



Professional development of adult educators: A European perspective

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of major dimensions of the professional development of adult educators identified in European policy documents, relevant reports and research. The author reviews the relevant policy visions of the past two decades, aiming to determine the extent to which professional development of adult educators is visible in European policy documents, how it is conceptualised and under which terms it is discussed. The author argues that adult educators play an essential role in adult education and society in general, are an important factor for securing quality in the sector, and are considered to be a critical pillar of adult education. To perform this role well, they require specialised, targeted and systematic professional development programmes in a changing environment which affects both their learners' and their own position as educators. However, the analysis of the policy documents shows that despite a consensus about the importance of quality adult education, over the past two decades little attention has been given to the initial training and continuous professional development of adult educators in practical terms. Due to a lack of opportunities, their professional development seems weak and still faces many challenges.

Keywords Adult education · Professional development · Adult educators · European policy documents

Résumé

Développement professionnel des éducateurs d'adultes : Une perspective européenne – Cet article donne un aperçu des principales dimensions du développement professionnel des éducateurs d'adultes identifiées dans les documents politiques européens, les rapports pertinents et la recherche. L'auteure passe en revue les visions politiques pertinentes des deux dernières décennies, afin de déterminer dans quelle mesure le développement professionnel des éducateurs d'adultes est visible dans les documents politiques européens, comment il est conceptualisé et sous quels termes il est dis-

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cuté. L'auteure affirme que les éducateurs d'adultes jouent un rôle essentiel dans l'éducation des adultes et dans la société en général, qu'ils sont un facteur important pour garantir la qualité dans le secteur et qu'ils sont considérés comme un pilier essentiel de l'éducation des adultes. Pour bien remplir ce rôle, ils ont besoin de programmes de développement professionnel spécialisés, ciblés et systématiques dans un environnement changeant qui affecte à la fois leurs apprenants et leur propre position en tant qu'éducateurs. Cependant, l'analyse des documents politiques montre qu'en dépit d'un consensus sur l'importance d'une éducation des adultes de qualité, peu d'attention a été accordée à la formation initiale et au développement professionnel continu des éducateurs d'adultes en termes pratiques au cours des deux dernières décennies. En raison d'un manque d'opportunités, leur développement professionnel semble faible et reste confronté à de nombreux défis.

Introduction

Adult education is a complex and multi-layered educational field with a very rich scope in relation to the way it is organised (Fejes and Nylander 2019). It is characterised as fragmented because of its various actors, the many levels at which adult education is provided, the many places where adult education takes place (NGOs, local communities, prisons, universities, vocational colleges and other adult education institutions), and the forms it takes (formal, non-formal, informal). Notably, the position that adult educators adopt, in relation to how they define adult education and its overall purpose, affects the way they approach teaching and learning, their relationship with their learners, and their aims and techniques. Their position is also relevant to the way they perceive their role in relation to enhancing societal change and individual growth.

Well-prepared adult educators can increase their learners' motivation to learn, their capacity to exercise critical judgment and their skill of learning how to learn. At the same time, effective education and preparation of adult educators affects their own teaching methodologies and can contribute to their students' success. According to Ekkehard Nuissl and Regina Egetenmeyer, "teachers in the field of adult education form the backbone of the system", and

their situation, their interests and motivations, their skills, competences and working conditions must be such so as to ensure that programmes are of high quality (Nuissl and Egetenmeyer 2010, p. 10).

With an increase in demand for highly skilled practitioners, more emphasis has been placed on the need to design and provide specialised, targeted and systematic professional development (PD) programmes for adult educators. Nonetheless, both early policy documents on adult education (EC 2006, 2007) as well as the more recent ones (EC 2019) note that "little attention has been paid to defining the content and processes for initial training for adult learning staff" (EC 2006, p. 7) and to their further professionalisation. Few adult educators are offered adequate PD opportunities (Nuissl and Egetenmeyer 2010; EC 2007, 2019; Buiskool et al. 2010; RvB and

PLATO 2008; Smith and Gillespie 2007), even though PD is acknowledged as an essential quality factor of the teaching staff working in this particular sector.

The purpose of this article is to better understand the notion of adult educators' PD in relevant European and international policy documents. My aim was to investigate how the European Union (EU) conceptualises adult educators' PD in the 21st century by reviewing major European policy documents, relevant reports commissioned by the European Commission (EC), and other European research of the past two decades. I also sought to determine the extent to which adult educators' PD is visible in these documents, and under what terms it is discussed. The final sections of this article discuss the contradictions and tensions between adult education policies and the actual PD of adult educators, mostly due to discrepancies between the vision of the nature of adult education and what this vision means in practical terms for the training of adult educators. The article wraps up with a number of suggestions for improving the PD of this group of practitioners.

