIS, 2012) which proposed that teachers working within the sector did not require full teaching qualifications to undertake their roles, a move which set them apart from teachers in other phases, who are required to gain qualified teacher status. In addition, this step also meant that not all teachers would experience a programme of teacher training, and many may not become aware of any professional framework beyond the requirements set out within their own organisations. As a result, the approach is fragmented, and

teachers are divided by the phase of education they work in as well as by whether or not they have embraced teacher training.

Developing PI

Teacher identity can be viewed as a dynamic process as it is dependent upon the individual and their working context (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). As suggested by Cordingley et al. (2019, p. 19) PI is formed through the development of a 'personal professional pathway' in which individuals adapt prescribed professional attitudes, knowledge and skills according to their context and work demands. Recognising that factors influencing identity are often outside of an individual's control, Thompson and Wolstencroft (2021) stress the importance of identifying with the profession as a whole, rather than a specific role, in this way, PI becomes a professional reference point.

In Crawley's view (2018) PI can be developed by focussing on a number of key actions; self-management, working with others, professional learning/research, building resilience and patience. These ideas are mirrored by Suarez and McGrath (2022), who also stress the role played by teacher education. An important consideration is the vocational nature of teaching which often leads to a focus on the more practical aspects of the role, reflected in aphorisms such as *teachers are born not made*. Anecdotal evidence suggests that such generalised beliefs are common and are often present in student-teachers' reflections which depict teaching as an inherent skill, and which can create an unconscious barrier to professional learning.

Liminality and Troublesome Knowledge

Whilst it is likely that certain personal traits are valuable in the teaching role, it is also important to recognise that trainee teachers undergo a complex process of change when integrating their knowledge and skills into their practice. This is especially true for FE teachers as many have experienced previous careers and may still identify with those roles.

Based on the work of Meyer and Land (2003), Wood (2012) advocates the importance of crossing the threshold separating a previous state into a state of liminality as a starting point in the transition from trainee to teacher. The liminal space is an in-between state, likened by Meyer and Land, (2003) to adolescents who are 'not yet adults; not quite children' in which knowledge is often considered to be 'troublesome' as it may be conceptually difficult to grasp, counter-intuitive or simply alien (Perkins, 1999). Yet, threshold concepts also form key stepping-stones to mastery of a subject and once integrated can be transformational.

Models of Teacher Development

Although FE teaching is underpinned by a set of professional standards, these simply provide a framework for learning, they do not guide the process, instead, this is informed by models of teacher development and the philosophy of course teams. Fuller and Brown (1975) identified a 3-stage model based on trainee teachers' concerns:

- 1) *Concerns about self*—trainee identifies more with being a student than a teacher and is concerned about how they are performing.
- 2) *Concerns about tasks*—focussed on role requirements and classroom practice. At this stage trainees may question what they are being taught as they cannot always see the links between theory and practice.
- 3) Concerns about students and the impact of teaching.

The concerns-based approach has been subject to some criticism. According to Buchmann (1986) it creates a narrow emphasis on the individual, which in turn may lead to a narrow view of the role. Conway and Clark (2003) describe a similar inward to outward journey to that depicted in the Fuller model but add the need to include reflexive questions about capacity to grow as a teacher and as a person, which takes the journey back on an inward

spiral encouraging a focus on some 'bigger' questions about the teacher's role in society.

An alternative to a concerns-based approach is that of skill acquisition (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1980). This model is focussed on situated learning and includes five stages of development:

- 1) *Novice* – everything is new, decision making is limited and there is a tendency to follow directions.
- 2) *Advanced beginner* – elements of the role seen and practised, feels confident to try things—*but* will blame external forces if something goes wrong.
- 3) *Competent* – can work in an efficient and organised way (often post training and predicted at 2 to 3 years in post). Rules and procedures are familiar, there is a sense of personal responsibility.
- 4) *Proficient* – good at the job, can make decisions and prioritise but cannot always articulate what they do.
- 5) *Expert* – has extensive experience, does not need guidelines, rules or procedures and has the ability to apply many skills; can analyse situations.

This model is a clear illustration of experiential learning but does not consider how intuition informs teachers' actions. As suggested by Gobet and Chassey (2009), intuition and the sort of tacit knowledge gained through experience, are highly valued aspects of expertise and the humanistic nature of the teaching role would suggest that tacit knowledge is also paramount.

To ensure that pre-service trainees have every opportunity to gain the necessary skills to become great teachers, it is incumbent upon teacher educators to create an environment that nurtures their learning, as well as their ability to use that learning to shape their teaching. Models are helpful in this, as is making good use of the tacit knowledge acquired by teacher educators, mentors, and other practitioners. However, a programme of teacher education can only go so far. Training great teachers also requires the creation of communities of discovery to enable collegiate development.

Communities of Practice and Agency

Communities of Practice (CoPs) have also been described as communities of learning for those with a shared interest. Lave and Wenger (1991) stress the importance of learning through social interaction as a vehicle for discussion and a way of developing confidence. In addition, CoPs have the potential to support the development of PI: 'Professional identity is indeed formed through interaction with others and with environment; it is a relational phenomenon' (Schepens et al., 2009, p. 363). In their research about using social media networking with pre-service trainees, Minkee and Bulent (2013, p. 306) outlined the benefits of 'gaining credibility from peers' within the community. This was achieved when students engaged in social discussion, offered support, and began to instruct each other.

Thompson (2018) in exploring teacher creativity in FE, discovered that a key constraint to teachers taking a creative approach was the perceived lack of agency in the role which led to 'playing safe'. Yet, despite this general feeling of constraint, some teachers did take creative approaches, usually when they felt supported by their peer group. Whilst not always housed in formal CoPs, these support networks were key factors in enabling the confidence to take creative leaps. Similarly, Maher and Jacob (2006) stress the need for emotional support from peers and as Davis et al. state, creativity is dependent on opportunities to progress ideas collaboratively through 'liberating innovative relationships' (2012, p. 179).

As the literature illustrates, forming a professional identity as a teacher is a complex process and requires individuals to experience a number of things as a part of the process. Whilst it may be an over-used metaphor in education, this can be likened to a journey, not necessarily one with a linear path from A to B, rather a more circuitous route enabling individuals to follow their own path.

Methodology

This research takes a qualitative approach which draws data from focus groups and reflective accounts. In addition, creative methods were used (in the form of pictorial roadmaps) to provide a focus for structuring reflections. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who met specific criteria in relation to their training and participants were selected for two groups:

Group A – were trainee teachers about to complete their training. There were two cohorts with 26 participants in total (19 female and 7 male). The cohorts were mixed in terms of experience and ages ranged from 22–56. This group was asked to produce a 'roadmap' image to track their journeys during training to enable them to think about the various 'twists' and 'turns' they had encountered. Two sub-groups (8 participants in total) were then invited to a focus group to explore the training journey in more detail.

Group B – were teachers who had qualified between 2018 and 2020. This group was asked to write a short reflective account of their journey from trainee to becoming a teacher. Data was collected via anonymous responses to a padlet link to allow participants to discuss their experiences freely and we did not collect any 'identifying' data such as gender or age. There were nine participants in this group.

Both groups were drawn from a university partnership including cohorts from two different colleges. The cohorts in group A trained during the height of the pandemic, between 2020 and 2022. Group B participants had qualified between 2018 and 2020. All participants followed a 'pre-service' route, which meant that they had no (or very little) prior teaching experience and were gaining their experience via a teaching placement.

Data was gathered using focus groups and written reflections where participants were asked to document their experiences as trainees to the point when they felt they had become a teacher. Responses from the focus groups have been coded using pseudonyms and reflective accounts were

captured on a padlet wall. To provide anonymity, these have been coded P1-P9. Ethical approval was sought (and awarded) by the university's research institute for Education.

Findings and Discussion

A thematic approach was used to organise the data and key themes include obstacles experienced, recognised advantages and the development of agency and professional identity.

Obstacles and Advantages

Many of the obstacles highlighted in the data were related to the practical aspects of teaching. Participants expressed concern about the 'pressures of the pandemic'; the unexpected demands of online teaching and lack of technical skills: 'I am not a computer literate person and had a fear of technology' (P4) [and] 'the degree of technological prowess you have to have been crazy'. (June) Mention was also made of the extra workload created by the need to upload materials to virtual learning spaces such as Google classroom. In addition, participants had not been prepared for other aspects of the job such as marking and administration, generating fears about their overall ability to carry out the role: 'As a student you do not understand the level of dedication, passion, and commitment it takes to be a teacher... In the beginning I was working 8 am until 9 pm to ensure I gave the students the best I could'. (P1) For some, this realisation, coupled with the strangeness of lockdown raised fears about their ability: 'Lockdown was quite a scary time because it was almost like all the feelings, I felt about teaching not being for me resurfaced' (P9).

A further concern related to how learners were engaging (or not) with the online experience. As Jazmine stated: 'I couldn't tell how much they were taking in, some of them didn't have their cameras on...' There was also an awareness of how isolating the experience was for learners: 'When they are online, they are just on their own and in Lalaland'. (Adebola) As a result,

trainees felt they were not able to offer the same support. Even when teaching moved back to the classroom, COVID regulations influenced teacher–student interactions. As June stated: 'I found it really hard to stay in my "box" at the front and not be able to have that one to one where you help people away from the group'.

Several of the obstacles highlighted relate to the second stage of Fuller and Brown's (1975) model as the trainees showed concern about role requirements and how the pandemic impacted on their ability to teach. One participant felt the impact had been extreme and cited an example of her own student, who used to 'hide' behind a mask during the height of the pandemic, refused to take the mask off when rules were relaxed:

'Even after COVID there were students that were still wearing masks because they weren't comfortable showing their faces. For one, in two years of her college life her peers have not seen her. She has lost her identity in a way... she is very anxious, she wears gloves in class, [...] she just shutdown' (Sami).

'Concern for self' (Fuller & Brown, 1975) was more apparent in the reflective accounts where some respondents referred to elements of training that were less supportive. Examples were provided of the 'discouragement' from other teachers in their placement and a sense of being less important than the established team (P6).

Despite these obstacles, there was acknowledgement of some positives of the pandemic, specifically the development of new skills. Being 'forced' to teach online had introduced them to new software and built confidence in using ICT resources. Alongside this, participants also recognised how the support they had received during their studies had influenced their development. This features strongly in the reflections and the focus groups: 'Cheerful connections the tutors provided the strength to move on'. (P3) Teachers and mentors are mentioned throughout but most prominent is the recognition of the support provided by peers. Participants provide examples

of how they set up small study groups so that they could work together, as well as a WhatsApp group for communication across the whole cohort: 'We have all supported each other massively... no-one has put in less or taken out more... it has been very collaborative. It's been a good journey' (Kelly).

Agency and Identity

Models of teacher development identify the ways in which trainee teachers gain agency in their practice by developing their own pedagogy through critical thinking (Haig, 2017). For some agency is about 'the way in which actors critically shape their responses to problematic situations' (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 11) and is often situated in practice. Simply put, it could be considered a form of 'personal autonomy which informs action' (Thompson & Wolstencroft, 2021, p. 23). Developing a sense of agency is often the starting point for developing a professional identity, beyond that which is allocated by job role and is influenced by many factors including workplace cultures and experiences. Taking this into account, it is not surprising that agency was not something that featured in the participants' responses. Most still considered themselves to be trainees, rather than fully-fledged teachers and this was reinforced by their work placements where they might be given the 'trainee' label and where they might not have access to the same resources as others. Because of this they were on the periphery of the workplace community rather than at the heart of it. As one responded said:

'Sometimes when I am walking around placement I feel *yeah I'm definitely a teacher* but then something will happen like my mentor will say "so how many weeks have you got left?"... or I'll be asked to do something that I don't have access to and I'm like *well yeah... still a trainee*' (Kelly).

In the focus groups, participants were asked what *being a teacher* meant to them and the majority of responses made mention of the altruistic aspects of the role such as 'helping others', 'being able to support' or 'sharing skills'.

Whilst these are acknowledged aspects of the role, they do not embrace its wider influence such as the impact on policy, the economy and society. Specific examples were grounded in the day-to-day aspects of teaching, as Fuller and Brown (1975) suggest, the 'concerns about tasks'. In contrast, the accounts of their own learning make much more reference to the emotional aspects of learning such as building confidence and developing coping mechanisms, achieving things they never thought they could achieve. As one respondent said: 'It's like a feeling of "I can fly, I can do this, Eureka, I'm there!"' (Adebola). One potential explanation for this is that the respondents did not yet have the experience to gauge the wider influence of their role, much less to articulate it. As suggested by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1980) they had built a level of proficiency in the role, they could say they were good at the job, but couldn't really explain what they did. Whereas their role as student was very familiar and not only could they talk extensively about their journeys, but they also experienced them at a visceral level.

The Journey from Trainee to Teacher

A key aim of this research was to depict the steps taken from being a trainee to becoming a teacher by exploring specific aspects of trainees' journeys. This information was drawn from focus groups of students at the end of their course of study and from reflective accounts produced by teachers who had qualified in the previous year. As outlined within the findings, both groups of participants highlighted comparable experiences and identified with the teaching role in similar ways. Although some participants did say they 'felt' like a teacher there was little evidence of embracing the wider aspects of the role. For most, PI was firmly linked to their formal occupation, and until they were employed in a teaching post, they would not identify as being a teacher: 'I would argue that I feel like a teacher but without the logins and the full responsibility [...] there isn't that recognition, so I wouldn't call myself a teacher' (Simon). The responses also suggested that some participants questioned the 'professional' element of the role; in line with some of the

literature, one participant described it as a 'craft' (Sachs, 2010) and another cited the need for continuous development: 'I think I view it like I am always in training. I wouldn't call myself a professional... because you have always got to be developing' (June).

As outlined in previous research (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1980; Fuller & Brown, 1975) there is evidence of distinct stages of development. However, in contrast to previous models, our data suggests that this is not a linear progress. Trainees do not appear to take incremental steps towards becoming a teacher, their route is far more circuitous and can be encapsulated in nine steps (Figure 1):

- *Tentative steps* – decision to undertake training is taken. Experienced as confusion and anxiety about what lies ahead. (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9, June, Kelly, Simon, Sami, Adebola, Esme, Jazmine)
- *Expressing concerns* – concern about own abilities and the impact of 'getting it wrong.' (P1, P2, P4, P7, P9, Simon, Sami)
- *Playing safe* – aware of judgement by others; concern for self and concern for students. Decision is made to follow 'rules' for teaching outlined by tutors and mentors. (P1, P3, P7, P8, P9)
- *Sense of belonging* – recognition that others are part of the journey. Aware of the support available. (P1, P3, P5, P7, P8, Kelly, Jazmine, Adebola, June, Esme)
- *Balancing demands* – teaching experience begins to influence approach, as do protocols followed in workplace. Theoretical aspects of the programme may seem troublesome and 'at odds' with practical experience. (P1, P2, P3, P4, P7, P9 & June, Sami)
- *Building confidence* – able to critically reflect on practice, begin to use feedback from others to shape approaches and considers how theory might inform practice. (P1, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9, Adebola, Simon, Kelly, Sami, June, Esme)
- *Stretching boundaries* – has more confidence to take 'informed risks.' (P1, P3, P4, P7, P9, Sami, Kelly)

- *Integrating ideas* – confident in classroom practice and familiar with theoretical concepts, able to synthesise ideas from theory and practice. (P1, P2, P5, P7, June, Adebola, Jazmine)
- *Becoming a teacher* – some awareness of own agency. Has developed an understanding of the wider impact of the role; starts to see self as 'teacher'. (Adebola, Jazmine, Steven)



Figure 1 – The journey from trainee to teacher

Although not evidenced within this data, we acknowledge the potential for trainees to adopt the position of 'playing safe' throughout their studies, which may mean they simply adopt a compliant stance in terms of meeting the needs of the programme and of their workplace. In doing so, it is likely that they will miss out the need to balance demands, stretch boundaries or integrate ideas. As a result, they will 'become a teacher' in as far as achieving the teaching qualification is concerned but are not likely to have developed the reflexive skills required for the professional role (Figure 2).



Figure 2 – The journey from trainee to teacher 'playing safe'

Final Thoughts

Within this research we have explored the ways in which trainee teachers begin to develop a professional identity. The findings illustrate the complexity of this journey, particularly the impact of the emotional experience which shows that this sort of professional development is unlikely to follow a linear path. Instead, individuals had a range of experiences en route; some questioned their overall suitability for the role and others acknowledged the omnipresent need to continue learning. Very few of the participants identified with the profession of teacher by the end of their training, suggesting that professional identity is less connected to qualifications and professional standards but has more to do with formal recognition in relation to employment. For our participants this meant being *recognised* as a teacher, rather than being *qualified* as a teacher. Despite this, responses did show acceptance of clear professional values such as concern for students. For these participants, the experience of teacher education appeared to be a vehicle which gave them permission to develop a professional identity further down the line. As Kelly put it: 'It's like taking the stabilisers off your bike... you're off into the winds'.

References

- Beauchamp, C., & Thomas, L. (2009). Understanding Teacher Identity: An Overview of Issues in the Literature and Implications for Teacher Education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 39, 175–189.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03057640902902252>Beauchamp and Thomas 2009
- Biesta, G. J. J., & Tedder, M. (2006). How Is Agency Possible? Towards an Ecological Understanding of Agency-as-Achievement (Working Paper 5). *Exeter: The learning Lives Project*.
- Buchmann, M. (1986). Role over person: Morality and authenticity in teaching. *Teachers College Record*, 87(4), 527–543.
- Coe, R., Rough, C. J., Kime, S., & Singleton, D. (2020). Great Teaching Toolkit. Evidence Review. Available at: <https://www.greatteaching.com> [date accessed: 25/6/22]
- Conway, P. F., & Clark, C. M. (2012). The journey inward and outward: a re-examination of Fuller's concerns-based model of teacher development. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 19(2003), 465–482.
- Cordingley, P., Crisp, B., Johns, P., Thomas, P., Campbell, C., Bell, M., Bradbury, M., (2019). 'Constructing Teachers' Professional Identities', *Educational International*. Brussels.
- Crawley J. (2018). *Just Teach! In FE*. Sage.
- Davis, J. M., Aruldoss, V., McNair, L., & Bizas, N. (2012). Enabling creativity in learning environments: Lessons from the CREANOVA project. *LEARNiNg Landscapes*, 6(1), 179–200.
Available at: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/49395/> [date accessed 29 May 2022]
- Department for Business Innovation and Skills. (2012). *Professionalism in Further Education*. Final report of the independent review panel.
Available at: [Professionalism in Further Education: Final report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](http://publishing.service.gov.uk) [date accessed: 20/6/22]

- Dreyfus, S. E., & Dreyfus, H. L. (1980). *A five-stage model of the mental activities involved in directed skill acquisition* (No. ORC-80-2). California Univ Berkeley Operations Research Center.
- Education and Training Foundation. (2014). *Professional Standards for Teachers and Trainers*. Available at: Professional Standards for Teachers and Trainers (et-foundation.co.uk) [date accessed:10/6/22]
- Fuller, F., & Brown, O. (1975). Becoming a teacher. In Ryan, K. (Ed), *Teacher Education: The seventy-fourth yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education* (pp. 25–52). The University of Chicago Press.
- Gobet, F., & Chassy, P. (2009). Expertise and intuition: A tale of three theories. *Minds and Machines*, 19, 151–180.
- Haigh, J. (2017). Teaching the Teachers: The Value of Information for Educators. In: *Disciplinary Applications of Information Literacy Threshold Concepts* (pp. 163–273). ALA Publishing.
- Ibarra, H. (1999). Provisional selves: Experimenting with image and identity in professional adaptation', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(4), 764–791.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge University Press
- Lingfield, R. (2012). Professionalism in Further Education, report of independent review panel, *Department for Business Innovation and Skills*: London.
- Maher, M., & Jacob, E. (2006). Peer computer conferencing to support teachers' reflection during action research. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 14 (14), 127–150.
- Meyer, J. H. F., & Land, R. (2003). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: Linkages to ways of thinking and practising within the disciplines. In *ISL 10 Improving Student Learning: Theory and Practice Ten Years On* (pp. 412–424). Oxford Brookes University.

- Minkee, K., & Bulent, C. (2013). Legitimate peripheral participation of pre-service science teachers: Collaborative reflections in an online community of practice, Twitter'. *Science, Education International*, 24(3), 306–323.
- Perkins, D. (1999). The many faces of constructivism. *Educational Leadership*, 57(3), 6–11.
- Sachs, J. (2010). The Activist Teaching Profession. In Goodson, I. and Hargreaves, A. (Eds.), *Professional Learning Series*. Open University Press.
- Sachs, J. (2005). Teacher education and the development of professional identity: Learning to be a teacher. In Denicolo, P. and Kompf, M. (Eds.), *Connecting policy and practice: Challenges for teaching and learning in schools and universities*. Routledge.
- Suarez, V., & McGrath, J. (2022). Teacher Professional Identity: How to develop and support in times of change. *OECD Education Working Papers*, 267.
- Schepens, A, Aelterman, A., & Vlerick, P. (2009). Student Teachers' Professional Identity Formation: Between being Born as a Teacher and becoming one. *Educational Studies*, 35(2).
- Thompson, C. (2018). Finding the glass slipper: the impact of leadership on innovation in further education. In *FETL (Further Education Trust for Leadership, 2018)*.
- Thompson, C., & Wolstencroft, P. (2021). *Being a teacher, the trainee teacher's guide to developing the personal and professional skills you need*. Learning Matters.
- Thompson, C., & Hopkins, N. (2019). Cinderella and Other Stories... An Exploration of practitioners' Views on Bringing Further Education out of the Shadows. *Encyclopaideia – Journal of Phenomenology and Education*, 23(53). <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1825-8670/9345>
- Wood, P. (2012). Blogs as liminal space: student teachers at the threshold. *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 21(1), 85–99.

Chapter 10

Neil Hopkins & Carol Thompson

Through the looking glass: Professional identity during a pandemic

Background

The theory of narrative identity (McAdams, 2001) describes the way in which we internalise our 'stories' in creating a sense of self. These stories are based on an integration of the way we have constructed past events to provide a unified narrative of our lives. In adulthood, our stories become an operating manual for day-to-day life, they show us what to do and provide a clear strategy for how to do it. They even provide the narrative for how we present ourselves to others: 'In this way our stories become the foundation of our personalities and influence the way we work, think about ourselves and interact with others' (Thompson, 2019, p. 26). Whilst narrative identity theory is often concerned with the stories we construct as children, it cannot be separated from adult life. As adults we form our identity through the range of roles we play and a significant part of this is professional identity, which informs the knowledge we acquire and the values we claim (Johnston, 2012).

When we talk about professional identity, we are considering the ways we might combine our attributes, experiences, and values in terms of a profession (Ibarra, 1999), which is an important part of seeing ourselves within the profession. In most cases this is a simple process, most professions have standards, recognised qualifications and bodies who ensure that everyone within the profession understands what it means to be a professional in that context. For teachers this is far less clear and for teachers in post-compulsory education (PCE) the situation is confused further by regulatory changes to qualification requirements and dual professionalism. When compared to other professions such as medicine or law, teachers do not have a strong sense of professional identity and when teaching is a second career this is further diluted by close identification with a previous role, therefore, many PCE teachers will see themselves as hairdressers or engineers before they think of themselves as teachers.

The last two years have thrown additional challenges at PCE teachers, and many were not prepared for the impact of the global pandemic. COVID-19 has turned our worlds upside down both personally and professionally. In much the same way as Alice's journey through the looking glass, the familiar was made unfamiliar, the known, unknown (Carroll, 1871). Now, more than ever, teachers must rethink their identity, not as prescribed by others but as something they claim for themselves, as a part of their own narrative.

Within this research we aim to capture the stories of a range of education professionals, working in different contexts. The research includes narratives from senior leaders, middle managers, teachers, academics, and teaching support staff working in settings as diverse as Further Education Colleges and the National Health Service. Each provides an 'insider' view of professional identity from their own unique vantage point.

Literature – What is Professional Identity?

The issue of identity in professional contexts such as further and higher education is a complex one. On the face of it, identity is a seemingly simple

thing, conceptualised as the 'being' that informs 'doing', where being is one's way of viewing the world and oneself based on certain values, beliefs, and attitudes, and doing is the way of living proceeding from this (McNaughton & Billot, 2016, p. 644). As Churchman and King suggest: 'Identity perspectives focus on members' understanding of who they are and the ways in which these influences, and is influenced by, what they do at work', (2009, p. 507). However, once identity is probed beyond the surface notions of 'being' and 'doing', the idea of identity and professional roles becomes more difficult to pin down. Arjava (2018) describes identity as something fluid and dynamic which is negotiated through reflection and awareness of the social and cultural context.

Research regarding professional identity has been influenced over successive decades by the debate over whether there is such a thing as a coherent self that different roles and identities can be related to. Akkerman and Meijar (2011) have discussed modernist and postmodernist conceptions of the self; in the modernist version

[i]ndividuality prevailed, and there was an explicit distinction between the internal united self and an external 'other person' whereas in the postmodern definition 'identity' is no longer seen as an overarching and unified framework but, instead, as being fragmented along with the multiple social worlds that people engage in (2011, p. 309).

Väläsantanen et al. (2020) adopt a modernist stance on the issue of identity and the self—stating that 'identity should be viewed as negotiated through individuals' activities in a social environment' (p. 2), making clear connections between identity and personal agency. Akkerman and Meijar (2011) acknowledge that a postmodern stance has advantages over the modernist one because, in their view, postmodern approaches 'particularly accommodate an accelerating globalization, leading us to participate more explicitly in multiple communities' (p. 310). However, Akkerman and Meijar (2011) question how far identity can be analysed if the self becomes highly fragmented.

Corporate vs. Non-corporate Identity: The Challenge for Teachers in Further and Higher Education

The association of further and higher education institutions with notions of the corporate has increased as post-compulsory education have adopted values associated with private business in what has been identified as a neoliberal turn. As Bathmaker and Avis (2013) have noted 'the reform and reconstruction of professionalism in public service work have been a key goal of governments in countries such as Australia, New Zealand and the UK' (p. 731). These reforms to public services are not exclusive to the Anglophone world: 'the global trend towards neoliberal economic policies has entailed the adoption of New Public Management (NPM) principles. These were introduced into education in the 1990s, the aim being to increase efficiency and international competitiveness' (Väläsantanen et al., 2020, p. 1).

In the context of further education in England, '[m]anagerialism... reflected... the concerns with efficiency, effectiveness, responsiveness and accountability... that were considerably heightened following incorporation' (Robson, 2006, p. 71). Part of the remit for removing further education colleges from local authority control was to expose them to 'externalized forms of regulation and accountability measures such as target-setting and performance review' (Evetts, 2009, p. 23). The changes that occurred in universities and other higher education institutions at around this time (early-to-mid 1990s) was subtly different because collegiality has a stronger foundation in universities and '[s]elf-regulation and peer control are important to collegiality' (Robson, 2006, p. 68). Even with these cultural factors in play, universities were still vulnerable to the neoliberal market pressures: 'the changing higher education policy context... with its emphasis on accountability, control, productivity, and efficiency, have resulted in the fragmentation of academic labour, harsh competition for funding, diminished autonomy, and increasing administrative duties.' (Arvaja, 2018, p. 291).

It can be of no surprise that these changes to the culture and ways of working in further and higher education organisations have often affected

the identities of the professionals within them. Robson (2006) outlines some of the potentially negative effects created by neoliberal values. She has spoken of 'a loss of trust... between managers and teachers and of an evolving narrative of previously experienced better times [being] a strong feature of the discourse in many FE departments' (Robson, 2006, p. 71). Avis counters this negativity by arguing that 'there is a paradoxical way in which managerialism carries with it a democratising impulse by raising questions of accountability' (Avis, 1996, p. 113). In the development towards performance indicators and measurable outcomes there is, at least, a certain transparency that staff can recognise and potentially 'buy into' or use as data to demand different priorities. Allied to this reliance on quantifiable statistics and benchmarks as a means of public accountability is the increasingly sophisticated use of branding by colleges and universities to market their wares: '[u]niversities have certainly intensified their efforts to develop a credible, shared corporate story, through artefacts such as newsletters, intranets and corporate emails' (Churchman & King, 2009, p. 508). This trend has become even more important as the HE sector has become genuinely international in its scope.

The institution is not necessarily the sole or even the primary entity that education professionals choose to base their identities upon. Colleagues often have disciplinary or industrial allegiances that they feel encapsulates their identity more fully than allegiances to an organisation. Robson (2006) concurs with this but also argues that there are subtle differences between professionals in HE and FE, such as having less contractual time to make and sustain external contacts than their HE counterparts. But Hopkins (2013) argues this is not necessarily the case as FE teachers are likely to maintain contacts with colleagues from their previous roles in order to keep up to date with developments. Many teachers and researchers in FE and HE have communities of practice where they can engage in discussion around disciplinary practices. Such communities, where effective, are likely to reinforce and enhance a sense of professional identity for those involved beyond the boundaries of the institution. However, because: 'the teacher of technical

specialisms actively seeks to redefine links between college and industry' (Robson, 2006, p. 73), the professional associations they are likely to form part of will not necessarily have an educational focus in the same way as HE.

Managers and Leaders: Factors Influencing Identity

Much has been said about the impact of managerialism on the teaching profession, in particular the ways in which a performative culture requires teachers to organise their work in response to targets. As Ball (2003) suggests, for some, the setting aside of personal beliefs in order to achieve what others deem important creates a source of inner conflict but for others provides an opportunity and a clear pathway to success. This has encouraged an alternative form of professional identity, deemed 'entrepreneurial identity', aligned to a new type of teacher who closely identifies with the perceived efficiencies of a commercial approach (Menter et. al, 1997; Sachs, 2010). Alongside this, is the emergence of 'designer teachers' whose focus is to be seen to perform at the highest levels. These teachers thrive on being seen as 'the best' and actively seek opportunities to demonstrate their ability to meet benchmarks for performance. This teacher explains his response to the removal of graded lesson observations: 'I was disappointed when they took away the grading system because I love chasing a grade, absolutely love it... because we all want to chase a grade one...of course you do, you want to be the best' (Thompson, 2018, p. 20).

The literature suggests that responses from managers in FE are not dissimilar to those of teachers. In their exploration of the experiences of Curriculum Managers, Thompson and Wolstencroft (2015) outline a typology of management personas which mirror those of teachers. They describe Lone Warriors with values focussed on responding to the 'student voice' and supporting colleagues, as individuals driven by strong principles, prepared to take risks. In contrast, Career Navigators, focussed on corporate objectives and motivated by job prospects were likely to digest systems and follow rules (Thompson & Wolstencroft, 2015).

In line with Murphy and Curtis (2013), Thompson and Wolstencroft's (2015) findings suggest that more than 80% of middle managers in FE experienced a confused sense of professional identity due to dual roles involving management and teaching: 'teaching commitments get in the way of my management role and vice versa...' (p. 219) Like teachers, managers also experienced constraints surrounding their work, usually as a result of rigid systems or diktats from senior leadership. Despite espoused movements towards models of distributed leadership within education (Gronn, 2002) it seems that senior leaders rely on control measures similar to those employed on the production line (Mintzberg, 1988).

The impact of the commercialisation of education has been widely discussed, particularly in relation to how it influences the roles of teachers and managers (Avis, 2005; Ball, 2003; Courtney, 2015). Thompson and Wolstencroft (2018) reinforce this view, stating that there is very little difference between middle managers' roles within education and the commercial sector as both are driven by key performance indicators focussed on meeting the organisation's aims. However, they did highlight two distinct differences. Firstly, in the authority bestowed upon managers, and secondly, the influence of external bodies. Within education settings, managers felt that they were working in a culture of 'mistrust', resulting in control mechanisms they often found debilitating, alongside this, they felt they were constantly juggling the operational demands of the job with the need to implement new initiatives. Whereas those managers working in the private sector did not experience constraints imposed by systems or external demands and felt they had autonomy and the authority to get on with their jobs.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the situation for leaders is a little clearer cut. Leaders express a strong sense of identity with their roles and are aware of the agency they have. This is especially true for those at higher levels within the organisation, such as College Principals (Thompson, 2018). However, for many participants agency was something they felt at a personal level, as one Principal suggested:

Internally I would say that's significant [agency]. If we are looking at genuinely the autonomy in the system then I would say it's not very much because in a way regulatory agencies tell us exactly what they want to offer... and in terms of the Inspectorate, they decide what 'good' looks like so there's actually very little freedom...

The Impact of COVID-19: Teacher Identities During a Pandemic

In March 2020, schools, colleges, and universities closed their doors and the teacher's world was turned upside down. Krogh Christensen et al. (2022) speak of 'the sudden change in the teaching context caused a loss of teacher identity... teachers' ability to adapt their teaching to students' needs while teaching and teachers' motivation and job satisfaction may have suffered' (Krogh Christensen et al., 2022, online). The change in the structure and environment through online and distance learning had a profound effect on teachers and how they perceived themselves. This is because: 'teaching is an embodied affair, and teacher identities are sensitive to structural changes in teaching contexts' (Krogh Cristensen et al., 2022, online). The movement away from face-to-face teaching in a physical environment was challenging and potentially disorienting, especially as the transition to online learning was relatively sudden and many teachers didn't feel confident or prepared for these changes. Kurz et al. (2021) write on how '[t]he pivot to online teaching forced [teachers] to change how they understood themselves' (Kurz et al., 2021, p. 174). However, this pivot had both positive and negative effects on the university teachers. Some colleagues found that 'these changes... provoked discomfort, frustration, fear, and anger—emotions that have sometimes disrupted the faculty–student relationship' (Kurz et al. 2021, p. 175). However, for others:

The shift has meant thinking much more about how to structure engaging, interactive sessions where students do most of the work... COVID-19's gift is how it has helped college instructors see and understand issues

that have long been present but latent and perhaps unobtrusive because ignoring them came at no cost (Kurz et al., 2021, p. 177).

These observations appear to show how developments in the way professional practice is performed can have both a malign and benign impact on how teachers view themselves. The movement to online learning also had repercussions for the notion of communities of practice: 'At the level of VET [Vocational Education and Training] schools, teachers often received help from colleagues and generally were glad to offer it. Groups were created for sharing ideas and support, both technical and emotional' (Kovacs et al., 2021, p. 7561).

The challenges in this instance seem to have instilled an *esprit de corps* amongst colleagues where their identities as part of a collective have enabled them to 'pull together' in a time of urgent need. However, this was by no means the only reaction. Some of the more negative perspectives on teacher identity during lockdown speak of isolation and disengagement from colleagues and organisations. In a powerful statement, one of the teachers interviewed by Krogh Christensen et al. speaks of the online experience as 'like... talking to a black space. And that can be very artificial' (Krogh Christensen, 2022, online).

Research Design

This research takes a narrative inquiry approach by asking participants to reflect on professional identity from a specific standpoint. Participants were drawn from a range of settings within education and had varying degrees of experience. The purposive sample consisted of senior leaders, middle managers, teachers, and teacher educators and provided a breadth of perspectives. Participants were chosen based on the following criteria: organisation type, position in organisation, disciplinary expertise, and levels of experience.

One of the strengths of narrative inquiry is that it provides the insider view and a deeper understanding of individual experiences. Participants

were asked to write a reflective account of professional identity within their individual roles and settings. This allowed them to analyse their experiences without having to justify them with tangible evidence and recognises the view that professional identity is as much as 'state of mind' as a definition of a professional role (Crossley & Vivekananda-Schmidt, 2009).

The use of 'stories' as a form of research may be subject to some criticism: 'Once upon a time, psychologists viewed life stories as little different from fairy tales... of little scientific value for understanding human behaviour' (McAdams, 2001). Whilst it is true that narrative inquiry does not allow us to make generalisations about the research: 'In sum, stories are too soft and human lives too big, as well as too singular' (McAdams, 2001, p. 100), it is also true that understanding experience is a complex process that cannot be explored solely in a scientific way.

Emerging Findings

The research to date highlights the complexities associated with defining and owning professional identity. The following reflections underline how individuals have begun this process.

Leadership–Agency Dichotomy

In this narrative, the participant, a senior leader within an FE College, considers the 9 changes to working practice enforced by the Coronavirus pandemic. By highlighting a number of conflicts, this narrative raises questions about how much agency leaders actually have and how, in turn, that impacts on professional identity. Reference is made to the practical challenges faced, suggesting that the pandemic had exposed some 'hidden edges' inside the systems. Prior to the pandemic, leaders and teachers had relied on day-to-day operations running smoothly but as a result of COVID-19, were thrown into a more reactive culture. An example of the difficulties associated with

teaching online, such as students not engaging and being able to 'hide' by not using cameras or chat functions, is used to illustrate an unexpected event. This would normally be something addressed by individual teachers but, the unusual circumstances required the creation of new policies and, in turn, increased bureaucracy. This raised questions about the purpose of the leadership role and exposed aspects of what was referred to as the 'leadership-agency' dichotomy:

[...] a leader might treat teacher agency with caution, another point of view is that a leader really needs their teachers to exercise a degree of agency: at best, the efforts of the leadership can then be directed towards allowing or creating a space for their teachers to excel. (Senior Leader)

Questioning how much control he really has within his leadership role, the participant uses a Badiouian lens to analyse the leadership role and suggests that leaders may not be the ones who instigate real change. This raises questions about the function of leadership: '...for me leadership is at best about not turning away but trying to hold the conflict; exploring and working with and within multi-levelled contractions' Citing Badiou (2005), he goes on to say that the 'truth' is really out there but is hidden inside an event, so leaders should brace themselves for the event and look to others to help find the answers.

Walking the Tightrope

This narrative explores the experiences of teacher educators supporting trainees through a pre-service programme of teacher education. The participants reflect on how this experience challenges their own professional identity.

When reflecting on their experiences, student teachers' often consider how they overcome specific hurdles in order to reach their goals. These accounts are littered with emotional highs and lows further heightened by

the pandemic where the norms of daily activity were turned upside down and where potential support systems became distanced. The focus is often on the support they received during their training and on how they learnt from observing others such as tutors and mentors. Very few consider the knowledge gained during their training and aside from copying what their own teachers do in the classroom, there is very little recognition of how the teacher education programme has influenced their teaching. This raises questions about the purpose of teacher education and the role of teacher educators.

A pre-service route to teacher education includes intensive training and experience gained through a practicum. In the UK there is a growing trend towards 'apprenticeships' which are taught and managed 'in-house' reinforcing current practice within organisations. The traditional university-based training is seen as an antidote to this model of regeneration, its aim being to create an environment in which new teachers can develop their knowledge and skills in a way which allows them to be the teacher they want to be. Aligned to this philosophy, teacher educators traditionally take the stance of facilitator, offering their knowledge and experience for critical analysis and encouraging trainees to synthesise this in relation to their own practice.

A further influence on the Teacher Educator's role is policy directive and demands from external bodies which have an influence on how teacher education is informed. Through the Core Content Framework (DfE, 2019) the Department for Education has provided a set of literature which must be incorporated into TE programmes, thereby dictating the knowledge that teacher educators' are 'allowed' to share. However, most teacher educators rely on years of experience and the tacit knowledge they have gained from this to inform their approach to their roles. This allows them to frame new learning in practical ways, and to give credence to the approaches they recommend. Removing the choice of what knowledge to share, removes significant agency from teacher educators, making the role little more than a vehicle for transporting the DfE's agenda:

On the one hand we must implement the DfE's guidelines and on the other hand, we have a lot of experience to share. I am never sure of how much of 'myself' I should put into the role; balancing the varied demands is constricting... it's a bit like walking a tightrope and I very often wobble, but I have realised that in order to provide the space for my students to grow, I need to relinquish some of my control and I have to manage some of the control that others have. Sometimes, I do as expected and sometimes I don't. (Teacher Educator)

Interdisciplinarity During a Pandemic

This narrative from a senior lecturer in a 'widening participation' university in the UK, explored the issue of interdisciplinarity and how this affects professional identity generally and during the pandemic. Using the work of Collini (2012) on the pressures to achieve research outputs in British universities and how this can have a profound effect on the value of work that crosses disciplinary boundaries. In relation to the COVID-19 lockdowns, the participant goes on to say:

The pandemic had a mixed impact on me... On the one hand, I felt a sense of increased isolation from colleagues—the lack of face-to-face engagement had a curious effect of questioning who I was professionally, where did I position myself? On the other hand, there was this massive increase in online communication and research discussion that often-straddled disciplines due to their fluid and impromptu nature. These seminars I found to be a bit of a lifesaver at times (Senior Lecturer).

This participant talks of interdisciplinarity as 'an inevitable' part of being a researcher in education due to the fact that education takes its cues from a variety of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. This crossing of boundaries can be potentially liberating, 'I'm not confined or 'boxed in' to a particular way of working or having to conform to a given way of thinking.

However, in an academic culture that appears to increasingly value the focus on measurable outcomes and their impact, this way of working can have its disadvantages: 'I'm sometimes vulnerable to peer reviews where the commentators say the paper doesn't contain enough of this or that subject area... There's a feeling that I'm just skimming the surface because I'm not concentrating on a given discipline'. The working environment during the pandemic appears to have magnified these issues for the participant, making professional identity a complex and potentially confusing quest.

Summary

The research suggests that identity is both within and external to the individual and is impacted significantly by environmental factors. This was evidenced in individual reflections detailing specific challenges encountered during lockdowns. However, the reflections show that some participants found the change in working practices enabled them to critique previous practice and presented opportunities to enhance their ways of working in the future. A particular benefit highlighted was how the effective use of ICT had a positive impact on teaching and learning as well as creating efficiencies in other areas such as education management.

The metaphor of the looking glass has identified both contracting and expanding lenses. The sense of isolation experienced by some had a contracting effect in terms of motivation and physical proximity to others. Whilst the pandemic may have encouraged some to narrow their focus in order to maintain a level of control, for others it had the opposite effect when they realised the potential of relinquishing some of their authority. Some narrowed their focus to what they knew best, or felt most comfortable with, whereas others took the opportunity to critique current practice and experiment with new ideas. In summary what we have seems to be a bi-focal looking glass—professional perceptions narrow or increase depending on which aspects of the pandemic we choose to look at and through which lens.

References

- Akkerman, S. F., & Meijer, P. (2011). A dialogical approach to conceptualizing teacher identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27, 308–319.
- Arjava, M. (2018). Tensions and striving for coherence in an academic's professional identity work. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 23(3), 291–306.
- Avis, J. (1996). The Enemy Within: Quality and Managerialism in Education. In J. Avis, M. Bloomer, G. Esland, D. Gleeson, & P. Hodgkinson (Eds.), *Knowledge and Nationhood*. Cassell.
- Avis, J. (2005). Beyond Performativity: Reflections on Activist Professionalism and the Labour Process in Further Education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 20(2), 209–222.
- Badiou, A. (2005). *Being and Event* (O. Feltham Trans.) Continuum (Original work published 1988).
- Ball, S. J. (2003). The teacher's soul and the powers of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(2), 215–228.
- Bathmaker, A-M., & Avis, J. (2013). Inbound, outbound or peripheral: The impact of discourses of 'organisational' professionalism on becoming a teacher in English further education. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 34(5), 731–748.
- Bolton, G. (2001). *Reflective Practice, Writing and Professional Development*. Sage.
- Carroll, L. (1998). *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There (The Centenary Edition)*. Penguin Classics.
- Churchman, D., & King, S. (2009). Academic practice in transition: Hidden stories of academic identities. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 14(5), 507–516.
- Collini, S. (2012). *What are Universities For?* Penguin.
- Cordingley, P., Crisp, B., Johns, P., Thomas, P., Campbell, C., Bell, M., & Bradbury, M. (2019). *Constructing Teachers' Professional Identities*. Educational International: Brussels.