Adult education: an important policy priority in Europe

According to John Holford and Marcella Milana (2014), adult education was only recognised in the past two decades as a distinct policy field with its own priorities and challenges. In the European region, the wide adoption of the concept of lifelong learning in 2000 has significantly influenced education policy, and especially adult education (Mikulec 2019). The EC *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (EC 2000), the EC Communication entitled "Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality" (EC 2001) and the Council Resolution on Lifelong Learning (CoEU 2002) enhanced the debate on lifelong learning in Europe and prepared the way for the emergence of adult education as a policy field in its own right. Adult education was seen as a core component of lifelong learning, which comprises all forms of education and learning (formal, non-formal, informal, lifelong, life-wide) that aim to ensure that all adults participate in their societies and the world of work (UNESCO 2015).

In 2006, the European Commission issued its Communication on Adult Learning entitled "It is never too late to learn" (the first official document focusing entirely on adult education) (EC 2006), followed by the "Action Plan on Adult Learning: It is Always a Good Time to Learn" (EC 2007). The 2006 Communication stated that "adult learning has not always gained the recognition it deserves in terms of visibility, policy, prioritisation and resources" (EC 2006, p. 3). It asserted that EU "Member States can no longer afford to be without an efficient adult learning system" (ibid. p. 5) and highlighted the importance of adult learning as a key component of lifelong learning. In the 2007 Action Plan, adult learning was identified as one of the key components of the *Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs* (CoEU 2000, 2005), and the contribution of the adult learning sector to achieving the Lisbon goals and to life-wide and lifelong education was recognised. The Action Plan focused on those who are disadvantaged because of their low literacy levels, and inadequate skills related to work and/or to successful integration into society. The general objective of the Action Plan was to implement the five key messages established in the EC

Communication “It is never too late to learn” (EC 2006): (1) to remove barriers to participation; (2) to increase the quality and efficiency of the sector; (3) to speed up the process of validation and recognition; (4) to ensure sufficient investment; and (5) to monitor the sector. Through these policy documents, the European Commission shifted adult education from being a relatively marginal field to being a prominent one (Holford et al. 2014).

The Communication (EC 2006) and the Action Plan (EC 2007) served as key documents during the decade for which the Lisbon Strategy was conceptualised (2000–2010), when initiatives undertaken by the EU were related to the very existence and persistence of Europe as a competitive actor within the world system. In the next decade, adult education was tied to “Europe 2020”, the European Union’s ten-year jobs and growth strategy. The EC Communication entitled “Europe 2020: A European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth” (EC 2010) highlighted all forms of learning at all levels of the lifelong learning process and identified adult education as the basis for upskilling and reskilling adults and as a means of achieving social and economic inclusion. The adult education policy for 2010–2020 was conceptualised in the “renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning” (CoEU 2011). This Council Resolution adopted by the Ministers of Education of all EU Member States in 2011 highlighted the need to increase participation in all kinds of adult learning (formal, non-formal and informal) in all domains, be it to acquire new work skills, for active citizenship, social inclusion or for personal development and fulfilment. The financial crisis of 2008 highlighted the major role which adult learning could play in achieving the Europe 2020 goals, by enabling adults – in particular low-skilled and older workers – to improve their ability to adapt to changes both in the labour market and in society. Adult learning could provide a means of upskilling or reskilling those affected by unemployment, restructuring and career transitions, as well as making an important contribution to social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development. The priorities of the European Action Plan and renewed Agenda for adult learning (EC 2007, CoEU 2011) were reaffirmed by the Commission in 2015, suggesting that the broad thrust of the renewed Agenda remains valid (EC 2015a).

Today, with the added experience of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, adult education is seen as a driving force with the potential of helping people navigate complex transitions, such as moving towards more digitalisation and eco-friendly production and consumption alternatives in addressing current and future challenges (such as climate change, demography, technology, health, etc.). Adult education, as an important part of lifelong learning, can contribute to making economies and societies stronger and more resilient and can create the conditions necessary for people to act as change agents through their own choices and decisions (CoEU 2021).

Adult educators as a critical pillar of adult education

The complexity of adult education directly affects those working in this sector and puts significant responsibility upon adult educators. There has been growing recognition that teachers are the most important factor in student achievement (Cronel et al.