- Courtney, S. (2015). Corporatised Leadership in English Schools. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 47(3), 214–231.
- Crossley, J., & Vivekananda-Schmidt, P. (2009). The development and Evaluation of a Professional Self Identity Questionnaire to measure evolving professional self-identity in health and social care students. *Med Teach*. Dec 31(12), E603–7.
- Department for Innovation Business and Skills (2012). Professionalism in Further Education. *Final Report of the Independent Review Panel*. BIS.
- Evetts, J. (2009). The management of professionalism: A contemporary paradox. In S. Gewirtz, P. Mahony, I. Hextall, & A. Cribb (Eds.), *Changing teacher professionalism: international trends, challenges and ways forward*. Routledge.
- Gronn, P. (2002). Distributed Leadership. In Leithwood, K., Hallinger, P., Seashore-Lewis, K., Furmann-Brown, G., Gronn, P., Mulford, W., & Riley, K. (Eds.), *Second International Handbook of Education Leadership and Administration* (pp. 653–696). Kluwer.
- Hooks, B. (2003). *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. Routledge.
- Hopkins, N. (2013). *Citizenship and Democracy in Further and Adult Education*, Springer.
- Ibarra, H. (1999). Provisional Selves: Experimenting with image and identity in professional adaptation. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(4), 764–791.
- Johnston, J. L. (2012). Using identify as a tool for investigation: A methodological option in the researcher's toolbox. *International Journal of Arts and Sciences*, 5(5), 1–9.
- Kerz, L., Metzler, E. T., & Ryan, K. C. (2021). Teaching in the Time of COVID-19: Reconceptualizing Faculty Identities in a Global Pandemic. *Journal of Teaching and Learning with Technology*, 10(1), 172–184.
- Kovacs, H., Pulfrey, C., & Monnier, E-C. (2021). Surviving but not thriving: Comparing primary, vocational and higher education teachers' experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown. *Education and Information Technologies*, 26, 7543–7567.

- Krogh Christensen, M., Schmidt Nielsen, K-J., & Dyhrberg O'Neill, L. (2022). Embodied teacher identity: A qualitative study on 'practical sense' as a basic pedagogical condition in times of Covid-19. *Advances in Health Sciences Education* [early online version].
- McAdams, D. P. (2001). The Psychology of Life Stories. *Review of General Psychology*, 5(2), 100-122.
- McNaughton, S. M., & Billot, J. (2016). Negotiating academic teacher identity shifts during higher education contextual change. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 21(6), 644-658.
- Menter, I. Muschamp, Y., Nicolls, P., Ozga, J., & Pollard, A. (1997) *Work and Identity in the Primary School*. Open University Press.
- Minzberg, H. (1988). Covert Leadership: Notes on Managing Professionals. *Harvard Business Review*, 76, 140-147.
- Murphy, M., & Curtis, W. (2013) 'The Micro-Politics of Micro-Leadership: Exploring the Role of Programme Leader in English Universities', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 35(1): 34-44.
- Robson, J. (2006). *Teacher Professionalism in Further and Higher Education: Challenges to culture and practice*. Routledge.
- Sachs, J. (2010). The Activist Teaching Profession. In Goodson, I., & Hargreaves, A. (Eds.), *Professional Learning Series*. Open University Press.
- Thompson, C. (2019). *The Magic of Mentoring – developing others and yourself*. Routledge.
- Thompson, C. (2018). Finding the Glass Slipper – the impact of leadership on innovation in Further Education. *Fellowship Report*. Further Education Trust for Leadership.
- Thompson, C., & Hopkins, N. (2019). Cinderella and other stories. An exploration of practitioners' views on bringing further education out of the shadows. *Encyclopedia: Journal of Phenomenology and Education*, 23(53), 55-14.

- Thompson, C., & Wolstencroft, P. (2015). Promises and Lies: An Exploration of Curriculum Managers' Experiences in FE. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 39(3), 399–416.
- Thompson, C., & Wolstencroft, P. (2018). Trust into mistrust: The uncertain marriage between public and private sector practice for middle managers in education. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 23(2), 213–230.
- Väläsantanen, K., Paloniemi, S., Räikkönen, E., & Hökkä, P. (2020). Professional agency in a university context: Academic freedom and fetters. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 89 [article 103000], 1–12.

Chapter 11

Micaela Castiglioni

The pandemic and disorienting narratives of old age

'Si sta come d'autunno sugli alberi le foglie'

[We hang like leaves in autumn]

(G. Ungaretti, 1918)

'I AM STAYING HOME', alone. Aldo's story

Methodological note: This chapter is the outcome of the initial, exploratory phase—implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic—of a broader, ongoing research project. Due to budgetary constraints, at this preliminary stage of the research process we collected only 20 short 'narrative vignettes' from older men and women (70–90 years old), who were invited to represent old age, themselves in general, and themselves during the pandemic (cf., Aldo's story).

Based on these texts, we identified a set of key words and themes, which we then further explored and investigated during a series of webinars (one of which is described in this chapter) with both invited experts and lay audiences. During these events, the perspectives of the experts were complemented by those of various practitioners (education specialists, psychologists, sociologists, etc.).

The webinars enabled us to identify what we have defined as different 'types of old age'.

We are currently analysing data collected from a larger group of participants using a more diverse range of qualitative research instruments (such as self-interviews, focus groups, etc.).

Our research is epistemologically informed by phenomenology and narrative constructivism.

'My name is Aldo. I live in Milan, and I turned eighty this past February. My son, Fabrizio, lives in Rome; he has a good set-up there. We speak on the phone once a week, every Saturday around lunchtime; I also talk to the kids, but it's not like having them around. I was married to Anna for 53 years, until one November morning two years ago she never woke up again: gone, just like that, in her sleep. Everybody told me: "A nice way to die, the best way..."

Maybe it is the best way—if it can be said that one way of dying is better than another—but this way, I didn't even get the chance to say goodbye to her. I only know that she is gone, and with her everything is gone: the affection, our game of cards in the afternoon, her comments on the news on TV, her getting mad and snorting to herself over football, or the aroma of her meat sauce (nobody ever made one as good as hers).

I have had to reinvent myself, at my age. So, I learned to go shopping, to cook... simple things, nothing complicated, but the most difficult thing was finding peace of mind. The first winter without my wife was very hard; then a friend invited me to the district club, in a large room beside the parish centre near my home. The name says it all: "Centro VarieEtà" [Mixed Ages Centre]. The first time I entered the hall, I felt like a fish out of water. I've never been a bar type. But then I realized that, at 79, I can't afford to be so picky. So, when I go, I can make the effort to exchange a few words about the penalty they gave to Ronaldo, or the latest stunt by some politician or other. It is better not to make a fuss—so Anna would have told me—and so I lift my eyes up to heaven, and I listen.

I go there day in day out. As long as the weather is fine, I never let an afternoon go to waste. It helps me to talk to other people. We talk a lot about the past, about the jobs we used to do, about the strikes in the 1970s, and the economic struggles of our youth, which, viewed in hindsight through the binoculars of age, seem to me to be beautiful things. Children are criticised and grandchildren praised. The Club has become my world. I don't have Internet and I don't care, amongst other reasons because the people in my world don't have it either.

I do have a mobile phone; mine has nice big keys; my son gave it to me for Christmas. We all have mobile phones, but at the Club we never exchanged numbers. If I had known that "that 23rd of February" was going to be the last time..., I would have asked at least Antonio and Michele for their numbers.

I've been locked up at home for over a month now. Kind young people drop by with the groceries and medicines I order once a week. I always give them a tip. Even if they don't want to take it, I give it anyway—they deserve it. They knock on my door, we exchange a few words, they leave my bags on the doormat, and that's it. When I hear the number of deaths announced on the news, I think about the "VarieEtà" club. The other night, an ambulance stopped at the top of the street, where Michele lives—I didn't sleep all night. At six in the morning, I was already up. It was raining outside. I didn't know what to do, so I took out a box of old photos and started looking at them... 1966—my wife and I smiling in the gardens of Villa Olmo on Lake Como; 1968—Fabrizio as a baby; Carnival 1972—Fabrizio dressed up as Zorro; June 1973—a Fiat 128 Sport, our new car! 1980—Alassio [a seaside resort in Liguria]. With each picture [I felt] a different emotion. The memories began to resurface and with them the feelings that bear witness to a life lived to the full, to real physical prowess, to goals materially achieved. A few smiles and many tears, between me and myself, looking back over the trials of that full life that I would not have wanted to be any different. Was I once that robust and smiling man who lifted Fabrizio up with one hand to teach him how to swim, or who painted the house in a weekend? Nowadays, in a weekend, at best, I change the sheets on my bed. As soon as all this ends, I am going to take the photos of my son's graduation to the Club; I'm going to show Antonio what my

128 Sport was like. I haven't always been like now, without a driving license. I had nice cars, I worked hard in the factory, I had a role of responsibility, and I could afford it. As soon as all this ends, I hope that Antonio and Michele will come back to the Club, I really hope so. For now, IORESTOACASA, alone'⁵ (Castiglioni, 2020).

'STAY AT HOME', I STAY AT HOME, ALONE

'RESTATE A CASA' ['STAY AT HOME', I STAY AT HOME ALONE] was the mantra addressed to adults, young adults, adolescents, and the elderly which, from the beginning of the initial lockdown in March 2020, we heard repeated almost obsessively on television, on news programmes across all networks, on talk-shows, variety shows, and advertisements.

For months, 'RESTATE A CASA' acted as a kind of slogan. If there had not been rules, or ministerial and governmental restrictions, with the threat of heavy fines or even criminal charges for not respecting them—in brief, all the interventions that prompted this explicit and widely communicated warning message—what would have happened? Would a large proportion of citizens of all ages have gone outside their homes anyway? Defying, underestimating, or ignoring the power of the virus? And thereby putting themselves and the community at risk? Most likely they would have, considering the tendency for crowds to gather that we have witnessed over and over, including on recent occasions, and in light of TV and newspaper reports that 40% of Italians, even during the severe spring 2020 lockdown, quietly continued to go about their business, in breach of the restrictive measures.

Suddenly, the lives of adolescents, young people, adults, and elders, whatever we prefer to call them (Castiglioni, 2019), were disrupted by the limitation of individual and collective freedom with a view to safeguarding and protecting the entire community, in particular the most fragile and vulnerable including the old.

From a more radical perspective, we might suggest that there is a fine line between the curtailment of individual freedoms in the interests of public health

⁵ Aldo's story was collected and transcribed by Nadia Rossi—an adult education tutor at the Department of Human Sciences for Education at Milano-Bicocca University.

and Foucauldian mechanisms of control, a viewpoint that has been adopted by sectors of the public and of Italian political leadership.

The health emergency and the political–institutional measures put in place have demanded that we adapt to norms, rules, and prohibitions.

The term adaptation, for those of us who are involved in adult education, must necessarily elicit careful and critical reflection, if we are grasp its nebulous, contrasting, ambivalent, and even, risky nature, clearly alongside its more understandable and justifiable aspects.

Even if the percentage of 'I'm going out anyway, no matter what...' might have increased if prohibitions and restrictions had not been put in place, it nonetheless appears to me that the issue merited at least scrutiny—if not action—from a more complex and critical observational vantage point, not least in case should we ever, unfortunately, be faced with other, similar or comparable, emergency situations.

Such scrutiny is even more important when the subjects concerned are older adults, with their everyday frailties and 'emergencies', alongside their resources, within their specific, personal stories of aging as women and men.

Types of Old Age

Old age, like adulthood, is not just a biological and demographic fact; it is also a social and cultural construct within which the biological dimension and that of the passing of time must be situated. As a prismatic and shifting construct, old age is subject to a sort of ambivalence and contradiction that flows from the potential gap between self–representations/attributions and hetero representations/attributions, a phenomenon that also applies to adulthood more generally (Tramma, 2008).

This shapes a set of narratives about late adulthood that are not always consistent with one another or appropriate. These narratives may be understood as rhetorics of old age, which in turn are underpinned by what we might term, typologies of old age, as conveyed on TV, in advertising, the print media, literature, film, etc.

Within the two macro-rhetorics of defeated and desperate old age—as Erikson (1981) calls it—versus efficient and victorious old age, the second of which can be confused with the excessive pursuit of youthfulness, it is possible to identify several subtypes of old age/older adults, which we may view as forms of dismissal or segregation of this life stage.

How many and what dismissed/segregated types of old age, or even denial of natural and human old age, are there? Like denied childhood, we sometimes observe the phenomenon of denied old age, for reasons that we can only partially grasp. Two phases of life, one at the beginning and one at the end, which in this respect are similar to one another.

Let us examine some typified models (Castiglioni, 2019):

- *Ridiculed old age*, featuring the excessive and protracted pursuit of youthfulness. This type occurs when older men and women are attributed with: attitudes, traits, behaviours, needs, and desires that revolve around being continuously on the move and travelling to relatively distant spaces and places; perennial energy and vitality; investment in caring for themselves and their bodies in terms of fitness; the constant quest for social spaces characterized by party games, and the pursuit of pleasure, including sexual pleasure. The last-mentioned tendency is particularly unseemly in the case of older women (Rigotti, 2018).
- *Advertised old age*, closely related to the first type. A source of profit for the marketing and consumer industries, made up of older men and women seeking the latest product for healthy nutrition, permanent health, perfect eyesight and hearing, regular sleep patterns, wrinkle-free skin, and thick hair. It includes elders who get on and off low-cost planes, cruise ships, and high-speed trains, keep themselves busy going to the gym, Latin American dance classes, wear various types of leisure clothing, and are more vital and energetic than many adults and young people.
- *Decrepit old age*, when only deficiencies, distress, weakness, and illness are attributed to the elderly. Due to mistaking their solely

physiological fragility for a form of vulnerability. Whereas frailty within certain limits—as Eugenio Borgna (2014) points out—can paradoxically represent a resource, if we understand it as bearing the potential for a more nuanced, profound, authentic, and shared sensibility that is distant from coarse utilitarian logic. An intelligent fragility, that of the elderly, which allows them to get to the essence of things.

- *Old age as a resource*, typical of older men and women who are still in good health, and/or sufficiently economically well off, who offer support to their married children and grandchildren, in a contemporary context where political–institutional welfare is lacking and the younger generations are increasingly less economically independent than their parents/grandparents.
- *'Grandparented' old age*, this applies to elderly grandmothers and grandfathers who still take—in my view, excessive—charge for minding, entertaining, and playing with their grandchildren. Grandmothers, having fulfilled their maternal duties towards their daughters and sons, risk having to continue, for long periods, to provide parental-like care—among other consequences, with intergenerational implications that are not always easy to manage. Grandfathers on their part are involved in recreational activities with their grandchildren, both inside and outside of the home. The gratuity, the pleasure of being grandparents, of being able to experience in the relationship with one's grandchildren a new and different part of oneself, as well as a different way of relating to them than to one's children, is confused with the duty of being grandparents, to the bitter end, so that the time for a physiological and perhaps even aspired-to old age is reduced when it is not outright denied. A phenomenon that Patrizia Taccani expresses as: 'old age can wait' (2008).
- *Old age as a burden*, when the elderly are only perceived as an inconvenient disruption of the everyday routines of their children or grandchildren, given that they require commitment, an investment of

energy and time, which must be taken from other occupations and activities viewed as more pleasant. An older adult who represents a burden corresponds to a younger adult that is forced to curtail their freedom and make sacrifices.

- *Prescribed old age*, determining what the elderly must and must not be, in that they must eat what others, whether family members or carers, have decided for them. They must go to bed and get up at specific times, preferably early in the morning and not late in the evening; they must move around the house at least a little; they must not watch television for too long; they must take a nap after lunch, but not an excessively long one; they must spend some time on the balcony in summer, etc.
- *Infantilised old age*, a type represented by elderly people whom hospital staff immediately address informally, or worse still, call them 'grandmother' or 'grandfather'; a situation that can also occur in a taxi, or at the information counter in any public office. Old people addressed in a style suitable for small children 'come on, be good, eat something', 'come on, make me happy', 'have you washed your hands?', 'Come on, do it for me'. They are not entrusted with the daily management of their own money, even if they are mentally lucid. This task is assigned to their caregiver because their children think that they will waste money on useless purchases, on a whim. Their actions are excessively kept in check for fear that they will get hurt, that they will cause trouble, that they will slow down the adults who take care of them, etc., just as with small children.
- *Angelic old age*, when older men and women are viewed as only animated by drives, emotions, and feelings of goodness, generosity, and altruism. Individuals to be protected, who are almost ethereal.
- *Selfish old age*, when, on the contrary, elders are attributed with exclusively self-centred attitudes, closed-mindedness, withdrawing into themselves and being wholly taken up with their own needs.
- *Asexual old age*, not unlike angelic old age, this is when elders are and considered devoid of emotional life, vitality, and intimate feelings (Castiglioni, 2019).

- *Medicalised old age*, when being old coincides with a succession of drugs, supplements, and medical aids, to the extent of transforming the elder's home into a sort of hospital room or rehabilitation centre.

Narratives of Old Age in Pandemic Times

At the webinar *Old age today*, designed and organized by the inter-university research group NUSA–New Adult Subjectivities⁶ in collaboration with the journal *Pedagogika.it*, which was the second in a series of seminars⁷ entitled *The pandemic as a time of change: in what sense and in what direction?*, the author of this paper, with Grazia Zuffa⁸ and Marina Piazza⁹ presented the typification/narratives of contemporary old age outlined above, with a view to stimulating reflection as to which of these models the COVID-19 public health emergency had exalted and amplified, making them into dominant narratives that then acted to hinder a realistic view of the complexity and multifactoriality of old age, offering instead a geometrized, linearized, and univocal interpretation with potentially negative implications and repercussions in terms of short-sighted and less than effective (Castiglioni, 2019) welfare and care interventions.

Furthermore, reductive readings of the aging process and consequently of old age, is a feature of multiple areas of discourse and even of certain scientific or disciplinary perspectives.

The narratives of old age that the pandemic certainly reinforced—a perspective that I share with Grazia Zuffa and Marina Piazza (Castiglioni, 2019)—include its infantilisation, which, to be more specific, has taken the

⁶ NUSA–Nuove Soggettività Adulte [New Adult Subjectivities] is an interuniversity research group headed by the author of this paper. The other members are: Raffaele Bellandi (educator); Roberto Bezzi (Head of Education, Bollate prison); Laura Caruso (Mutual Aid Group for Trans-gender Culture and Ethics); Manuela Gallerani (Università degli Studi di Bologna); Barbara Mapelli (education specialist; expert in the pedagogy of gender differences); Roberto Melloni (psychologist and psychotherapist); Maria Piacente (editor *Pedagogika.it*); Susanna Ronconi (researcher, trainer, expert in autobiographical methods). The publishing house Edizioni ETS di Pisa has brought out a new book series NUSA–Nuove Soggettività adulte, under the editorship of the author of this paper.

⁷ The webinar was held on 11/03/2021 and may be viewed on www.Pedagogika.it; www.nusablog.org and YouTube.

⁸ Psychologist on National Bioethics committee.

⁹ Sociologist and writer. My thanks go to Marina Piazza and Grazia Zuffa for having co-presented and moderated the seminar with me.

form of non-recognition of older adults' capability to exercise responsibility and free choice. Why would they have violated the rules and regulations that required them to stay indoors for their own safety and that of others? When in doubt, and in the absence of institutional, local-area strategies, etc., it is easier and safer to prescribe and proscribe. During the COVID emergency behaviours, rules, prohibitions were prescribed to elders, while many of their other behaviours, choices and freedoms were proscribed. This meant that the model of prescribed and proscribed old age also came to fore.

Alongside infantilisation, we witnessed the extreme medicalisation of old age, as discussed by Grazia Zuffa during the webinar.

We saw the elderly as struggling with the pandemic principally from the biological and medical points of view, almost completely overlooking the feelings of fear and anxiety that many of them were experiencing and attributing only marginal importance to the other facet of their suffering: loneliness.

What about their loneliness, possible sadness, melancholy, or depression? It was as though older people lacked an inner world and only consisted of deficient bodies.

We concerned ourselves exclusively—as Grazia Zuffa has reminded us—with the 'health of the body' (Castiglioni, 2019) as though health had nothing to do with emotionality, affectivity, emotions, and sociality, especially in dramatic situations such as a public health emergency and in the case of people who were already experiencing forms of frailty, albeit that they were also endowed with resources and skills.

Undoubtedly, the health emergency that we experienced made the biological and medical dimensions of COVID more pressing in the short term; however, at least over the medium-long time, in my view, we are guilty of overlooking the emotional, social, and relational emergency that has affected all age groups, and not just the elderly. As Grazia Zuffa has emphasized, the question undoubtedly deserved to be raised and investigated as a critical issue, including with a view to possible future emergency situations.

Added to this was the dimension of media communication during the emergency, which paradoxically generated much confusion, contradictory

information, disorientation, and ambivalence, along with genuine anxiety and fear during all the phases of the pandemic, including during the rollout of the vaccination campaign.

How can an elderly person be expected to feel when they are alone, confined to their homes, forced into a sort of social withdrawal, during which they are obliged to deal with the presentification of death? Let us not forget that many old people, who found themselves in this situation, for fear of dying alone, avoided going to hospital or arrived there too late. In this regard, Marina Piazza speaks of 'a confrontation with death, without the right to mourning, in the absence of a collective dimension' (Castiglioni, 2019).

Based on this dramatic experience, we should at least have learned that fragility, or institutional inadequacy, cannot be counteracted by imposing social isolation.

Furthermore, we need to acknowledge what happened in the nursing homes, where safe protocols for allowing family members to visit their elders were only introduced very late in the day. Here, we might say that old age was outright mortified.

Grazia Zuffa has pointed out the contradictory approach to the elderly, who on the one hand were the main focus of attention, while on the other being experienced as a risk, given that they were more likely to be struck down by COVID, and therefore more contagious and, as such, to be forced into isolation.

Initially, this dynamic also gave rise to intergenerational conflict between old people and adolescents and/or young adults: a cynical form of *mors tua, vita mea*.

Thus, during the health emergency, the narrative of decrepit old age also dominated, in that the elderly were attributed almost exclusively with deficits, problems, and weaknesses. Older adults were seen as vulnerable by default, without considering that a certain amount of fragility—as Eugenio Borgna (2014) has pointed out, and as outlined above—can paradoxically also represent a resource.

Theirs is a vital fragility that needs to engage physically present with others, alternating private and even solitary moments with moments of relational and social life.

Suddenly, during the pandemic, we went from the stereotype of overactive old age and elders as a resource for children, to old age as a state of utter lack. As though there were no third, more realistic approach to old age that integrates both aspects. That considers the individual elder's personal traits and life history as well as external, contextual, social, and relational factors.

Marina Piazza has reminded us that the COVID health emergency made the need to 'question old age'—or perhaps we should say the different narratives of old age—even more evident, especially with a view to informing the care and self-care of older adults.

Aldo's Story: 'I will have been'. And other Stories...

Aldo's story speaks of an old man who lives alone, who during the early stages of the COVID-19 emergency may have experienced loneliness, but who was able to protect himself by nourishing intimate memories and whose present had a future (Benasayag & Cohen, 2020), in terms of his motivation and desire (Stoppa, 2021) to re-establish meaningful contact with friends and life. Following Stoppa (2021), we might associate Aldo with the future perfect tense.

However, not all stories of older adults resemble that of Aldo, or that of well-known personalities, such as Professor Silvia Vegetti Finzi, as introduced in a newspaper feature by the journalist Giusi Fasano (2021, pp. 18–19).

Silvia Vegetti Finzi says:

Until recently it was a virtue and a proud symbol of privacy and self-sufficiency to say, "I don't know my next-door neighbours". On the contrary, I believe that nowadays it is of more value than ever before for each and every one of us to know how to ask for and give help. I have become very good friends with my concierge, I am constantly in touch with a couple who are my

neighbours and who share their lunches with me. Early in the morning, we exchange photos of the dawn sky by e-mail [...] It is not a welfare relationship, it is a give and take that goes beyond need, it is a new form of care. There comes a time in life when we need someone to need us (Fasano, 2021, p. 19).

The need of or desire for social contact, in times of COVID, permeates—we may surmise—the stories of all older women and men. Of course, differences in background and current life circumstances, the extent to which an individual elder has previously cultivated their interests, their existing network of relationships also play a key role in shaping outcomes.

Loneliness or the experience of loneliness cannot be alleviated by medical concern exclusively focused on bodies that have been infected by, or need to be sheltered from, the virus.

This would be like asserting that the technical solution of distance learning has adequately catered for the emotional needs of adolescents and young adults.

Responding to the Key Challenges Both During and After COVID

We have seen very clearly how the public health emergency brought to the fore the gaps in our national health service, especially regarding the local area network which had already been undermined by a lack of investment, determining poor coordination between hospitals, general practitioners, health boards, and other local bodies/services.

Networking among the key services was also non-existent when it came to the frailties of stories of old age that were similar to one other but also different: as is the case at the other life stages too, all these stories reflect complexity and complex needs. Which require complex responses. In keeping with this perspective is the following extract from an interview with Dr. Luigi Cavana, Head of Oncohematology at Piacenza Hospital in Northern Italy during the second phase of the COVID-19 emergency.

In the *Good News* feature of *Corriere della Sera* [national daily newspaper] on 19 May 2020, during what continued to be the most demanding days of

the pandemic, Dr. Cavana chose to define himself as a 'family doctor', given that he had begun to also deliver medical care to his patients directly in their homes, including his cancer patients, whether or not they had acquired a coronavirus infection.

In the doctor's own words: 'The healthcare staff have given proof of themselves, proof of great humanity' (Fasano, 2021, p. 7). In answer to the reporter's question: 'What did you find in the homes of the sick?', the eminent physician replied:

Many elderly, lonely and frightened people. The welcome that they gave us was touching, they saw us as saviours [...] They felt cared for, listened to. Many repeated to us: "However things work out, at least someone came". For us, that already means a lot. It means everything [...] (Fasano, 2021, p. 7).

Continuing the conversation, the journalist asks: 'Did you have any criteria for choosing where to intervene?'. The answer was:

Wherever we were asked to help. Where people were loneliest. Some had just lost a husband, a brother, a child... We often found ourselves crying along with them. They knew nothing about the funeral arrangements, they had had no further news of a family member who had ended up in hospital (Fasano, 2021, p. 7).

Medical communication, while obviously indispensable, is not sufficient to contain acute emotional suffering and loneliness. Older adults need more sensitive attention, a delicate and kind word or two from their healthcare practitioners.

In this regard, Professor Claudio Mencacci, president of the Italian Society of Neuropsychopharmacology, told the journalist Giusi Fasano that:

'Loneliness hurts'. Indeed. More than loneliness, Mencacci spoke of 'feeling alone' which is 'a factor capable of worsening the outcomes of all forms of disease: physical, mental, and cognitive. Having that feeling exacerbates disability and fragility'—he observed—'and it is such an important issue that the British made it a political matter and a couple of years ago they set up a ministry of loneliness'. Mencacci went on to comment that: 'Medicine cannot ignore and must address this feeling of loneliness' and 'while on the one hand this traumatic experience has seen the elderly suffer the most serious consequences, on the other it has shown us once more that they have an extraordinary spirit of resilience (Fasano, 2021, pp. 18–19).

Going forward, we must place our hope in the plan for reforming local healthcare that the Draghi government is currently drafting, which will be financed using €7bn from the Recovery Fund, and which provides for the setting up of community health care centres, community hospitals, and an operations centre, as well as a revisiting of the figure and role of the general practitioner (Gabanelli & Ravizza, 2021, p. 17). This reform, with its emphasis on what we might term proximity healthcare, in terms of intervening as a healthcare network, reinforcing cooperation among practitioners from different organizations, giving nurses greater autonomy and expanding their skill set, to mention only a few aspects, will demand a corresponding revisiting of the basic training provided to doctors and other healthcare professionals in order to legitimise the complementarity of medical–scientific and humanistic knowledge.

References

- Benasayag, M., & Cohen T. (2020). *Cinque lezioni di complessità*. Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli.
- Borgna, E. (2014). *La fragilità che è in noi*. Einaudi.
- Castiglioni, M. (2020). L'educazione degli adulti ai tempi del coronavirus. *Pedagogika.it. Rivista di educazione, formazione e cultura*, 24(2), 73–79. Coop. STRIPES.
- Castiglioni, M. (2019). *Il posto delle fragole. Intimità e vecchiaie*. Edizioni ETS.
- Erikson, E. H. (1981). *L'Adulto. Una prospettiva interculturale*. Armando Editore.
- Fasano, G. (22/01/2021). SOLITUDINI/2, lo, la portinaia e le mail che ci scambiamo all'alba (pp. 18–19). *ANZIANI, 7. Corriere della Sera*.
<https://www.corriere.it/sette/attualita/7-web-rep-siamo-soli-anziani-fasano/index.shtml>.
- Gabanelli, M., & Ravizza, S. (24/05/2021). Cure sul territorio. Ecco cosa cambierà (p. 17). *Corriere della Sera*.
http://www.centrostudi.50epiu.it/Schede/cure_sul_territorio_ecco_cosa_cambiera.
- Rigotti, F. (2018). *De senectute*. Einaudi.
- Schiavi, G. (19/05/2020). Luigi Cavanna, un medico in famiglia. Ha salvato i pazienti, casa per casa. *BUONE NOTIZIE. L'impresa del bene. Corriere della Sera*.
https://www.corriere.it/buone-notizie/20_maggio_19/luigi-cavanna-medico-famiglia-ha-salvato-pazienti-casa-casa-ef797b68-990a-11ea-8e5b-51a0b6bd4de9.shtml.
- Stoppa, F. (2021). *Le età del desiderio. Adolescenza e vecchiaia nella società dell'eterna giovinezza*. Feltrinelli.
- Taccani, P. (2008). Anziani eterni adulti. Per quanto ancora?. M. Castiglioni (Ed.), *Adulità. Vol. 28. I Nuovi Adulti* (pp. 25–26). Guerini e Associati.
- Tramma, S. (2017). *Pedagogia dell'invecchiare. Vivere (bene) la tarda età*. Franco Angeli.
- Tramma, S. (1997). *Educazione degli adulti*. Guerini e Associati.

Chapter 12

Aurora Coelho & Cláudio Garcia

Effects of the pandemic on the Roma community of Cerro do Bruxo

Introduction

In 2020, COVID-19 was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern by the World Health Organization, an outbreak with the highest level of alert, having been classified as a pandemic on March 11 of the same year. In March 2020, life as people knew changed radically. Most people were confined to their homes, which implied significant changes for most of the population. Vulnerable groups became more isolated, as is the case of part of the Roma community. This investigation intends to study the effects of the pandemic on the Roma community of Cerro do Bruxo, in Faro. Due to our experience with vulnerable populations and observing their day-by-day difficulties, we intend to critically analyse a group of people who were already isolated and discriminated against before COVID-19 and study how the pandemic has further worsened this situation.

During the 2020 confinement, the Lusco-Fusco project—funded through the Programa Escolhas of the public institute Alto Comissariado para as Migrações (ACM)—continued working in the field, despite being strongly

recommended not to, in order to respond to the new urgent needs of the population. While the ACM intervenes in the execution of public policies on migration, the Programa Escolhas has the specific mission of promoting the social integration of children and adolescents from socioeconomic vulnerability. The main objective of the Lusco–Fusco project is to contribute to the inclusion of Roma communities in the municipality of Faro, as well as reducing school absenteeism and promoting educational success, civic participation, active citizenship, intercultural dialogue, and mutual acceptance between Roma and non-Roma.

The number of Roma people in Portugal is not certain; it is estimated that there are between 40,000 and 60,000 (ACIDI, 2011). The district of Faro has the fifth largest concentration of Roma population in Portugal (2614). The ENCC (ACM, 2016) points out that the municipality of Faro is in the national top 10, with 599 Roma residing in the municipality. The district of Faro is immediately behind Lisbon and Porto in the number of Roma residents. Unlike Lisbon, however, where about 94% of Roma people live in apartments or houses, the Faro region has 68% of this population living in shacks, rudimentary housing, and overall makeshift dwellings, according to data from the National Study on Roma Communities. Regarding the types of housing, the district of Faro stands out for the high percentage of situations of illegal occupation (ca. 16.79%, according to ENCC), with poor living conditions—such as tents, containers, or vans a total of 599 people (Mendes et al., 2014).

In particular, the Lusco–Fusco participants are children and adolescents of Roma ethnicity, aged between 6 and 18, and their families, residing in the intervention area of the Agrupamento de Escolas (School District) Pinheiro e Rosa, with a special focus on the communities/camps of Cerro do Bruxo, Lejana, Sítio do Escuro, and Falfosa. They mainly correspond to the intervention areas of Escola Básica (Middle School) da Lejana and Escola Básica (Middle School) de Santa Bárbara de Nexe, considered a priority by the consortium, taking into consideration the high number of Roma children at risk.

With the urgency of understanding what needed to be done, social educators of Lusco–Fusco experienced a new professional and personal

reality. This is reflected in the collected accounts and the implications that these had on the Roma community of Cerro do Bruxo, as well as the changes that the social intervention project 'Lusco-Fusco' experienced in its intervention in the field. For this purpose, 37 questionnaire surveys were applied, distributed between adults, school-age children, and adolescents. Document analysis was also used, with the documentary information taking several forms, such as activity reports (Yin, 2001), as was the case of this article with the use of the 'Project Lusco-Fusco Interim Activity Report'.

Methodology

The questionnaire surveys aimed to describe the population and verify their perceptions regarding the pandemic in general, regarding the 2020 confinement, and then compare the data with the 2021 confinement period. Because data was collected from many respondents, this methodology is the most suitable, also for later processing of data and presenting their results (Quivy & Campenhoudt, 1998). Another reason for the choice of this methodology is due to the unfeasibility to directly observe the entire period of confinement. Thus, the response to the surveys provides the most accurate depiction of the experiences endured by the respondents (Dias, 1994), which is later corroborated with the Lusco-Fusco project.

Regarding the criteria for inclusion of participants, we took into consideration several factors. First, there was an attempt at gender balance. Second, we tried to involve as many diverse families as possible. In adults, more female individuals were surveyed, because mothers are mostly caregivers and responsible for the education of their children. During the pandemic, they were the ones who mostly resolved the daily problems and contacted the Lusco-Fusco project whenever in need of assistance.

As stated above, questionnaires were given to groups divided into adults, children, and adolescents. The adults, including 12 females and 5 males between the ages of 25 and 35, were surveyed to assess the living conditions of this population and the perceptions regarding the changes

that the confinement brought to their lives. As for school-age children and adolescents (8 females and 12 males between the ages 8 and 12), these questionnaires were given to understand what they endured, considering they went through two confinements and varied experiences in educational access.

The Cerro do Bruxo is, so far, the largest Roma community in the municipality of Faro. The latest data from Faro Social Charter (2014–2022) indicated 143 individuals residing in a total of 35 households, which represents outdated information. During the project, we found more than 200 individuals distributed between 40 households; the questionnaires involved members of 24 households, of which 17 adults and 20 children/adolescents were surveyed.

Housing Conditions

Regarding housing conditions, according to the National Study on Roma Communities in Mendes (Magano & Candeias, 2014), Faro has one of the highest percentages of illegal occupation in the country, corresponding to 4.9%. The largest surveyed population lives in shacks or rudimentary houses (68%). In the case of Cerro do Bruxo, the members of the households all live in rudimentary houses, with no legal registration. It is estimated that there are more than 30 houses of this kind, and some families have been in these living arrangements for over 20 years illegally. In the applied surveys, we can better understand the characteristics of the population and the precarious situation in which all families live.

Even though in recent years Faro has had several social policy programs—such as Local Development Contracts, the Programa Escolhas (within which Lusco–Fusco is included), Social Insertion Income, and Integrated Response Program, among others (Rede Social, 2014–2022)—this population still lives in very vulnerable conditions.

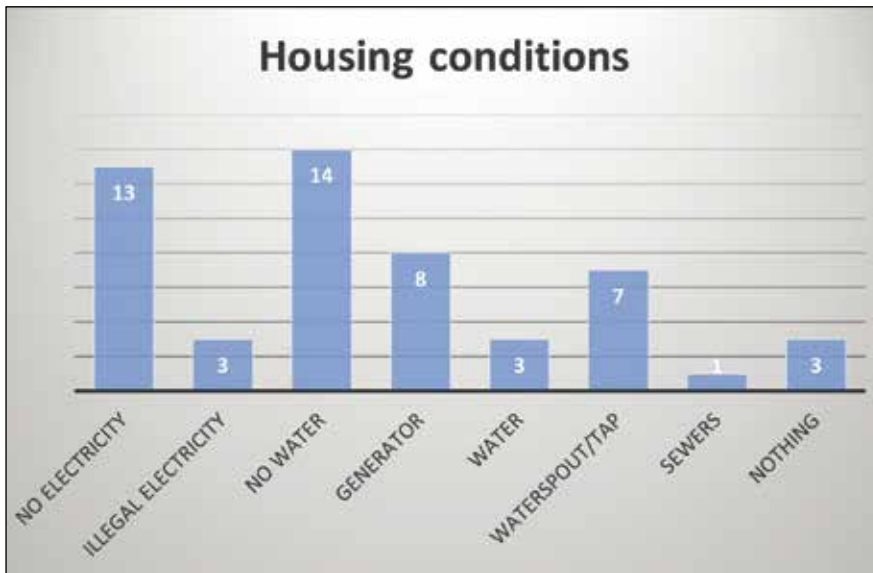


Figure 1 – Housing Conditions

The lack of housing conditions is visible in Figure 1, where we highlight that 13 individuals do not have electricity and 14 do not have running water inside their homes. Only 7 adults have access to a waterspout outside (there are only 3 waterspouts in the entire camp). Correlated with the lack of housing conditions is a lack of digital and technological access, as well as overall means of communication. On the one hand, the lack of electricity highly limits, for instance, access to the internet; on the other, low levels of education (data that will be presented later in chapter) also limit the handling of equipment. Even those who have access to a telephone mentioned the difficulty in making appointments, stating that 'it was not possible to access the services', 'they had to call and did not understand what people were saying', or 'the phone was rarely answered for appointments'.

Income

The sources of family income are also insufficient, with most people having access to the Social Insertion Income (RSI – Rendimento Social de Inserção) (Figure 2).

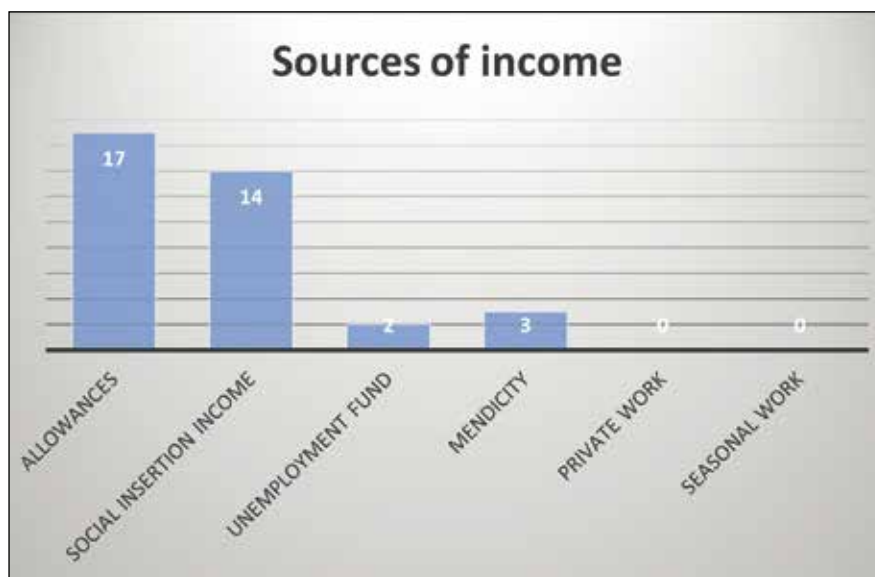


Figure 2 – Sources of Income

About Roma children and adolescents, according to data from the General Board for Education and Science Statistics (DGEEC in 2017), out of the 816 children and adolescents in the Algarve region, 701 were assigned a grade at school (680 grade A, 21 grade B).

The most vulnerable groups of people in societies in general are the elderly, the unemployed, and minorities. As a Roma community, the population studied in this chapter, falls within the latter group. Although the Roma have been in Portugal for more than 500 years, they were and continue to be the target of discrimination, racism, and social inequality

(Magano, 2010). Roma still remains a group not recognized by the majority of Portuguese society: they are not acknowledged as either a national or an ethnic minority, while most of them are national citizens not granted with as many rights, guarantees, or specific protections (Taylor, 1988). In Europe, particularly in Portugal, members of the Roma community have been prevented from asserting themselves as citizens, often being confined to a marginalized status and kept away from public space (Mendes & Magano, 2013). Social inequalities persist, expressed in high levels of poverty, low levels of education, poor living conditions, difficulties in accessing the labour market, uncertainty of income and, sometimes, dependence on social benefits (Magano & Mendes, 2016).

Qualifications



Figure 3 – Qualifications per School Year /Grade

In Cerro do Bruxo, in terms of academic qualifications, only 35% of the respondents have completed the First Cycle (i.e., Primary School; Figure 3),

and no individuals reported education beyond that level. The same percentage (35%) applies also to individuals without any schooling. According to Bourdieu (1998), people of social classes with lower levels of education have high birth rates. Low levels of education tend to be correlated with the average number of children families have, as demonstrated in Figure 4.

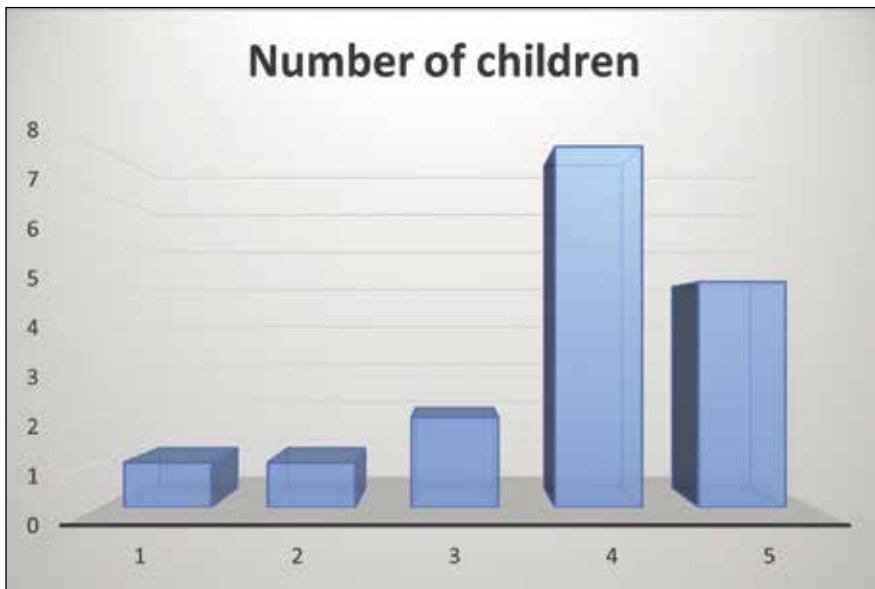


Figure 4 – Number of Children

In the analysed population sample, 8 of the 17 respondents have 4 children and 5 of them have 5 children, that is, 76% have 4 or more children (Figure 4). It is to be noted that 76% of them only know how to write their own first name. Out of these, only one individual knows how to write their full name (Figure 6 and 7). About children and adolescents, there were 12 males and 8 females. Although the ages are between 9 and 17 years old—an average of 12 years old (Figure 5)—, 13 of these 20 individuals do not know how to read or write, and they only know their first name.