2015; UNESCO 2015; Wasik 2012). This emphasis on the role of adult educators is also reflected in the European and international policy documents identified in the previous section, claiming that teachers of adults help build a strong adult learning sector, that they are crucial in implementing effective adult learning policies “at regional, national and international levels” (EC 2015b, p. 5) and vital determinants of the quality of adult learning. Thus EU Member States should ensure that teachers are provided with opportunities to develop their practices and skills through continuous professional development (CPD), encouraging and enabling them to progress their professional status and increase their professionalisation (CoEU 2011; EC 2015b, 2019). Moreover, research has shown that adult teaching staff enable learners to contribute to economic development and social growth, increase their motivation to learn, their capacity to exercise critical judgment and their skill of learning how to learn, thus “form[ing] the backbone of the system” (Nuisl and Egetenmeyer 2010, p. 10). Therefore, “their situation, their interests and motivations, their skills, competences and working conditions must be such so as to ensure that programmes are of high quality” (ibid.).

According to recent “Council conclusions on European teachers and trainers for the future” (CoEU 2020), adult educators are “an indispensable driving force of education and training and work in the world of today” and have a “crucial role in preparing individuals of all backgrounds and ages to live, learn and work in the world of today, as well as in creating and leading future changes” (ibid., p. 1). In an early report commissioned by the European Commission, adult teaching staff were identified as playing a key role in making lifelong learning a reality, as they “help learners to develop knowledge, competences and skills” (RvB and PLATO 2008, p. 9).

Nevertheless, as yet few opportunities exist for adult educators to acquire a body of abstract and organised knowledge on adult learning theory and its application before entering their profession, and even fewer are on offer for them once they are in practice. In the absence of specialised programmes and regulated procedures that would safeguard quality, we see many adult educators assume this responsibility for themselves. In Europe today, the majority of adult educators are self-taught professionals who only have access to poorly-designed and uncoordinated PD (Papastamatis et al. 2009). Too often, teaching effectiveness depends upon adult educators’ sensitivity, social commitment, talent and attitude towards their profession (Vergidis 2006; Kapsalis 2006; Papastamatis and Panitsidou 2008; Youngman 2005).

This situation is similar internationally, prompting the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to recommend that its Member States should “foster an environment where quality adult learning and education is provided” (UNESCO 2014, p. 8) through measures which will

improv[e] training, capacity-building, employment conditions and the professionalisation of adult educators, for example through the establishment of partnerships with higher education institutions, teacher associations and civil society organizations (ibid.).

Interestingly, UNESCO’s fourth *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE 4; UIL 2019)* paid particular attention to the progress made on pre-service and in-service training for adult learning educators and their employment conditions,

since adult learning teachers were identified as major contributors to the quality of the sector. Thus, UNESCO Member States were called on to increase their commitment to developing quality criteria for improving training and employment conditions for adult educators. *GRALE 4* reported that globally 52% of countries ($n = 76$) had improved in-service training, and 58% ($n = 79$) had improved employment conditions (ibid., p. 68). However, in North America and Western Europe, only 33% of countries reported improvements in pre-service training, and 25% reported improvements in employment conditions (ibid.). A decade earlier, the *Belém Framework for Action* stated: “As in other education sectors, teachers, facilitators and trainers constitute the most important quality input factor in adult education” (UNESCO 2009, p. 5).

Despite a consensus that adult educators are an important source of quality in education and training, *GRALE 1*, also published in 2009, noted that

the lack of professionalisation and training opportunities for educators has had a detrimental impact on the quality of adult learning and education provision (UIL 2009, p. 10).

The European study *Promoting adult learning in the workplace* found that “the quality of adult learning in the workplace is influenced by ... the quality of the learning facilitator (teacher, trainer)” (EC 2018, p. 34). Likewise, in the European report *Improving Policy and Provision for Adult Learning in Europe*, adult educators and their support were identified as important “building blocks” in strengthening their competences and updating their skills (EC 2015a, p. 36). Training and CPD are regarded as indicators towards the professionalisation of adult education. However, EU Member States still provide limited opportunities for adult learning staff (EC 2019). Since adult learning should be “an investment that pays off for all” (ibid., p. 2), the professionalisation of adult educators needs further attention to achieve real benefits for everyone (EC 2019).

Adult educators’ continuing education is part of the discussions on improving the quality of adult education, and European policies have argued for an increased professionalisation of adult educators (CoEU 2020; RvB and PLATO 2008; Buiskool et al. 2010). Adult teaching staff have been identified as a success factor of effective adult learning policies at regional, national and international levels, and

the Commission, Member States and other relevant stakeholders are recommended to improve the evidence base on adult learning policy by commissioning meta-reviews of the literature or other research to fill gaps in the evidence ... in particular on the effectiveness of [the policy action of] developing a skilled adult education workforce through initial teacher training and continuous professional development (EC 2015b, p. 288).