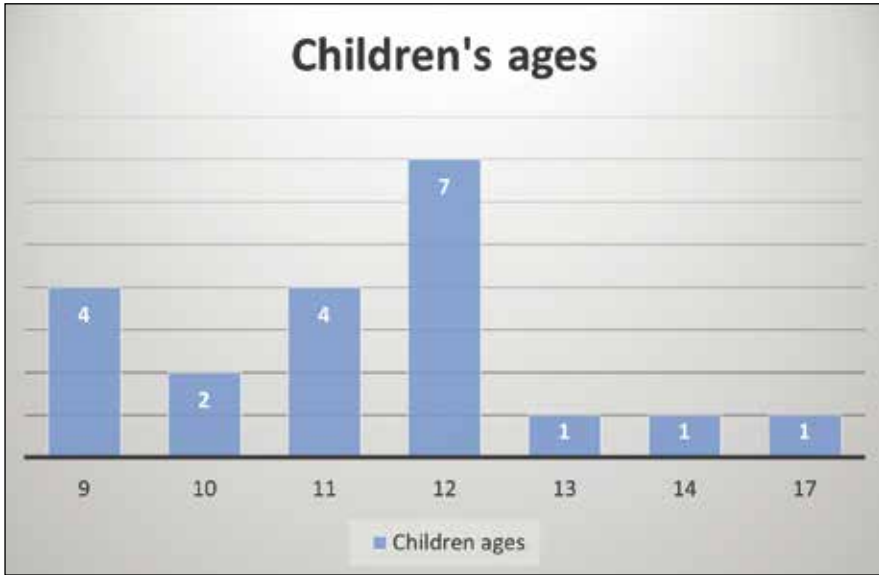


Figure 5 – Children's Ages

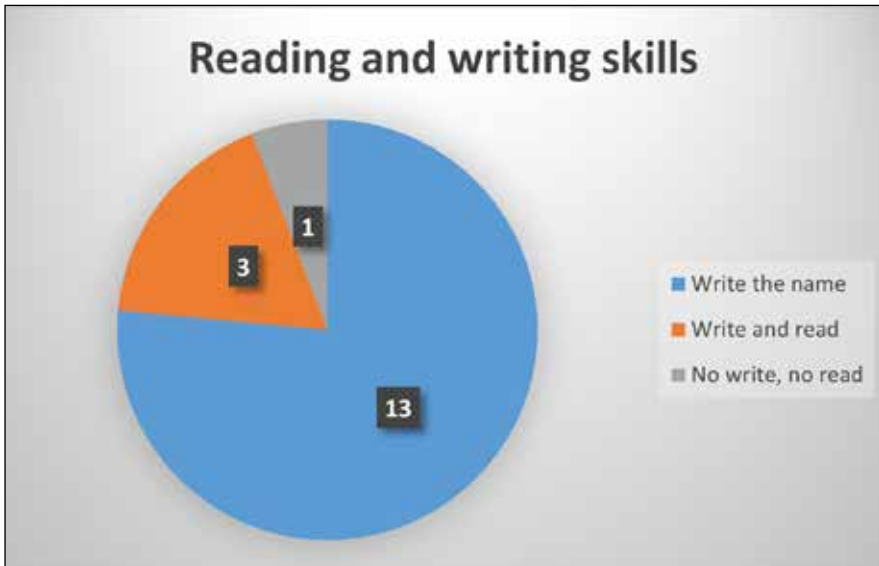


Figure 6 – Reading and Writing Skills

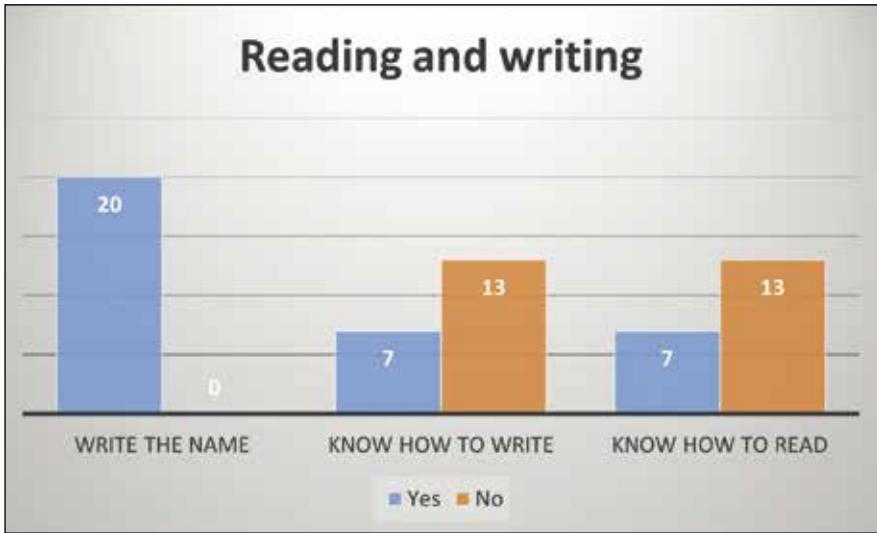


Figure 7 – Reading and Writing

Still regarding children and adolescents, despite their age, most of them attend the First Cycle (Figure 8)—1 child attends the 2nd grade/year, 5 the 3rd grade/year, and another 5 the 4th grade/year. In the Second Cycle (Middle School), 4 adolescents are in the 5th grade and 4 are in the 6th grade. Lastly, we recorded 1 adolescent in High School, in the 10th grade. This sample represents the reality of Cerro do Bruxo, where most of the time children attending Primary School fail twice, and later complete it with or without the proper knowledge and skills. When they reach Middle School, whenever they have not previously acquired the needed skills, they end up being held back until they are transferred to alternative routes. Many drop out of school early because they want to work or get married. According to recent Portuguese law (Law No. 85/2009), education is compulsory until the age of 18 years old, or one must complete the 12th grade. Whenever students start to miss classes, run away from school, or drop out entirely, the CPCJ (Comissão de Proteção de Crianças e Jovens) is triggered, followed by Court action. As these processes are considerably lengthy, children often age out of these requirements, do not return to school, and there are no further

consequences apart from social exclusion and the lack of educational qualifications. According to Magano, Gomes and Mendes (2016), the highest rates of illiteracy among Roma people continue to be found in Portugal, along with early dropout rates (often without finishing the First Cycle), despite Portuguese educational policies, namely the above-mentioned compulsory education.

Access to Education, Public Services, and Health

Specifically in the Algarve, according to the DGEEC Study (2018) on the 'School Profile of the Roma Community', only 7 adolescents of Roma ethnicity attended High School, while 809 attended Primary School. At the national level, the numbers are quite indicative, as 10,762 Roma children and adolescents attended basic education (Primary and Middle School), while only 256 attended High School. More specifically, in Faro, 809 children and adolescents enrolled in basic education and 7 in High School in the 2016/2017 academic year. Out of these, only 462 children and adolescents in basic education, and 2 in High School, advanced to the next grade.

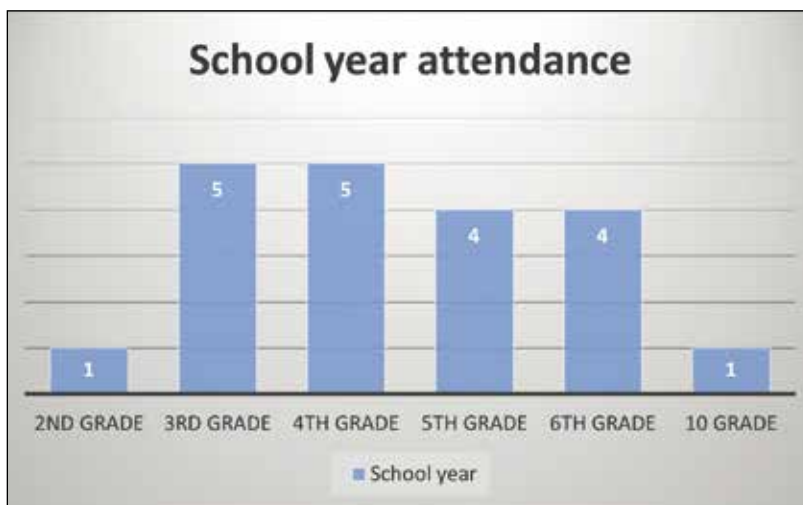


Figure 8 – School Year Attendance

Socially, according to Costa (2020), the most vulnerable and most disadvantaged people are becoming increasingly more vulnerable and disadvantaged than before. The worsening of social inequalities around the world is evident, and Portugal is no exception. Several age groups within the Portuguese society were and still are affected by the pandemic, among them school-age children and adolescents. Costa (2020) states that these generations are at a disadvantage compared to previous generations due to the pandemic, with the aggravating factor of being physically distant from their peers and from the social spaces that the school provides. These inequalities are accentuated since the educational and economic resources are disparate and of limited access. Therefore, 'the social inequalities of future opportunities between them became even deeper' (Costa, p. 8).

All gathered data lead us to the main issues pointed out in the questionnaires in terms of the pandemic in general, and the ensuing confinement in particular, with statements issued by the Roma population such as 'services asked me to call or email and I don't know how to nor have the means to do so', and 'I didn't understand anything they were saying'. The project Lusco-Fusco (2020) served as support to the community by facilitating the communication with different services (through phone calls and emails), assisting in decoding the information they were hearing and on how they should proceed afterwards, helping in accessing face-to-face services, 'speeding up food support, and above all, support[ing] and [providing] information in order to have greater inclusion' (p. 4). Meanwhile, the Lusco-Fusco project was attempting to solve the problem of access to services that required appointments. An example of this was when children and adolescents were required to enrol in school, and families had to provide Social Security and financial documents. More than 50 Revenue Service (IRS) passwords were requested, the documents were entirely processed online, and more than 40 in-person appointments were scheduled through Social Security. The latter were booked by phone, and for each call they took about 20 minutes to answer and would only allow scheduling a total of 3 appointments per phone call.

For issues such as access to health services, people were referred to go to Olhão, which is 10km away from Cerro do Bruxo. Other issues pertain to difficulties in the access to information and digital media, access to technologies, and public and private services, which were analysed both from the eyes of the community of the Cerro do Bruxo and from the perspective of the technicians of the Lusco-Fusco project. Lastly, one of the most important premises was access to education. As one of the objectives of the Lusco-Fusco project is to 'contribute to the reduction of school absenteeism and the promotion of school success for children and adolescents in the Roma Community', we wanted to know how the confinement experience affected and changed the school life of children, adolescents, and guardians in this area.

As stated by Costa, 'this pandemic has not found educational systems "free of inequalities"' (Costa, p. 46). According to Martins (2020), the months of March and April of 2020 were marked by the physical closing of schools all over the world. In some countries, there was a complete closure and in others it was partial. One of the areas significantly affected by the pandemic was the educational experience in general, and the education system and schools in particular. The closing of schools was one of these most visible effects. All over the country, schools 'reacted very differently to the re-establishment of contact with their students' (Martins, 2020, p. 39). After the closure of schools, one of the measures taken in Portugal was to continue with the school year in an online format.

In Social Education, it is often considered that the school itself is a tool to counter and reverse social inequalities. However, the pandemic has shaken this premise, 'increasing its impacts on the educational system and the clarification and deepening of inequalities in a critical way' (Martins, 2020, p. 47). Inequalities, such as access to new technologies, greatly differ between families. In the most disadvantaged classes in general, and specifically in the Cerro do Bruxo community, children and adolescents barely have access to the internet, tablets, computers, or no access at all (Formiga, 2021). Regarding the confinement periods and access to school through online learning, this community endured two different experiences.

Small-scale Solutions in a Large-scale Pandemic

The first confinement period started in March 2020 and lasted until the end of the school period of that same year. Society in general lived a very different reality that changed abruptly, particularly in Cerro do Bruxo, where the consequences of confinement were experienced intensely. Adults were faced with many changes, due to the closure of most services and businesses. This particular community was already socially isolated and became even more so: institutions were not accessible in person, and those who survived by begging stopped being able to do so. Children also greatly suffered from these changes. Specifically in relation to the school, as previously analysed, the learning experience transitioned to an online format when schools closed. Of the children and adolescents surveyed, none had a computer or internet access; therefore, such a solution excluded many of them from their educational journey. Although the adults acknowledge that the online solution was good, they stated that it was 'difficult for those who did not have a computer'. Most of the children mentioned that 'the works were delivered by Lusco-Fusco on paper'. The Lusco-Fusco project (2020), contrary to the government indications, did not abandon the field work, and such efforts turned out to be an efficient response to the issues presented. Teachers began to communicate with the parents through the Lusco-Fusco project due to the lack of means of communication, sending homework and constant feedback on a weekly basis. The project went from field interventions with First Cycle children in Cerro do Bruxo and Falfosa (about 35 children and adolescents, 20 guardians, and 15 teachers), to interventions in Cerro do Bruxo, Falfosa, Cerro do Guillhim, Estoi, and several isolated households near these locations. There were children and adolescents from preschool to high school education (96 children and adolescents, 57 guardians, and 51 teachers). Particularly in Cerro do Bruxo, teachers sent us homework on a weekly basis, after which we printed them at schools, divided them by folder per each child, delivered the assigned homework and collected those from the previous week, scanned the completed assignments, and sent them back to the teachers for grading and feedback (Lusco-Fusco, 2020). This solution was seen by the community in different

ways: some considered it an easy alternative to the problem of isolation and lack of access to online resources, while others did not find it to be optimal. All questioned individuals reported that they preferred to take classes at school, as 5 of the respondents did not have family members to help them, and the remaining ones had family members with very low qualifications (Figure 3).

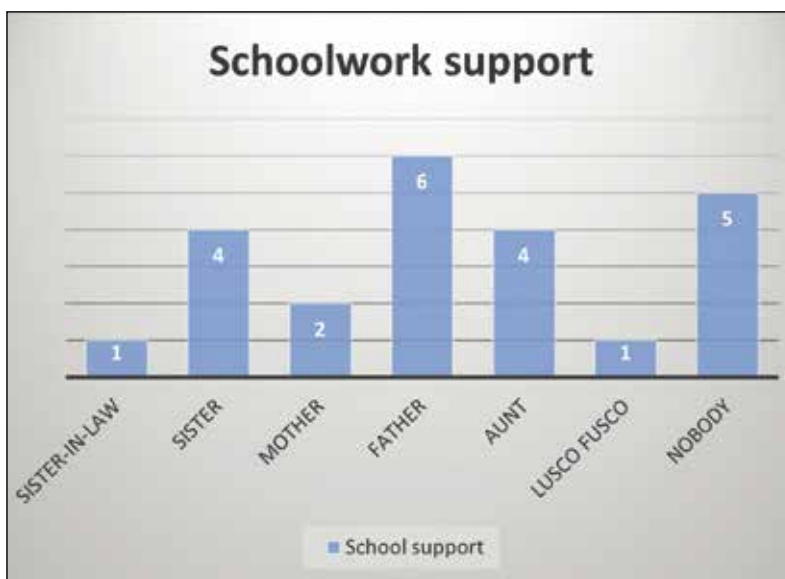


Figure 9 – Schoolwork Support

As for support with the at-home assignments, there were different responses provided. Some of the respondents had help from several family members (Figure 9), despite the latter's low qualifications. It should be noted that 5 of the respondents did not have any kind of help in their study, while the majority (6) received help from their father, 4 from their sister or aunt, 2 from their mother, and there is also a reference to their sister-in-law, as well as the assistance of Lusco-Fusco technicians.

Another response from the national government was teleschool (DGE, 2020), where a schedule was made available for each academic level with

different subjects for students to watch and have classes via television. Regarding this option, the children and adolescents of Cerro do Bruxo mentioned the following: '... I have a TV, but I don't have electricity, only a generator, which cannot always be on'. Others stated: '... I didn't understand...', while others mentioned that '... I didn't know there were classes on TV', that is, this was not a viable answer for this community either.

In the second confinement period, from January to March 2021, the Portuguese State provided the same response of online education and teleschool, but this time distributing computer equipment to all students of the 1st grade (Resolução do Conselho de Ministros No. 8-B/2021). Despite this effort, the State seemed to forget that some problems prevailed: illiteracy of parents (for schoolwork support), language barriers, lack of electricity to charge the computers, precarious housing conditions that do not allow a child to study alone (such as one-room tents with entire families), among other constraints. Thus, the difficulties pointed out by the community were the following: 'I could not connect to classes' (that is, several difficulties in online access, due to lack of technological understanding), or 'I did not understand what was being said' (due to housing space not being compatible with classes), or there were 'problems with the password' and 'it broke down' (meaning a series of equipment malfunctions). The Lusco-Fusco project at this time was at a standstill, working at a distance and, whenever possible, contacting the population. Once more, it felt that there was an attempt to homogenize a solution for a heterogeneous population with clear discrepancies and inequalities to the detriment of the more disadvantaged groups of Portuguese society, namely, the Roma.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic caught the entire community off guard, from the private sector to the public. One of the difficulties of this study, when applying the questionnaires, was to locate the participants in time for these surveys, given that there were two lockdowns, and the limited access to public services. Another difficulty of this topic is related to the limited scientific research carried out in

Portugal, with little up-to-date literature, studies, and research on this subject.

In Portugal, the first response to the pandemic was to send people to their homes, with a mandatory curfew, closing public and private services to the public, and providing 'virtual' responses to the general population. Despite quick responses from the State on how society should act in such an emergency, there were clearly shortcomings in these approaches. Unfortunately, a portion of the society was partly neglected and not included in such solutions. Specifically in the case of Cerro do Bruxo, the disadvantaged community discussed in this chapter were faced with even more difficulties than those they had before the pandemic. Although several programs have involved the Roma community over the years, there is still the need for considerable support. On the one hand, children, and adolescents—who already had prior difficulties at school—at first found themselves alienated, not having access to digital solutions or the conditions to use them. Later, they were given a computer but experienced several difficulties in keeping up with their colleagues and the schoolwork. On the other hand, adults found themselves with children and adolescents at home, most of them without having attended school and unable to help their children with their schoolwork. In addition, there were more mouths to feed daily, without the possibility of solutions such as school lunch, and with limitations in access to other necessary goods and services. The pandemic has exacerbated the inequalities between the general community and the Roma community in particular. The responses of the government and society in general were often homogenous, becoming non-inclusive for the most vulnerable portion of the society who had little to no access to digital media and information, and who were either illiterate or poorly literate. Access to healthcare, food, and education was seriously affected in this community, and there were no sufficient responses to support this group. The Lusco-Fusco project provided some assistance, but the pandemic demonstrated that vulnerable groups are among the most affected in a national emergency.

Acknowledgements: Júlia Coelho and Chris Van Leeuwen.

References

- ACIDI. (2011). *Estratégia nacional para a Integração das Comunidades Ciganas*. Secretário de Estado Adjunto do Ministro Adjunto e dos Assuntos Parlamentares/ ACIDI.
- ACM. (2016). *Estratégia nacional para a Integração das Comunidades Ciganas*. Relatório de Execução. ACM.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998). Futuro de classe e causalidade do provável. In Nogueira, M. A. & Catani, A. (Org.). *Escritos de Educação*. Petrópolis: Vozes (pp. 81–126).
- Costa, A. (2020). Desigualdades sociais e pandemia. In Carmo, R., Tavares, I. & Cândido, A. (Org.). *Um olhar sociológico sobre a crise Covid-19* (pp. 4–16). Observatório das Desigualdades.
- Decreto-Lei n.º 85/2009, de 27 de agosto. Diário da República, I Série. Assembleia da República.
- DGE. (2020). *Estudo em casa*. Accessed on March 20, 2022, in <https://estudoemcasa.dge.mec.pt/>
- DGEEC. (2018). *Perfil Escolar da Comunidade Cigana 2016/17*. Accessed on March 20, 2022, in <https://www.dgeec.mec.pt/np4/906.html>
- Dias, M. (1994). *O Inquérito por questionário: problemas teóricos e metodológicos gerais*. Universidade do Porto Faculdade de Letras.
- Formiga, I. (2021). *A exclusão e a educação na pós pandemia*. Accessed on February 30, 2022, in <https://repositorio.uniceub.br/jspui/bitstream/prefix/14315/1/%C3%8Dris%20Maria%20De%20Oliveira%20Formiga.pdf>
- Lusco-Fusco. (2020). Relatório Interno ALG-003 "Lusco-Fusco - E7G". Não Publicado.
- Magano, O., & Mendes, M. (2016). *Constrangimentos e oportunidades para a continuidade e sucesso das pessoas Ciganas* (pp. 8–26). Configurações vol.18.

- Magano, O. (2010). *Tracejar vidas normais. Estudo qualitativo sobre a integração social de indivíduos de origem cigana na sociedade portuguesa* (Doctoral thesis in sociology). Lisboa, Universidade Aberta/DCSG.
- Magano, O., Gomes, S., & Mendes, M. (2016). Introdução – Os Ciganos e a Educação. In A. P. Marques, & A. M. Brandão (Coord.). *Configurações* (pp. 5–8). *Revista de Sociologia*, n.º 18.
- Martins, S. (2020). A educação e a Covid-19: Desigualdades, experiências e impactos de uma pandemia não anunciada. In Carmo, R., Tavares, I., & Cândido, A. (Org.), *Um olhar sociológico sobre a crise Covid-19*. *Observatory of Inequalities* (pp. 37–55).
- Mendes, M., & Magano, O. (Orgs, 2013). *Portuguese Gypsies. Plural Views and New Challenges in a Transition Society*. *Social Worlds*.
- Mendes, M., Magano, O., & Candeias, P. (2014). *Estudo Nacional sobre as Comunidades Ciganas. Observatório das comunidades ciganas*. ACM.
- Quivy, R., & Campenhoudt, L. (1998). *Manual de Investigação em Ciências Sociais*. Gradiva publicações, Lda.
- Rede Social (S/D). *Carta Social. Diagnostico Plano de Desenvolvimento Social (2014–2022)*. Faro: Câmara Municipal de Faro.
- Resolução do Conselho de Ministros n.º 8-B/2021, de 4 de fevereiro. *Diário da República* n.º24 – I Série. Assembleia da República: Lisboa.
- Taylor, C. (1998). *Multiculturalismo*. Instituto Piaget.
- Yin, R. K. (2001). *Estudo de caso: planeamento e métodos* – trad. Daniel Grassi (2.ª ed.). Bookman.

Chapter 13

Paola Zonca, Federico Zamengo, Nicolò Valenzano & Marianna Peotta

Working in a local community without community: Reinventing community work in an Alpine valley during a pandemic

Introduction

Terres Monviso Incl is a European cross-border cooperation programme developed in both Italian and French mountain valleys and marginal areas around the Monviso massif. This programme aims to promote preventive health and community development by facilitating and supporting the activation of both formal and informal social networks, which can manage fragilities and enhance the resources already available in the community. The main beneficiaries of the project are all people with fragilities, including individuals suffering from chronic diseases and elderly people living in isolation due to environmental conditions. As a result, the beneficiaries are already covered by social and/or health services. The programme is administered by a multidisciplinary team of community nurses, social workers, educators, and social-health workers. The group's work manages both individual and collective care activities. The professionals' deep involvement in this project is proved by how the guiding research questions have been outlined: in fact,

training needs arose directly from them, thanks to the ongoing dialogue between the university and the local organisations.

The methodology chosen for the present participatory action research (PAR) is the critical incident technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954). This technique is identified as an effective tool in promoting reflectivity, since it proposes moments of reflection both individually—through the narration of critical events that occurred during the development of the project—and collectively—through some instances of group discussion. This methodology guides professionals in their research of resources and practical solutions to apply as a working team to improve the quality and effectiveness of their work.

In the first part of the chapter, we introduce the *Terres Monviso Incl* project and its challenges. Then, we present the multidisciplinary team involved in the training and analyse the main questions guiding the research. In the subsequent section, we define the methodological elements underlying the study. Finally, we outline the results that were achieved and utilize them to draw up some recommendations for professionals, collected through this experience.

The Context of the Research

On the Italian side, *Terres Monviso Incl* seeks to improve an integrated social–health care model. Two strategies to achieve this goal are proposed. The first strategy oversees the start-up of individualised projects from a multidisciplinary perspective, involving the engagement of various professionals with different skills. Where it innovates is in its use of tools, such as telemedicine, to implement home care and in its creation of regional reception and proximity offices, to prevent vulnerable people from institutionalisation. The second strategy concerns community social work. The International Association for Community Development (IACD) defines community development as:

a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes participative democracy, sustainable development, rights, economic opportunities, equality and social justice, through the organisation, education and empowerment of people within their communities, whether these be of locality, identity or interest, in urban and rural settings¹⁰.

Accordingly, community development is a political and social approach as well as an educational practice and a work style, which based on collaboration, support networks, and the recognition and activation of resources that are helpful to both individuals and communities.

The regions chosen for *Terres Monviso Incl* have a history of investment in local community development, thanks to other projects (such as #Com. Viso, which was part of the previous ALCOTRA programme). The projects share the aim of improving multidisciplinary community work and the will to revitalise marginalised territories, using storytelling and social animation as tools to share their inhabitants' stories. As will be shown, the biggest challenge of *Terres Monviso Incl* is to keep the two strategies—the social and health integrated system and the community development—in sync, through an ongoing dialogue.

The proposed project actions are fully consistent with some recent national and international political policies and guidelines, such as the European 2020 Strategy (Next Generation EU) and the National Strategy for 'Inner Areas' (SNAI). Moreover, good health and well-being, reduced inequality, sustainable communities, strong institutions, and partnership are five goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was adopted by all United Nation Member States in 2015.

In the following subsections, we explore the three 'souls' of *Terres Monviso Incl*.

¹⁰ <https://www.iacdglobal.org/about/>

Territory and Local Communities

'Territory' and 'community' are two closely connected concepts. Indeed, the land is the primary common resource for its inhabitants, and the community is able to create and animate places. However, modernity has greatly changed the relationship between the two and the meaning that each term can take. In terms of 'territory', in contrast to the past, nowadays 'space' and 'place' express different things. The weakening of relationships, the increase of loneliness, the advent of a new digital dimension of space, the consequent possibility of being connected despite physical absence (Giddens, 1994), and the phenomena of depopulation and marginalisation of certain geographical areas lead to the emptying of *places*, transforming them into just *spaces*. The loss of places—relational, historical, and concerned with identity (Augé, 1995)—can only be contained by vitalising actions by people (Cerosimo & Donzelli, 2020). Therefore, it is essential to promote experiences of proximity and sharing, to enhance the feeling of belonging.

This is the case with *Terres Monviso Incl*, which acts in a complex territory which is characterised by small centres and many isolated areas (Zamengo, 2019). Despite this, in recent years—especially after the pandemic—have seen a progressive return of inhabitants to the inner areas, and there are some good experiences of economic and social innovation in start-ups. Thus, it is even more important that we look for policies, methods, and tools to support the regeneration of fragile lands, starting with listening to and helping the local population (Cerosimo & Donzelli, 2020).

Care for Aged and Vulnerable People

The beneficiaries of the project are seniors living alone in isolation and vulnerable people suffering from chronic disorders. To outline the logic of policies along with both social and medical intervention, it is important to contemplate the theme of ageing. As is already known, age is a social construct: according to Peter Laslett (1992), age is connected to the notion

of identity and to the concept of time, since it is part of the circle of life. The loss of individual autonomy and one's status and role in the community, due to retirement, can result in the loss of identity. In addition, biological age may be very different from recognised or perceived age, which can also be due to chronic disease. For these reasons, seniority is a public policy issue. This thesis was reinforced by the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To increase wellness and avoid institutionalisation, we must redesign territories and services to promote and sustain an intergenerational and integrated ageing culture. Pursuing the capability approach (Sen, 2000; Nussbaum, 2002) and following the guidelines recommended by the World Health Organisation entails creating 'age-friendly cities' and territories; these 'encourages active ageing by optimising opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age' (Ronzi et al., 2020) and adapt their services to be accessible to and inclusive of vulnerable people with varying needs and capacities. To this end, the World Health Organisation recommends the implementation of certain strategies and pedagogical perspectives, such as social inclusion and participation, housing and home care, community health services, accessible transportation, outdoors spaces and places of socialisation, communication, and information.

Social and Health Integration

In the Italian system, social and medical arrangements are unconnected. Through the years, and especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, experiences have shown that this model is not effective. Politics must find a balance between the two, starting from a common language. Although this is the main need, it is also essential to establish a movement from the inside, which means starting from the 'invisible', as social workers often are (Canevaro, 2021). They are asked to change their perspective from an individual service logic to a network service logic; however, as a result of lower economic resources being linked to higher rates of fragilities, social workers are overloaded. Here, the community can help, as suggested by the

case of Roseto: in the late 19th century, this small town in the United States demonstrated that the presence of strong social bonds had an extremely positive impact in reducing the incidence of cardiovascular diseases (Lemma, 2019). The goal is to find a new planning setup which allows the social and medical systems to communicate, as well as the formal and informal networks to work together, without falling into the trap of delegating health promotion entirely to the community (Folgheraiter, 2016).

Target Group and Research Questions

The *Terres Monviso Incl* multidisciplinary team is composed of two groups. The first group, 'Gipic', comprises 'integrated take-over units'. The number of Gipic groups is equal to the number of the valleys involved in the project. In each group, family doctors, social workers, social-health workers, community nurses, and educators organise home care. The second group, called the 'animation team' and composed of educators and social-health professionals, handles the community work, and promotes social activities. The two units are not separated, as one of the project's goals is to integrate the groups while each one maintains its specific role more deeply. In everyday practice, the animation team attends Gipic's meetings; thus, plans are made together. It is this point in the process that contains the greatest difficulty for the professionals, as we describe more in detail later.

This PAR study focuses primarily on the animation team: the group is composed of two educators, two social and health workers, and a pedagogical coordinator. The whole team was previously involved in other community development projects in the mountain areas; consequently, the professionals have both individually and collectively developed competences that are significant to the research.

As it happens, the beginning of the *Terres Monviso Incl* project coincided with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, the impact of COVID-19 has brought into crisis all aspects of the project we have outlined here. In particular, the animation group found itself (at least in the

first period) unable to work with the community, which was a very tough moment for them. Thanks to the strong partnership between the university and the social services consortium to which the professionals belonged, these difficulties were quickly considered. Thus began the work to plan the formation moments together.

The main questions that the professionals faced at the beginning of our research concern their experience during the COVID-19 pandemic: How did the animation team reimagine its job? Which skills did the professionals develop?

As will be explained in the results section, by starting from these questions, the meta-analysis during the PAR led the animation team to wonder about its role within the project and in relation to the Gipic group. The complexity of both the programme and the COVID-19 pandemic threw into question the role of each professional and the direction of the whole animation team.

To address the research questions while also allowing other issues to come up, the methodology taken in this study was the critical incident technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954). It is a reflective practice that is both individual and collective, in which participants are directed to seek solutions and share strategies to learn from the (albeit difficult) past and innovate their practice. Moreover, the development of community workers' reflexivity renews and raises individual and collective skills and enhances the group atmosphere (Farnese & Fida, 2012).

The Methodology: Using Critical Incident Technique to Increase Reflexivity

In line with modernity, professional training today is a complex practice. Over the last few decades, a paradigm shift took place in the field of education: traditional methods and strong technical rationality give way to lifelong learning, evidence-based education, reflexive rationality, autonomy, and creativity in professionals (Tomassini, 2008). To engage in training, therefore, means first starting from professionals' needs and motivations—the two

elements underlying any lasting change (Costa & Gianecchini, 2019). In addition, training must address certain skills. Soft skills (Goleman, 1995; Goleman et al., 2000) play a key role in social work; nevertheless, emotional and behavioural competencies are more difficult to teach and learn than hard skills.

To respond to this complexity, the current PAR proposes improving reflexivity in professionals, using the CIT as a tool to generate awareness and change.

Training by Developing Reflexivity

Schön proposes overcoming technical rationality and replacing it with practical rationality, which means enhancing professionals' reflective skills to analyse their experience and learn lessons to be used in daily practice. It is thus a matter of developing a creative attitude of reflection throughout the action. Consequently, professionals become 'reflective practitioners' (Schön, 1983) and reflection becomes reflexivity, able to interrupt routines and enhance reflective empowerment in professionals (Tomassini, 2014). To this end, Ripamonti uses the concept of 'reframing'—or the capacity of continuously reading and re-signifying reality—in order to increase professionals' awareness (Ripamonti, 2018). In this ongoing dialogue, theory keeps its validity but abandons its traditional inflexibility: instead, it becomes dynamic and can be contextualised in reality each time (Thompson, 2016).

In a step beyond the individual perspective, training a team by promoting reflexivity enables members to recognise and enhance different points of view and, consequently, provides analytical skills as well as the resources for shared solutions. Moreover, adopting reflexivity as the practice with which to train groups enables the development of sense-making through the improvement of common patterns of thought (Farnese & Fida, 2012).

Finally, an important issue to consider while planning a reflexivity-focused training is that professionals must be willing to get involved, to open up to others and offer their own narration, as well as to engage in an active listening attitude, adopting complexity as their gaze.

The Critical Incident Technique

In 1954, the American psychologist John Flanagan first described the *critical incident technique* in the *American Psychological Bulletin*. He had experimented with the tool a few years earlier, when in 1941 he was commissioned by the American Air Forces to lead a programme aimed at improving pilot selection procedures. He decided to interview veterans of missions, asking them to narrate and analyse meaningful incidents concerning officers' behaviour which they directly observed during war actions. The several thousand incidents were grouped according to the similarity principle into categories, called 'critical requirements'. In this way, it was possible to highlight the requirements for wartime leadership and the events that could affect the effectiveness of mission acts. Flanagan called these requirements 'critical incidents' (Flanagan, 1954). At the end of World War II, the technique was formally acknowledged. Currently, it takes an analytic, inductive, and qualitative approach, and it is mainly used in research to implement reflexivity in training processes.

The CIT was chosen for this study because it represents the connection between individual and collective reflexive practices. The process is organised around two key moments. In the first key moment, each professional must identify a critical incident experienced during their daily practice; thus, an initial personal reflection occurs in the choice of the critical incident (Nuzzaci, 2017). The storytelling can use different tools; for this study, we chose to assign a diary, to allow for freedom of expression. Negative events will likely emerge, but it is important for the researcher to state that the fact does not necessarily have to be destructive or dramatic. It is a particularly important event, as perceived by the narrator. In the second key moment, the team works together; through sharing their narrations and searching for agreement, the objective of the group discussion is the identification of a unique critical incident to work on. The researcher then leads the group in a brief analysis of the causes and in the research of strategies to enhance the quality of the work. The experience for the group is deep: from the critical incidents arise reflective dilemmas, which demand that professionals face

great challenges related to change.

The common thread connecting the two moments is represented by the storytelling. The second moment also takes on a meta-narration value, which allows professionals to reflect in depth on their experience, thus generating collective learning.

The methodology is interesting because it highlights different aspects, such as emotional and ethical elements, and allows the questioning of the relational dynamic of the team, which is often 'frozen' by daily routine.

Planning the Participatory Action Research

The PAR took place between October 2021 and May 2022 and involved the animation team (consisting of two educators, two social-health workers, and a pedagogical coordinator). The research was organised into five moments, in line with Flanagan's directions. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the first moment was held online and consisted of individual reflection, obtained through in-depth interviews. During the interviews, each practitioner was asked to identify and explain the aim of the project and to present their role and main actions. Once the interviews were over, the second moment took place in the professionals' office and was focused on team building, using creative and narrative activities to create a productive group atmosphere, to facilitate mutual observation and listening, and to introduce storytelling and reflective practice. At the end of the meeting, the researcher introduced the methodology, and the professionals were given the task of writing the CIT diary (the third moment). The CIT diaries were anonymously sent to the researcher, and the fourth moment consisted of reorganising them into categories, according to the principles of content and time similarity. The critical incidents were not interpreted, thereby enabling shared reflection in the following meetings. Finally, two more meetings took place in the professionals' office and were focused on group discussion (the fifth moment).

In his description of the technique, Flanagan includes a final report as witness to the process; one recommendation is to share this report with the professionals, so that it becomes a collective heritage that can support

further changes.

Results of the PAR

In line with the phases of the methodology outlined above, the results of the PAR are presented below.

First Moment: Define General Aims

The online in-depth interviews sought to establish the consensus within the team about the mission and the vision of the *Terres Monviso Incl* project.

Data collected through the interviews show a high level of agreement regarding the general aim of the project. However, the degree of internal coherence about each professional role within the team appears to be low. In particular, confusion is seen across the different professional positions, as if the multidisciplinary attitude has also led to overlapping tasks. The social-health workers' role seems especially hard to correctly define, because it is divided between two activities. The two social-health worker members of the animation team also deal with subjects individually treated by the social-health system, which is why the whole team expresses difficulty in seeing the two roles equally recognised by Gipic.

Second Moment: Plans and Specifications

In the first group meeting, after the team-building activities, the professionals received instruction to write CIT diaries. Below are the translated instructions given to the professionals.

Critical Incident Diary

Think about a recent incident in your work practice which generated an unsatisfactory condition. Using as many details as possible, describe the fact, the circumstances, and explain the emotions you felt. Then, try to identify the consequences which, according to you, it had for the project and for its actors.

- What critical incident did you choose? Why?
- When did it happen? Who was involved?
- What circumstances caused dissatisfaction?
- Which results did it produce?

Third Moment: Collecting and Analysing the Data

Once the anonymous diaries were collected, the researcher numbered them 1 to 5 and organised them into two categories, according to the principle of similarity in content or in the moment of occurrence.

The two clusters are described in the following table.

| Group number | Similarity for | Subgroup 1 | Subgroup 2 | Subgroup 3 |
|--------------|---------------------------|--|---|--|
| 1 | Type of critical incident | Diaries 2 and 5: the critical incident is the project itself, in its complexity and difficult organisation. | Diaries 1, 3, and 4: the critical incidents are connected to the confusion about the animation team's goals and role. | |
| 2 | Time | Diaries 2 and 5: from the beginning of the project (springtime 2020) until the time of testing (autumn 2021) | Diary 3: beginning of project (springtime 2020) | Diaries 1 and 4: from June to October 2021 |

Fourth and Fifth Moments: Interpreting and Reporting

The last step of the action research consisted of two mornings of group reflection.

The purpose of the first morning was to share the critical incidents, come to an agreement, and identify the main incident to work on. Thus, once they met, the researcher asked them to not comment during each narration: instead, it was important to have a listening attitude and avoid judgements. After a moment of silence, the professionals spoke spontaneously, and a calm atmosphere prevailed.

Once the presentations ended, the discussion took place, providing the opportunity to speak freely. With the respectful climate being constantly maintained, some opinions emerged. First, professionals agreed on the difficulty of managing complex programmes like *Terres Monviso Incl.* Moreover, at the beginning of every community project, there is a period

of uncertainty, which can cause confusion. However, in this situation, the uncertainty had become chronic, also because of its coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic. Another element of confusion was the months-long absence of the coordinator, who was repurposed to other projects. In addition, in recent years, there had been a turnover of professionals, which made it harder to create bonds among the team and continuity in practice.

From this first part of the dialogue, it became clear that balance and redefinition of roles were needed. At the same time, as for the professionals' dynamics and emotional experiences, the moment was very intense, and mutual solidarity arose within the group.

Despite their work as social animators without community (due to the COVID-19 pandemic)—which represents a longer shared critical incident—the coordinator proposed focusing on giving the animation group a definite shape, one that would be resilient to external agents. His reflection was motivated by an acknowledgement of proficiency and solidity within the team. According to him, what they lack is the ability to narrate and legitimise this to more traditional professionals, such as nurses and social workers.

The second moment of reflection sought to find solutions and strategies to solve the critical incidents. Before starting, the group told the researcher about a new critical incident they had experienced. This narration shows that the logic of reflection during the PAR immediately entered the professionals' practice, thus demonstrating an initial effectiveness of the process.

Attention was then directed again to the goal of daily reflection. The professionals felt the need to co-create a unique definition of the animation team before the group could effectively communicate its essence. To this end, the professionals shared tales of activities they carried out during the pandemic. First, in the times of strict social restrictions, the connections with the target population could only be on an individual basis. Thus, the animation team had an even more essential role. As an example of their activities, 'Let's frame the beauty of fragility' can be considered as the main event. All the people involved in the project took part in the selection and reproduction of a

famous painting; the photos composed an art exhibition, opened at the end of limitations, which had the merit of giving the project's beneficiaries a new opportunity for meeting after the COVID-19 pandemic and feeling somewhat like a group. This activity had the power to restore dignity to fragility and to generate positive effects for the community involved in the project. Moreover, professionals engaged in a role-playing game, starting from the individual construction of each box. Finally, a video was produced, with interviews with the elderly population recounting their experiences of living in mountain areas and the impact of the *Terres Monviso Incl* project on their lives. These examples showed to the professionals that even in a tough moment, they were able to reinvent themselves; this allowed them to legitimise their work and reflect on the skills they (almost unconsciously) gained.

Finally, at the end of the last meeting of the research study, the professionals discussed practical strategies, which are proposed in the conclusion as good practices.

Conclusion and Good Practices

Two types of strategies primarily emerged during the team reflection.

The first type of strategy involves organisation. Regarding the management of the animation team, the professionals identified two suggestions: create more specific checklists, thus improving the meetings' agenda and increasing effectiveness; and better clarify the division of tasks among them for each action. For the latter, it is particularly important to shed light on the dual position of the social-health workers.

The second type of strategy concerns communication. The group recognised the importance of effective communication about the roles, methods, tools, and type of activities used. In particular, it is important to explain that the animation activities are not improvisations or mere entertainment, but the result of networking, needs analysis, and creativity, working along a bottom-up and empowerment approach. To make this clear, the professionals shared some practical suggestions, such as using the same

definition of 'social animator' and more precise language, as well as bringing examples from field experience and reporting their work through more attractive communication methodologies.

The most significant proposal was to create an organisation chart of the project, with all its actors. It might sound trivial, but as demonstrated a few months later, this tactic generated better understanding, greater respect, and closer collaboration between all the professionals of the *Terres Monviso Incl* project.

Finally, an important consideration concerns digital skills and the use of technological tools, given the importance they took on during the months of the pandemic.

In the final reflections, provided through individual interviews a few weeks after the last group meeting, the team claimed to have experienced a moment of collective learning and to have learned a method which allowed them to redefine the task of the project and their role within it. The research helped them strengthen their group identity around a unique professional figure—the 'community social animator'—and generated a significant change, even inside Gipic.

In conclusion, a few considerations about the CIT must be considered. The tool has shown itself to be a powerful instrument for developing both individual and collective reflectivity, from the errors made in the practice to seeking a new and more-aware balance. Among its advantages, the professionals appreciated most the freedom of expression and the depth of thought and dialogue that could be reached in a short period of time. However, we caution researchers that they must be very careful and recommend that they be able to read and manage groups, as well as to analyse and synthesise what emerges during the team discussion.

References

- Augé, M. (1995). *Non Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Verso Book.
- Boyatzis, R. E., Goleman, D., & Rhee, K. S. (2000). Clustering competence in emotional intelligence: Insights from the Emotional Competence Inventory. In R. Bar-On & J. D. A. Parker (Eds.), *The handbook of emotional intelligence: Theory, development, assessment, and application at home, school, and in the workplace* (pp. 343–362). Jossey-Bass.
- Canevaro, A. (2021). Riconoscere il valore di un lavoro invisibile. Perché gli zero-invisibili possono dare valore all'uno-invisibile. *Lavoro Sociale*, 21(2), 52–53.
- Cersosimo, D., & Donzelli, C. (2020). *Manifesto per riabitare l'Italia*. Donzelli.
- Farnese, M. L., & Fida, R. (2012). Come la riflessività promuove l'apertura delle organizzazioni verso l'innovazione: il ruolo delle pratiche di riflessività e del clima di gruppo per l'innovazione. *Risorsa Uomo*, 1, 87–102.
- Flanagan, J. C. (1954). The critical incident technique. *Psychological Bulletin*, 51(4), 327–358. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0061470>
- Folgheraiter, F., Pasini, A., & Raineri, M. L. (2016). *Scritti scelti. Teoria e metodologia di Social Work*. Erickson.
- Giddens, A. (1990). *The Consequence of Modernity*. Polity Press.
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional Intelligence*. Bantam Books.
- Interreg France – Italia ALCOTRA. (n.d.). Terres Monviso – INCL: Invecchiare bene
<https://www.interreg-alcotra.eu/it/terres-monviso-incl-invecchiare-bene>
- International Association for Community Development. (n.d). *About IACD*.
- International Association for Community Development
- Laslett, P. (1991). *A Fresh Map of Life. The Emergence of the Third Age*. Harvard University Press.
- Lemma, P. (2018). *Promuovere salute. Principi e Strategie*. Il Pensiero Scientifico.