European policies on the professional development of adult educators

The importance of adult educators’ PD is stressed in all European policy documents developed for this sector. The first two policy papers for European adult education, “It is never too late to learn” (EC 2006) and the subsequent adult

learning Action Plan “It is always a good time to learn” (EC 2007) both stressed the need for national systems for adult educators’ initial training and CPD. The Council of the European Union reinforced this through its “Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning” by inviting EU Member States to focus on

improving the quality of adult education staff, ... by defining competence profiles, establishing effective systems for [their] ... professional development and facilitating the mobility of ... adult education staff (CoEU 2011, p. 5).

This emphasis was reiterated in 2015, when EU Member States, with the support of the European Commission, were invited to achieve by 2020 the longer-term vision of the renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning by prioritising quality in terms of

improving quality assurance, including monitoring and impact assessment, improving initial and continuing education of adult educators, and collecting the necessary data on needs to effectively target and design provision” (CoEU and EC 2015, p. 35).

To achieve the aforementioned EU objectives, the European Commission (EC 2006, 2007, 2019) and the Council of the European Union (CoEU 2011, 2020) prioritised adult educators’ PD in their policy documents, arguing for the sector’s increased professionalisation, and they all considered how to make the adult educator’s teaching effective. The European Commission’s priorities for adult learning set for 2015–2020 included

strong support for teachers, trainers, school leaders and other members of educational staff, who play a key role in ensuring the success of learners and in implementing education policy (CoEU and EC 2015a, 2015b, 2015, p. 29).

In the face of the increased diversity of learners and for the purpose of promoting excellence in teaching at all levels through programme design, learning organisation and incentive structures, suggestions included supporting both initial training of educators and their CPD.

The policy documents, such as the Communications from the European Commission (EC 2006, 2007) which exclusively referred to adult learning, and the Council’s subsequent Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning (CoEU 2011) with its proposals for innovative pedagogy addressed the shift in emphasis from knowledge acquisition to competence development and the new roles for adult educators and learners that this implies. Also, in 2015, the European Agenda for Adult Learning defined four priorities for EU Member States and the European Commission to work on until 2020, one of which referred to “[b]etter quality assurance, policy monitoring, education of adult educators, better data on needs to target and design provision” (EC 2019, p. 4).

Yet, quality assurance in adult learning is slow to develop, partly under influence of more “visible” and well-established sectors such as that of vocational

education and training (VET) (ibid.). Moreover, in spite of several attempts undertaken at European level to exchange good practices and produce reports to monitor EU Member States' development and policy formulation, progress to date is rather limited. According to the EC report entitled *Achievements under the Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning*, EU Member States "still provide limited opportunities for the professionalisation of adult learning staff" (EC 2019, p. 6) and in general, "it remains challenging to identify clear developments in relation to professionalisation of adult educators between 2011 and 2018" (ibid., p. 62). This key finding is confirmed in more recent policy documents, along with the criticism that the EU has not properly defined the context and approaches that should be followed concerning the initial training and PD for adult education personnel (EC 2019). Although there is evidence of some developments, these remain at the sub-policy level and have not made much of an impact in strengthening the integration of adult educators into initial and continuing education, or to improve their professional status (ibid., p. 62).

European adult education policy has identified PD as an important building block linked to the quality of the sector, and the existence of the term in all documents and reports serves as a reminder that adult educators' PD is an important policy area to be addressed at the national level. Still, there is a need to understand how the above-mentioned initiatives are being used to support adult educators in practical terms, not only informing them about new policies but also helping them improve their knowledge and competences and create communities of practice with other educators in which they will be able to discuss issues of common interest and find solutions to everyday problems related to their teaching practice. As already noted, European policy documents and reports have pointed out that it remains challenging to identify developments in relation to adult educators' professional status and the PD options available to them in EU Member States (EC 2006, 2007, 2019; RvB and PLATO 2008; Buiskool et al. 2010; Hansen 2021). These documents highlight the conditions that hinder adult educators' PD, such as high percentages of part-time staff, who may have few career prospects and are frequently paid on an hourly basis, and uncertain working conditions. Participation in PD and the acquisition of specialised knowledge and skills can help establish adult education as a profession, but few adult educators participate in these activities.