- Lewin, K. (1946). Action research and minority problems. In K. Lewin, *Resolving Social Conflict* (pp. 201–2016). Harper & Row.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1946.tb02295.x>
- Mezirow, J. (2003). Transformative Learning as Discourse. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 1(1), 58–63.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344603252172>
- Nussbaum, M. (2002). *Giustizia Sociale e Dignità Umana*. Il Mulino.
- Nuzzaci, A. (2017). Applicazione e analisi della Tecnica dell'Incidente Critico in alcune pratiche di ricerca sulla riflessività. Possibilità e limiti. In *Formare alla Ricerca Empirica in Educazione. Atti del Convegno Nazionale Gruppo di Lavoro SIPED, Teorie e Metodi della Ricerca in Educazione* (pp. 72–85).
<https://doi.org/10.6092/unibo/amsacta/5634>
- Orefice, P. (2006). *La ricerca azione partecipativa. Teoria e pratiche. Volume 1: La creazione dei saperi nell'educazione di comunità per lo sviluppo locale*. Liguori.
- Pineau, G. (2013). Les réflexions sur les pratiques au cœur du tournant réflexif. *Education Permenente*, 196, 9–24.
- Ronzi, S., Orton, L., Buckner, S., Bruce, N., & Pope, D. (2020). How is Respect and Social Inclusion Conceptualised by Older Adults in an Aspiring Age-Friendly City? A Photovoice Study in the North-West of England. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(24), 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17249246>
- Schön, D. A. (1999). *The Reflective Practitioner. How Professionals Think in Action*. Routledge.
- Sen, A. K. (2000). *Development as freedom*. Anchor.
- Thompson, N. (2016). *Lavorare con le persone. Far emergere il meglio dalle relazioni*. Erickson.
- Tomassini, M. (2008). La riflessività dei professionisti della formazione: verso lo sviluppo di pratiche riflessive in contesti di formazione professionale. In Montedoro C. & Pepe D. *La riflessività nella formazione. Modelli e metodi*. Isfol. Franco Angeli.

- Wood, G. E. R., Pykett, J., Daw, P., Agyapong-Badu, S., Banchoff, A., King, A. C., & Stathi, A. (2022). The Role of Urban Environments in Promoting Active and Healthy Aging: A Systematic Scoping Review of Citizen Science Approaches. *Journal of Urban Health*, 99, 427–456.
- Zamengo, F. (2019). *Senso e prospettive del lavoro di comunità. Sguardi interdisciplinari attraverso le voci del territorio*. Franco Angeli.

Chapter 14

Vito Balzano

Crisis in adult education of the post-pandemic period: A possible model of sustainable welfare

Introduction

The following question is posed for consideration: is it possible in the present day to measure policy actions on social issues from a pedagogical perspective? Moreover, to what extent can adult education serve as a conduit for this perspective? These are some of the questions that prompted the present institution of higher learning to initiate an investigation into perspectives in the post-pandemic period. It should be noted that this research is still in progress and has thus far only yielded preliminary findings. Consequently, the reflections obtained from this research are only partial. The objective is to provide a practical instrument that can be utilised by education professionals, educators within social cooperatives, and policymakers seeking to formulate novel concepts of assistance and welfare for families from diverse cultural backgrounds. The prevailing notion of welfare as a responsibility limited to the young or those with deficits is being challenged by the recognition of an equal need for all individuals, irrespective of cultural or age-related differences. In adult education, a cross-section has emerged that prompts

reflection on the issue of the sustainability of a novel concept of welfare. The present case study focuses on a specific locale in southern Italy, which is deemed a microcosm of a larger, more expansive phenomenon – Apulia (Balzano, 2017)¹.

The necessity to define context arises in circumstances where a search for meaning and significance is underway through the processes of communication, interpretation and knowledge. If we consider learning to be closely related to these processes, it follows that a theory of learning (adult, but not only) cannot avoid conceptualising context, just as a practice of learning and education cannot avoid contextualising. A notable distinction exists between the context and the reality in which communication occurs. It is not legitimate to conflate or confuse these two concepts: context is a cognitive construct, not a factual reality, and is subject to interpretation. It is important to recognise that context alludes to the knowledge possessed by the interlocutors, the assumptions and inferences they make unconsciously while communicating. This cognitive apparatus, while indispensable in comprehending the literal meaning of a given discourse, is malleable and manifold, necessitating a degree of consensus and coordination among its users. Consequently, context, being mental in nature, cannot be confined to the individual mind; rather, it attests to the existence of a mind as a complex system (Bholinger et al., 2015).

The contemporary political and social-pedagogical predicament is that the prevailing historical period has eroded the three fundamental components of the labour system: stable employment, women's propensity to care for family members, and the capacity for the expansion of welfare state initiatives. The contemporary concept of welfare that resonates with families is characterised by a pronounced emphasis on the analysis of the world of work. This is primarily due to the evolution of family structures, which have become detached from the traditional archetype (Joint Research

¹ For a more in-depth look at the situation in Puglia, and how this region has been defined as a model on a European scale of new approaches in social policies and welfare reforms, see the broader contribution Balzano V. (2017). *Educazione, persona e welfare. Il contributo della pedagogia nello sviluppo delle politiche sociali*. Bari: Progedit.

Centre, 2013; Kettunen & Petersen, 2011). The needs of different family forms are also subject to variation, with new forms emerging and existing forms being open to different experiences, and yet the same needs persist. This is undoubtedly a political issue, as has been acknowledged, but it is also a social issue, varying according to different social strata.

The pedagogical dimension of adult education today

Pedagogically understood values are always part of that filter that makes all interpretation possible; they are conditions and ways of accessing the other and its truth. Education, and particularly the adult education system, which permeates the various spheres of knowledge and culture, is instrumental in guiding individuals towards self-realisation through dialogue with the world and in harmony with it. It is imperative that education fosters awareness of individuals' roots and provides them with specific points of reference that enable them to define their place in various worlds and contexts while respecting human diversity and different abilities. This notion is further emphasised in the UNESCO Report 2021:

Adult learning and education play multiple roles. It helps people find their way through a range of problems and increases skills and agency. It enables people to take greater responsibility for their future. It also helps adults understand and critique changing paradigms and power relations and take steps to shape a just and sustainable world. A future-oriented approach should define adult education, as well as education always, as education intertwined with life. Adults are responsible for the world they live in and the world of the future. Responsibility for the future cannot simply be passed on to future generations. A shared ethic of intergenerational solidarity is needed (p. 115).

This chapter proposes a preliminary reflection on the transition from an education oriented to what happens, to one more focused on the individual,

on the sustainability of the events that characterise human reality. This is a crucial aspect that should not be underestimated when considering prospects for adult education and the measures that can be taken, albeit on a small scale, to address a human crisis that is already in progress. The UNESCO document also underscores the responsibility of adults as agents of the present and the future, entrusted with the responsibility of shaping their own lives and, consequently, the lives of their peers. This solidarity, which is a moral category proper to pedagogy, becomes shared, intergenerational knowledge, spanning different cultures and eras.

Learning is an everyday event that is social in nature in that it takes place with other people; it is too dependent because the setting provides tools (computers, maps, scoops) that facilitate and especially structure the cognitive process. Ultimately, what determines learning is the interaction with the setting in relation to its social and tool-dependent nature. Interactions among people, with tools and with the environment are pivotal, whilst taking into account the situation and the interests, needs and prior knowledge of the adults involved. Education is defined as the process of acting in the real world through social practices and relationships. The focus of attention shifts from the individual mind to the entire learning situation, where the assumption of beliefs, values and knowledge is not a subjective fact but rather arises from participation in a community or culture. The act of contextualisation entails the ability to discern the contemporary moment, which is informed by the historical context.

In the context of liquid modernity, for instance, there has been a proliferation of forms, needs and opportunities for learning that engender plural and discordant theories. These theories must be integrated and applied to learning, encompassing a variety of rational, psychological, behavioural, embedded, spiritual, or holistic approaches in different contexts of knowledge construction. Conventional problem-solving methodologies prove inadequate in this regard; effective adult educators must possess the capacity to interpret the context and discern whether the requisite learning is elementary, intricate, intricate, or chaotic. The concept under discussion is that of complexity

theory, a theoretical framework capable of connecting individual learning with systems of interactions, and constraints with possibilities.

A recurrent theme within our discourse is the notion of complexity theory, which guides the examination of contemporary adult learning practices, with a particular focus on adult education in the present age. Indeed, in recent decades, the principle of lifelong learning has become central to educational policy formulation around the world. For instance, the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) calls upon member states to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (Boeren, 2019, p. 37). Adult learning and education are characterised by a robust emancipatory tradition, as evidenced by its capacity to empower individuals and foster active citizenship. Nevertheless, this has been eroded in recent years by an excessive focus on the vocational and skills dimensions of lifelong learning. This paradigm shift has effectively transformed a previously recognised “right” for adults, particularly those who had previously experienced barriers to education, into a mandatory obligation for the majority. This is primarily due to the growing societal expectation for individuals to maintain their employability and relevance in a rapidly changing global landscape. This has resulted in a constant cycle of qualification and retraining (Carretero Gomez, Vuorikar & Punie, 2017; Elfert, 2019). A particularly noteworthy aspect of these passages is the emphasis on pedagogical approaches tailored to meet the needs of adults facing educational challenges. The notion of providing support to individuals is repeatedly emphasised, in contrast to the prevailing welfare policies in Europe and Italy.

In light of our ongoing collaboration with Apulian cooperatives during the pandemic period, it became evident that there was a pressing educational need to establish supportive pathways, which extend beyond the confines of conventional schooling. The role of educators must be recognised beyond the confines of the school environment, encompassing a broader societal impact. It is imperative to acknowledge that numerous families need assistance within the educational sector, as opposed to the economic domain.

Towards an inevitable transformative process

It is imperative that a transformative process is initiated with a view to revising educational processes and learning practices, rendering the process more flexible and open to the diversity of the world of work. Adult learning and education must evolve significantly between generations. In the context of evolving economies and societies, adult education must evolve to encompass far more than lifelong learning for labour market purposes. Opportunities for career change and retraining must be integrated with a comprehensive reform of educational systems, emphasising the establishment of multiple and adaptable pathways. Rather than adopting a reactive or adaptive approach, as seen in the introduction of labour markets, technology, or environmental factors, adult education must be reconceptualised around learning that is truly transformative. In this regard, it is worthwhile to re-examine the theory of Mezirow, who posits that learning is a conscious, critical, and reflective process through which adults construct new or updated interpretations of meanings attributed to past experiences or thoughts to guide the present and direct future action (Merrill et al., 2019). The focus is not on the addition of new experiences or the integration of more contemporary content; rather, it is on the adult's capacity to reinterpret a remote experience based on a novel set of meanings. In this regard, the author distinguishes between four forms of learning. The former pertains to the adjustment or updating of behaviours, knowledge, and attitudes through the utilisation of existing meaning schemas. In contrast, the latter involves the creation of meaning schemas through the transformation of existing ones, albeit without presupposing an actual change in viewpoints. Transformative learning, on the other hand, occurs through the transformation of meaning perspectives, which is defined as "consisting of becoming aware, through reflection and critique, of the specific assumptions on which a distorted or incomplete meaning perspective is based and transforming it through a reorganization of meaning" (Merrill et al, 2020, p. 87). Meaning perspectives can be defined as "patterns of expectations that filter perception and cognition [...] the perceptual and conceptual codes

to form, constrain, and distort the way we think, believe, and feel, as well as the how, what, and why of our learning" (Grotlüschen, Nienkemper & Duncker-Euringer, 2020, p. 34–35). The fundamental premise of transformative theory is predicated on a constructivist paradigm of learning, wherein frames of reference serve as the foundational construct. During personal, formative historical and cultural-historical events, adults construct perceptions, expectations, behaviours, values, desires, relationships, and the "boundary structures" of their individual meaning systems, through which experiences are assimilated. In Knowles' andragogy, experiential baggage is identified as a defining characteristic of the adult and their unique learning style. Conversely, Mezirow's perspective asserts that the past can impose limitations on future learning, as individuals tend to attribute old meanings to new experiences through routinised habits of expectation. Consequently, critical reflection emerges as the privileged mode for attributing a different meaning to past or present experience, thereby conferring upon its coherence and thus enabling its interpretation, re-focusing of the meaning system.

In transformative theory, moreover, a few characteristics of reflection can be traced back to Dewey's thought as well as Freire's approach, even allowing glimpses of some echoes of the debate of the 1980s: the acquisition of awareness, the capacity for emotional distancing and cognitive objectification, doubt and questioning of beliefs and assertions inherited from personal history, tradition, and authority. Reflection is defined as a conscious process of evaluation, whereby assumptions are revisited, even distorted ones, through the negotiation of meanings and their analytical and synthetic elaboration. In this regard, three types of meaning perspectives can be distinguished: epistemological, relating to the ways in which the adult knows, acquires knowledge; sociolinguistic, relating to the linguistic, social, and cultural influences of life contexts; and psychological, relating to the adult's concept and image of selves as well as emotional and imaginative patterns. It is therefore the function of critical reflection to enable adults to overcome the distortions and errors of these frames of reference that uncritically result in the adult "seeing reality in a way that arbitrarily limits what is included,

prevents differentiation, hinders other approaches to viewing reality, or does not facilitate the integration of experience" (Vuorikari et al., 2016, p. 90). However, it is not a spontaneous act of adults, but rather the outcome of a long and complex process that generally begins when an event, encounter, or situation leads adults to question the habitual assumptions underlying their own perspectives of meaning because those perspectives turn out to be no longer suitable for interpreting what happened. The transformative dynamic commences with a disorienting dilemma and progresses through nine stages that encompass moments of self-analysis, self-assessment, comparison with others, exploration of new options, confidence-building, construction of new skills, and attempts until an integration of meaning perspectives. The product of reflection on these premises, which extends beyond mere content review and encompasses metacognitive processes, aligns with the act of learning itself. Reflection is not merely a goal of learning, but rather "the central dynamic of problem solving, problem posing and the transformation of meaning schemas and meaning perspectives" (Merrill et al., 2017, p. 38).

An analysis of the mechanisms through which reflexive reframing action occurs reveals a distinction between critical reflection on assumptions (CRA) and critical self-reflection on assumptions (CSRA). The implementation of this process may be facilitated by a trainer or conducted autonomously, with the resultant insights being communicated to others as well as to adults themselves. The forms of critical self-reflection involved are distinguished into four privileged domains: the first is narrative, applied by adults about her/himself; the second is systemic, concerning social norms, workplaces, organisations, and life contexts; the third is therapeutic, concerning deep individual dynamics; and finally, epistemic, about the ways in which thinking works and the operational consequences of them.

What prospects for welfare in the post-Covid-19 era

It has been demonstrated that it is of particular importance to reflect on innovation and the role it plays, or could play, as an orientation and guideline

for the future of humanity. Pedagogical discourse, both within and beyond the field of adult education, has historically underplayed the significance of future-oriented reflection. The future of a nation, a continent, or a society is seldom deliberated upon in these contexts. The prevailing discourse appears to be one of a present-oriented nature, with the future being marginalised and, at best, a topic of discussion (Fejes, 2019). However, in the initial phase of the global spread of the Sars-Cov-2 virus, the future became a pivotal element in our discourses, our lives, and our collective reflections, compelling us to pause and reflect. This period has provided a significant and unique opportunity for reflection. On the one hand, the future calls us back to the category of innovation; on the other, it questions us about adult education and the meaning of a field of knowledge that must find alternative paths to those normally followed if it is to survive the evolution of knowledge. In light of our experiences, studies, accounts, and investigations, it is evident that we stand at a critical juncture, akin to the disciplines that interrogate education. The question that arises is whether to prioritise human agency or to entrust decision-making to machines.

The fundamental issue that must be addressed prior to embarking on a reflection on the concepts recalled is the context, beyond and beyond disciplines and knowledge, in which innovation and adult education, as well as contemporary social policies, must be situated. The focus is on innovation within the context of the social economy. It is important to note that innovation encompasses not only the development of products and processes within the domains of knowledge and human enterprise, but also the realm of social innovation. The discussion surrounding social innovation can diverge significantly from the conventional discourse on innovation. In challenging and disruptive times, such as the present moment during the global pandemic and educational disruption, improvisations and experiments have been demonstrated by adults in various professions, highlighting their determination, commitment, and resourcefulness. For instance, as numerous school systems recognised the primacy of personal needs and social well-being, testing was postponed, coverage requirements for curriculum

content were suspended, and classroom interactions were directed towards authentic learning and well-being.

During the period of the pandemic, the work became more visible to the public. The elevated standards of specialised knowledge and pedagogical dedication demanded of adults have been subject to concurrent appreciation and scrutiny. The cultivation of the social dimension of learning, for instance, has entailed the sustainability of citizenship education in an increasingly interconnected world. This enables individuals to care for one another, embrace other perspectives and experiences, and engage in responsible practices towards the environment and our shared natural resources. It is evident that digital media alone cannot achieve these ends. Participatory and engaged learning is required in a variety of contexts. The pernicious intrusion of the virus into our territories has affected three fundamental spheres of individual and social life: health, economy, and education. The repercussions of the virus have been exacerbated by the pre-existing injustices, inequalities, and delays within these spheres. The economic blockade and enforced isolation measures have resulted in a significant escalation of these issues. It is imperative to consider the prevalence of multi-problem poverty, encompassing both historical and contemporary manifestations. A significant proportion of these cases are associated with the elevated levels of stress experienced by housebound parents, who are confronted with a multitude of pressing concerns. Additionally, the issue of school delay, impacting at least one-fifth of the student population, is of considerable concern. This figure amounts to over 1.6 million children. 000 children lacking or deficient in the necessary distance learning devices); of behavioural problems and regression syndromes; of sleep disorders, sudden changes in mood, feelings of airlessness, irritability, states of anxiety, dispersiveness, poor concentration, apathy, closure, and noncommunication; of regressions for those with psychiatric disorders (think e. g. autistic children); of abandoned disabled people; of anti-conservative acts, domestic violence; of abuse, mistreatment and loosening of guardianships for children. Furthermore, the aforementioned factors cause lockdowns for social, health

and judicial services with possible negative “zero removal” effects. In such scenarios, the realm of education appears to have deviated from its primary function, which is to assume a proactive and creative role in swiftly conceiving and constructing mechanisms capable of addressing and, as far as feasible, averting the “collateral damage” that affects all socio–psycho–pedagogical dimensions of individuals and relationships. The disciplinary frameworks of the pedagogical, social, psychological, philosophical, and anthropological sciences have not been engaged in a timely manner to rethink some of the foundational paradigms of the human sciences with their interpretative devices, nor to revise the organisational forms of services. Consequently, a predominant medicalisation approach to the crisis has emerged, entrusting the interpretation and prediction of outcomes to virological, infectious, and epidemiological methodologies alone.

We therefore arrived at preliminary conclusions regarding the impact of social cooperatives in the Apulian region, focusing on three pressing issues:

1. The pervasive disregard of politics (at various levels) for a sector encompassing more than nine million children and adolescents, and for the direct management of state schools alone, there are 800,000 teachers, over 40,000 school sites, and almost 370,000 classrooms. The education system is regarded as a cost rather than an investment in the future.
2. Secondly, the concept of family support measures leading to comprehensive childcare is overstated, while the positive aspects of intense “domestic relations” are overestimated and the necessity for education, learning, and socialisation in educational settings with adults and peers is underestimated. A mandate of “exceptional resilience” was placed on parental responsibilities, and yet, despite everything, the role of grandparents was acknowledged.
3. Overestimation of the effectiveness of distance education in the face of the emergence of the tool's significant limitations with respect to educational and social needs.

Notwithstanding the determiners, it is this author's conviction that an endeavour to mobilise the educational prowess of the scientific community, in conjunction with the voluminous social resources, both formal and informal, inherent within our nation, may yet be instigated in the forthcoming months. Beyond the success of the extraordinary measures of economic support to families in mitigating hardship and discontent on the material level, there is still time to bridge the significant educational gap, to address the challenge of relational goods that also have a strong economic value, and to effectively counter the extensive intangible poverty that has worsened in the last six months. However, this will require a concerted effort on the part of institutions and the social fabric, as well as a significant contribution from the human sciences and professionals engaged in the educational sector. The question arises as to whether teachers, professional educators, social workers, psychologists and entertainers will be able to provide a counterbalance to the significant efforts of doctors, nurses, social and health workers providing intensive and home care to patients with the virus.

This initial stage of conclusions unveils an intriguing pedagogical paradigm, centring on the concept of citizenship in a social context (Balzano, 2020; Marshall, 1964). It explores the potential of citizenship to serve as the pivotal theme in the contemporary evolution of adult education. The citizenship debate, in fact, initiates us to the final step in this reflection: social sustainability, a new welfare system that can cope with today's difficulties. The question that arises is whether it is possible to consider a new sustainable welfare system in the immediate future. It is my belief that a precise answer to this question is elusive, and that it is equally challenging to formulate a definitive affirmative or negative response. Drawing from the extant research in this domain, particularly in the Italian context, and more specifically in Puglia, a region in southern Italy, it is posited that the viability of such a proposal is contingent upon the empowerment of the adult sphere, and more specifically from four essential elements:

1. The individual, the pedagogical focus of the affirmation of a series of rights and conventions.

2. The family, as the primary educational institution.
3. The school as the fundamental educational pole of openness for the citizen of the future.
4. The relationship that forms the basis of human relationships and represents the fundamental challenge for the future of adult education.

An interesting key to interpretation leads us towards the evolution of a well-known model, that of proximity welfare. Proximity welfare can be defined as a system that indicates a set of interventions and measures resulting from an analysis of needs that is developed on a territorial proximity dimension. This system envisages the protagonism of the beneficiaries themselves in the co-definition of services. It is widely acknowledged among experts that proximity welfare played a pivotal role in mitigating the repercussions of the economic and social crisis by employing innovative approaches and making inroads into uncharted domains of intervention (Bode, 2007). For instance, collaboration with the Third Sector and civil society facilitated the timely management of national measures such as "shopping vouchers". The present research is aligned with this approach, examining the role of third sector support for primary educational agencies: the family and school. Other instances of innovation in this regard include activities directed towards the school population during periods of school closures and distance learning. In contexts where public intervention is historically deficient, there has been a substitution of the third sector, which is commendable in the context of emergency situations, but not in terms of a comprehensive understanding of the third sector's role. In the post-pandemic era, there is an opportunity for a shift in perspective, moving away from the notion of the third sector as a low-cost service provider, thus overcoming the current logic of procurement. The development of this concept necessitates the affirmation of the political and advocacy role, the co-planning and co-design confirmed by the third sector code, the strengthening of public welfare in terms of professional and economic resources to overcome territorial differences, and the presence of integrated public-private networks. A new and adequate public-private

capacity building as a function of a new governance arrangement at the various levels of government is also proposed.

As we await the results of the research and reflect on the significant and important data concerning the validity of the practical action of social cooperatives in an Italian territory, it is important to emphasise the potential of similar projects to provide a comprehensive scope within the human educational sector, which is increasingly in trouble. We are confronted with a novel paradigm of institutional collaboration and cooperation between the private and public sectors, representing a paradigm of educational innovation with the potential to chart new courses of action in the face of the educational crisis of the third millennium.

References

- Balzano, V. (2017). *Educazione, persona e welfare. Il contributo della pedagogia nello sviluppo delle politiche sociali*. Progedit.
- Balzano, V. (2020). *Educare alla cittadinanza sociale*. Progedit.
- Bholinger, S., Haake, U., Helms Jørgensen, C., Toiviainen, H., & Wallo, A. (Eds.). (2015). *Working and learning in times of uncertainty: Challenges to adult, professional and vocational education*. Sense.
- Bode, I. (2007). The culture of welfare markets in international perspective. In *The School of Social and Political Studies, University of Edinburgh*.
- Boeren, E. (2019). Understanding Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on "quality education" from micro, meso and macro perspectives. *International Review of Education*, 65(2), 277–294.
- Carretero Gomez, S., Vuorikari, R., & Punie, Y. (Eds.). (2017). *DigComp 2.1: The digital competence framework for citizens with eight proficiency levels and examples of use*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC106281>
- Elfert, M. (2019). Lifelong learning in Sustainable Development Goal 4: What does it mean for UNESCO's rights-based approach to adult learning and education? *International Review of Education*, 65(4), 537–556.
- Evans, R., Kurantowicz, E., & Villegas, E. L. (Eds.). (2015). *Researching and transforming adult learning and communities: The local/global context*. Sense.
- Fejes, A. (2019). Adult education and the fostering of asylum seekers as "full" citizens. *International Review of Education*, 65(2), 233–250.
- Ferrera, M., & Hemerijck, A. (2003). Recalibrating Europe's welfare regimes. In J. Zeitlin & D. M. Trubek (Eds.), *Governing work and welfare in the new economy: European and American experiments*. Oxford University Press.
- Fraser, D. (2002). *The evolution of the British welfare*. Macmillan.

- Grotlüschen, A., Nienkemper, B., & Duncker–Euringer, C. (2020). International assessment of low reading proficiency in the adult population: A question of components or lower rungs? *International Review of Education*. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11159-020-09829-y>.
- Joint Research Centre. (2013). *DIGCOMP: A framework for developing and understanding digital competence in Europe*. Publications Office of the European Union.
- Kettunen, P., & Petersen, K. (2011). *Beyond welfare state models: Transnational historical perspectives on social policy*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Marshall, T. H. (1964). *Class, citizenship and social development*. Doubleday.
- Merrill, B., González Monteagudo, J., Nizinska, A., Galimberti, A., & Ballesteros–Moscosio, M. A. (Eds.). (2017). *Adult learning, educational careers and social change*. University of Seville.
- Merrill, B., Nizinska, A., Galimberti, A., Eneau, J., & Sanojca Samiri Bezzan, E. (Eds.). (2019). *Exploring learning contexts: Implications for access, learning careers and identities*. University Rennes 2/ESREA.
- Merrill, B., Vieira, C., Galimberti, A., & Nizinska, A. (2020). *Adult education as a resource for resistance and transformation: Voices, learning experiences, identities of student and adult educators*. University of Coimbra/University of Algarve/ESREA.
- Moyn, S. (2010). *The last utopia: Human rights in history*. Harvard University Press.
- Naldini, M. (2003). *The family in the Mediterranean welfare state*. Frank Cass.
- Ostrouch–Kaminska, J., & Vieira, C. (Eds.). (2015). *Private world(s): Gender and informal learning of adults*. Sense.
- Sechrist, F. K. (2019). *Education and the general welfare*. Bibliobazar.
- UNESCO. (2021). *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379707>

- Vuorikari, R., Punie, Y., Carretero Gomez, S., & Van Den Brande, G. (Eds.). (2016). *DigComp 2.0: The digital competence framework for citizens. Update phase 1: The conceptual reference model*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC101254>
- Wringe, C. (1999). Issues in education for citizenship at national, local and global levels. *The Development Education Journal*, 1(1), 4-6.

Editors Biographical Notes

Liliana Paulos, PhD, is a researcher at the Research Centre on Adult Education and Community Intervention (CEAD) and an Invited Assistant Professor at the University of Algarve (UAlg), Portugal. She is Director of the Postgraduate Program in Education and Learning for Older Adults and the Subdirector of the Postgraduate Program in Preparation for Retirement at UAlg. She leads the Scientific Dissemination Program of CEAD, alongside Sandra T. Valadas, with the main aim of sharing and discussing scientific results in community public spaces. She has participated/participates in numerous research projects, funded both national and internationally, and published articles in peer reviewed journals, books, and manuals of broad scientific dissemination. Her research interests include Higher Education, university-to-work transition, employability, identity, self-efficacy, and non-traditional students/graduates.

Barbara Merrill, PhD, is an Emeritus Professor/Dr. at the Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Warwick, UK. Her research interests include issues of class and gender in relation to the learning experiences and the learner identity of adult students, particularly in higher education as well as biographical approaches to research. She has published extensively in the field and has co-ordinated several European research projects on inequalities and adult students in higher education. Barbara is a member of the Steering Committee for ESREA (European Society for Research on the Education of Adults) and co-ordinates the ESREA Access, Learning

Careers and Identities Network. She is on the editorial board of *Studies in the Education of Adults*, *RELA* and *Social Sciences* journals.

Sandra T. Valadas, PhD, is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences of the University of Algarve. She has experience as researcher at CEAD, where she is member of the direction, but also as team local coordinator, in several national and international projects in the past years. Her main research interests nowadays are employability in higher education, transition to the labour market of traditional and non-traditional students and graduates, life trajectories of graduates and older people, and the influence of social capital in academic and professional success. She participates, for several years, in national and international research projects funded by FCT and Erasmus+. She publishes mainly in adult education and educational psychology in national and international journals with peer review indexed in different platforms. Within the scope of her academic management activities, she is responsible for numerous protocols and partnerships with institutions in the community. She is currently Course Subdirector and Director of Department.

Andrea Galimberti, PhD, is a researcher at the Department of Human Sciences for Education "R. Massa", University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy, and a member of the scientific board of the PhD programme Education in the Contemporary Society. He is an Associate member of SIPED (Società Italiana di Pedagogia) and SIPEGES (Società Italiana di Pedagogia Generale e Sociale). He co-ordinates the ESREA (European Society for Research on the Education of Adults) Access, Learning Careers and Identities Network, the ESREA Working Life and Learning Network, and the EERA (European Educational Research Association) Research in Higher Education Network. His research interests are mainly focused on epistemologies of education, transformation processes in higher education, workplace learning and sustainability issues. He is in charge of the course Pedagogy of work (8 CFU) in the Master Degree of Human Resource Management.

António Fragoso, PhD, is a Full Professor at the University of Algarve, Portugal.

He was a member of the steering committee of ESREA (European Society for Research on the Education of Adults). Currently he is one of the convenors of the ESREA research network on Access, Learning Careers and Identities (together with Barbara Merrill and Andrea Galimberti). António is one of the editors of the European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults. From 2020 on he is the coordinator of the Research centre on adult education and community intervention (CEAD: <https://cead.ualg.pt/>). His research focuses on adult education, community development and education, education of older adults and non-traditional students in higher education.

Authors Biographical Notes

Ana C. D. Lopes, PhD, is a Tutor in Universidade Aberta, Lisboa, Portugal and a researcher at CEMRI/UAb. PhD in Intercultural Relations at Universidade Aberta. Master in Statistics and Information Management at Nova IMS. Graduated in Management at Universidade Aberta, Lisbon & in Mathematics applied to Operational Research at NOVA School of Science and Technology. In terms of research, the areas of interest cover a reflection on the opportunities and challenges of the contemporary world, with a focus on education and interculturality.

Anne-Gaëlle, PhD, is a Professional counsellor and coordinator of a master's program in adult vocational training. She supports learners in their personal and professional development using practice analysis approaches. She is also involved in adult education research at the University of Rennes 2 in France, focusing on the links between on the potentially transformative links between research, training, and professional activities.

Aurora Coelho is a social educator currently working in the Legos Project in Faro, Portugal, involved in intervention work with its homeless population. She worked as a social educator in neighbourhoods of subsidized housing in Faro and Olhão (2013–2023). She holds a bachelor's and a master's degree in Social Education from the University of Algarve (UALg), where she worked as an invited assistant professor. The focus of her intervention outreach is mostly on roma communities. Previously, Aurora Coelho served as co-chair promoting the association Núcleo

do Algarve do Instituto Paulo Freire de Portugal (2009–2013) and participated in the international project Older Men as Active Learners in the Community (OMAL, 2014). She is the founder of the Na Mira Jogos board game project (2006–today), engaging with a diverse population.

Carol Thompson, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer and Researcher at the University of Bedfordshire. She has over 30 years' teaching experience and more than 20 years working with trainee teachers and mentors. Passionate about sharing her experience, Carol is the author of several books aimed at supporting teacher education, including *The Trainee Teacher's Handbook*, *Learning Theories for Everyday Teaching*, *Being a Teacher*, *Reflective Practice for Professional Development* and *The Magic of Mentoring*.

Cláudio Garcia graduated in Computer Engineering, and began working at the MOJU Association with children, young people and their families in the most vulnerable neighbourhoods of Olhão from 2012 onwards. Between 2019 and 2022, worked with roma communities in Faro, carrying out activities in the area of school and digital inclusion. Also in 2022, he completed his master's degree in Social Education, with the dissertation theme *(ROMA)ria para a Escola: Contributos para a inclusão escolar nas comunidades ciganas*. In 2021, he became a trainer for the High Commission for Migration, in the area of roma communities. Since 2022, he has embraced the challenge of teaching IT at Bernardette Romeira private school in Olhão.

Elaine Battams, PhD. After a career in Early Years, Elaine moved into Teacher Education and is now based at Barnfield College in Luton. She is an advanced practitioner supporting others in all things teaching, learning and assessment. A firm believer in reflective practice and self-development, Elaine was one of the first cohort in the country to achieve Advanced Teacher Status (ATS) and CTeach with the Education and Training Foundation.

Eric Bertrand, PhD, is a teacher and researcher in adult education at Rennes 2 University in France. His research focuses on the transformative learning of adults at work, and on the heuristic links between research,

work, and training activities. He is co-director of a master's degree program in training. He is involved in a number of professional networks concerned with the professionalization of professions, professionals and organizations, such as the Centre des Jeunes Dirigeants.

Federico Zamengo, PhD, is Associate Professor of General and Social Education at University of Turin, where he teaches Theory of Education. He is interested on community development themes, with a focus on the education informal and non-formal context and with reference to young people and adults.

Henrique M. A. C. Fonseca, PhD. Degree in Biology from the University of Porto and PhD in Biology from the University of Dundee, (Scotland). He is currently Assistant Professor at the Department of Biology & GeoBioTec at the University of Aveiro and his main areas of research are Education, specifically lifelong learning for adult and senior students, and Biology, in the fields of Botany, Microbiology and Phytopathology. In the area in question, he has focused his interest on the characterization of non-traditional higher education audiences and/or those with unique characteristics. In particular, students entering higher education via those over 23 years of age and CET/CTeSP, students from the PALOP, and those who have special educational needs; with the ultimate objective of finding answers that enhance socialization processes, learning and academic success.

Jérôme Eneau, PhD, is a full professor of adult education at Rennes 2 University, France. His research themes focus on adult autonomy, emancipation, and self-directed learning. He is particularly interested in the social dimensions of self-directed learning and accompanies master's and doctoral students on various issues related to these problems. His interests include both lifelong learning and more specific issues related to learning contexts (vocational education and training, learning in the workplace, trainers and their professionalisation, learning technologies, etc.).

Joanna Stankowska, PhD, is sociologist, a key expert in the Educational Research Institute (IBE) in Warsaw and a doctoral student at the

Interdisciplinary Doctoral School of Social Sciences at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland. She is a team member in research projects: "Adult Learning in Poland" and "Institutional Dimension of Adult Learning at the Local Level". Her main scientific interests are the quality of life, the middle class, and education.

Julita Pieńkosz, PhD, is sociologist, a senior expert in the Educational Research Institute (IBE) in Warsaw, Poland. She is the author of scientific publications on the development of national sociology and the methodological foundations of practicing the history of sociology. Currently, her research interests focus on the broadly understood issues of education, particularly the structural determinants of adult learning. In her professional work, she uses both quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection.

Laura Formenti, PhD, is a full professor in General and Social Pedagogy at Milano-Bicocca University, Italy. She does research in the education, training and guidance of adults and older adults, vocational training for educators, family pedagogy, social work and health. Her approach is systemic, participatory and transformative. She uses ethnographic, narrative-aesthetic and cooperative research methods in a critical interpretative framework, often entailing action-research and intervention. She has explored original and new methodologies to study as well as transform knowledge and the perspectives of meaning with individuals, groups, organizations and complex systems, acting at a micro, meso and macro-level. Among her publications, the book *Transforming Perspectives in Lifelong Learning and Adult Education. A Dialogue*, written with Linden West, received the 2019 Cyril O. Houle Award for Outstanding Literature in Adult Education.

Lucília Santos, PhD in Condensed Matter Physics, Associate Professor at the University of Aveiro (UA), Department of Physics. Member of RCDTET. Teaching and supervision activities include Sciences, Engineering, Health, and Teacher Training (Bachelor's, Master's and Doctorate degrees) and Supervision of Integrated Internships/PPS. She developed research

in Physics and Physics Teaching and Learning, and the focus is Lifelong Learning. She represented UA at EUCEN and coordinated CIFOP, UINFOC and, finally, continUA, where the One-Stop Shop for M23 students is based. The main interest is the characterization and monitoring of the academic path of non-traditional students (M23, CET/CTeSP, PALOP, SEN, International) in higher education and the development and implementation of immersion courses for these audiences at UA, aiming at their academic success and social integration.

Maria Natália P. Ramos, PhD, is an Associate Professor in Universidade Aberta, Lisboa, Portugal. Scientific Coordinator of the Centre for The Study of Migration and Intercultural Relations/CEMRI/UAb. Responsible Researcher of the Group Health, Culture and Development Research, UAb. PHD in Psychology by the University of Paris V, Sorbonne, France. Psychology. Author and director of numerous scientific works both written and filmic, in particular on intercultural, migratory, gender, educational, psychosocial, clinical and health, communicational, intergenerational, family and developmental issues.

Marianna Peotta is a professional educator. She graduated in Pedagogy at the University of Turin. She got a Master's degree in Pedagogical Consultancy in legal, family and school issues and one in Social Work in the field of protection of minors, promoted by the Erickson Study Centre in collaboration with the Relational Social Work Centre of the Catholic University of Milan. She works in Turin as an educator at the local health board, where she deals with the treatment and rehabilitation of individuals with substance use disorder. Previously, she worked for some social cooperatives, mainly dealing with community development, youth housing projects and social innovation. Main research topics are the promotion of well-being and the methodology of community development, social innovation, urban regeneration, and the valorisation of marginal territories.

Marta Petelewicz, PhD, is sociologist, an expert in the Educational Research Institute (IBE) in Warsaw, Poland. Her main scientific interest is social

structure, inequalities in adult education, participation in learning activities. She is engaged in quantitative and qualitative research projects.

Micaela Castiglioni, PhD, is professor of adult and elderly education at the University of Milan-Bicocca; Department of Human Sciences for Education "R. Massa". For years she has been involved in the training of healthcare professionals with narrative and self-reflective methodologies. She designed, in Italy, the first Interdepartmental Master in Medical Humanities and Narrative in Medicine of which she is the Director and Scientific Responsible - University of Milan-Bicocca. She has written numerous texts and articles in A-level magazines on the themes of fragility and transitions in adulthood, on care and on the solitudes of our contemporary world.

Natália Rego, PhD, is an Associate Professor (Tenured) with Habilitation at the Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave (Portugal). She has a degree in Biological Engineering by the University of Minho (Portugal), a Master degree in Environmental Engineering from the Faculty of Engineering of Porto University (Portugal), and a Ph.D in Advanced Mathematical Techniques and their Applications from the University of Vigo (Spain). Her research interest is to study in depth the Hom/Lie and Hom/Leibniz algebras and their generalizations, namely, endowed with n -ary operations. She is Member Associated of the research center Mathematics Center of the University of Porto – CMUP and, actually is the Academic Coordinator of the School of Technology.

Neil Hopkins, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer and Advanced Researcher at the University of Bedfordshire, UK. He has published two books: *Democracy and Citizenship in Adult and Further Education* (Springer 2013) and *Democratic Socialism and Education: New Perspectives on Policy and Practice* (Springer 2019). He was awarded the British Educational Research Journal's 'Editors' Choice Award' in 2020. He has recently co-edited the volume, *Reflections on Identity: Narratives from Educators* (Springer 2023). He has recently had an article published on teacher identity in 'Modern Psychoanalysis'.

Nicolò Valenzano, PhD, is a high school teacher of philosophy and human sciences. He is currently a Post–Doc Fellow in Theory of Education at the Department of Philosophy and Education Sciences at the University of Turin in Italy. In the past, he has focused on topics such as death education and the teaching of philosophy. Currently, his interests lie in Philosophy for Community as a proposal for adult education in informal and non-formal settings, community educational practices in marginalized areas, informal teacher training, and Paulo Freire's pedagogical anthropology.

Paola Zonca, PhD, is a confirmed researcher of General and Social Pedagogy at the Department of Philosophy and Education Sciences of University of Turin (Italy). She teaches Childhood Pedagogy and her research interests and expertise deal with early childhood education and care, adult–child relationships, child and family policies, home–school relationships, professional development in ECEC's settings with particular regard to the perspective of continuing education.

Ricardo Simões, PhD, is an Associate Professor (Tenured) with Habilitation at the Polytechnic Institute of Cavado and Ave (Portugal). He has a Ph.D. in Materials Science and Engineering from the University of North Texas (USA). His areas of research include Engineering Design, Sustainability, and Complex Engineering Systems, having supervised 11 PhD and 30 MS theses, and coordinated a total of 20 National and International research projects funded by competitive programs. He has 95 Publications in Refereed Scientific Journals, 17 Book Chapters, 100 Publications in International Conference Proceedings, 2 Edited Books, and 70 oral presentations in International Conferences.

Samantha Broadhead, PhD, is Head of Research at Leeds Arts University, UK. Her research interests include access and widening participation in art and design education and the educational sociology of Basil Bernstein (1924–2000). She serves on the Journal of Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning's editorial board. Broadhead has co-authored with Professor Maggie Gregson (2018) *Practical Wisdom and Democratic Education – Phronesis, Art and Non-traditional Students*, Palgrave

Macmillan. She also has co-authored with Rosemarie Davies and Anthony Hudson (2019) *Perspectives on Access: Practice and Research*, Emerald Publishing. She has produced an edited book, *Access and Widening Participation in Arts Higher Education*, Palgrave Macmillan (2022). Broadhead is working on *Learning Returns*, a practice-based project that aims to capture the experiences of mature students studying art and design through film-making.

Sharon Hooper, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer and a filmmaker. Having had previous experience in television as well as community filmmaking, I now mainly make academic films and work with third sector organisations. I am also undertaking a PhD which focuses on the archives and work of Leeds Animation Workshop, a feminist film group making animated documentaries since the Seventies. Within my broader interest in feminist filmmaking, my research explores participatory and collaborative practice. I am interested in skills sharing and the sharing of experiences through film and filmmaking.

Ted Fleming, PhD, is emeritus professor at Maynooth University, Ireland and adjunct professor at Teachers College Columbia University, New York. At Maynooth, he was head of the Department of Adult Education and associate dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences. He was a senator on the Senate of the National University of Ireland. Graduate studies included an MA and EdD (Columbia University) with Jack Mezirow as supervisor. A summer school with Paulo Freire in Boston followed. He is currently external academic advisor to the Citizens' University and to the UNESCO funded Learning City Project in Larissa, Greece. In Ireland, he is a contributor to the International Expert Group, advising AONTAS (Ireland's Association of Adult Learners) on formally recognizing student voice in Ireland's Further Education programmes. His publications include *European Perspectives on Transformation Theory*, co-edited with Alexis Kokkos, and Fergal Finnegan.

Vito Balzano, PhD, is a senior researcher (RtdB) in General and Social Pedagogy at the Department of Education Sciences, Psychology,

Communication at the University of Bari Aldo Moro. He holds a PhD in Educational Dynamics and Political Education. His research focuses on pedagogy and social policy, education for politics, solidarity, inclusion, dignity, and welfare, with a particular interest in the interconnections between educational and social policy dimensions. He has obtained the National Scientific Qualification for the second band in sector 11/D1. He has presented his work at numerous Italian and international conferences and actively collaborates with various scientific societies and networks. He is a member of SIPED, SIREF, SPES, and ESREA.

Emerging from a conference by the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) in Portugal, this book offers an insightful reflection of adult education's evolution in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring themes of access, learning approaches, identity, and digital pedagogy. It critically addresses the shift towards digital learning and its implications on social interaction, pedagogical practices, and the educator–learner dynamic. The narrative spans across diverse contexts, including higher education, community education, vocational learning, and informal learning environments, highlighting the pandemic's exacerbation of social inequalities and the nuanced effects on gender, ethnicity, and age. Through empirical research and reflective analysis, the book interrogates the potential of digital technologies in fostering inclusive and accessible learning experiences, while also considering the challenges of maintaining a sense of community and identity in virtual spaces. It not only assesses the immediate responses to the pandemic but also projects future implications and possibilities for adult education, aiming to inform practice, policy, and research. The book stands as a testament to the enduring significance of adult education in navigating times of crisis and change, advocating for a more equitable and responsive educational landscape.