The formation of the European policy on adult educators' PD was and continues to be supported by a number of European initiatives, such as the Open Method of Coordination, which is a "soft" form of intergovernmental policymaking. While it does not require EU countries to introduce or amend their laws, it does provide a new framework for cooperation between EU countries (European Parliament 2014). It consists, among others, of indicators and benchmarks and peer learning, creating a common understanding among EU countries and building consensus on solutions and their practical implementation. In addition, the introduction of a network of National Coordinators for the implementation of the European Agenda for Adult Learning; the Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPALE) (EC 2022a); and the European Working Group of Member State experts on Adult Learning are initiatives that support the exchange of good practices in relation to adult education practitioners' PD among EU Member States. They also make European

policies more visible and are communicated better to stakeholders, mostly adult educators.

In the international arena, UNESCO also invites countries to allocate sufficient resources to adult education depending on national needs and to engage in capacity development of educational personnel, including the provision of decent working conditions, remuneration and training (UNESCO 2014, p. 7). In-service education and training programmes for adult educators are important aspects of ensuring high-quality provision and professionalisation of adult learning teachers (UIL 2016, 2019).

The fact that in many European countries, there are no prescribed initial qualifications, formal requirements or structural measures for adult educators, means that implementing EU policies that encourage EU Member States to adopt such measures remains a challenge (Jütte et al. 2011). The European Commission has designated Member States' engagement with competences of adult educators as a strategic aim for adult education (along with basic education and increasing the efficiency, effectiveness and coherence of adult education) (EC 2015c). Two European studies that focused on adult learning professions in Europe in the field of non-vocational adult learning and their competencies (RvB and PLATO 2008; Buiskool et al. 2010) found the "terrain" of adult learning practitioners, their professional status and their working conditions to be "heterogeneous and changing" (Jütte et al. 2011, p. 8). Understanding this is essential if PD is to be useful and relevant across the range of subfields (e.g. literacy and numeracy; vocational education and training [VET]; citizenship education etc.) within the adult education sector.

Addressing the need for guidance, the EU report *Key competences for adult learning professionals* (Buiskool et al. 2010) provides a European reference framework which also covers several activities undertaken by adult educators apart from teaching, such as counselling, guidance and administration. These competences constitute a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes adult educators need to carry out their tasks effectively. The complexity of the competences involved in the learning process, directly and indirectly, highlights the complexity of the role of the adult educator. Acquiring or strengthening these competences requires PD opportunities to enable adult educators to address the many challenges of their role. Improving the quality of teaching staff working in the non-vocational sector includes developing competence profiles. The report clarifies the terminology as follows:

Competences should be understood as a complex combination of knowledge, skills and abilities/attitudes needed to carry out a specific activity, leading to results. *Knowledge* should be understood as a body of facts, concepts, ideas, principles, theories and practices related to a field of practice, work or study. *Skills* should be understood as a capacity learned or acquired through training in order to perform actions by applying knowledge. *Abilities/attitudes* should be understood as the physical, mental or emotional capacity to perform a task (Buiskool et al. 2010, p. 10; emphases added).

All of these aptitudes may be better understood and acquired through participation in PD. The report also reveals the diversity of both adult education's related activities and adult educator profiles, which implies that it may be inappropriate to implement

a single approach to adult educators' PD. One answer to this is to identify the different clusters or fields of activity in adult education, such as teaching, management, counselling and guidance, which will then allow for the identification of skill sets and competencies related to each of these fields (Nuissl 2010; Sava 2011). This can run alongside the identification of needs which are generic to all, regardless of field.

Contradictions and tensions between adult education policy and the professional development of adult educators

EU policy documents agree that the purpose of adult education is to provide learning opportunities for all adults, throughout their life, to enhance employability and competitiveness, social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development. These documents also acknowledge the importance of adult education in lifelong learning. However, although the policies say this, EU policymakers' attention is still mainly focused on economic goals, competitiveness and employability, and adult education, which has been conceptualised mostly in terms of vocational training, is seen as a means of achieving these goals. This situation poses a number of questions that affect adult educators and their PD. Where do the adult educators stand in this context? What is their responsibility and what should they place emphasis on?

On the one hand, there is this policy shift of adult education towards achieving labour market objectives by creating adults with a set of competences to address these objectives, employability or workplace learning. On the other hand, there is the notion of adult education that professionals improve society for everyone, they are committed to ideas of freedom and justice and the belief that critical practice creates occasions for developing and engaging alternative democratic discourses (Collins 1991). This is relevant to the fundamental values of adult education, such as "development and liberation" (Merriam and Caffarella 1999, p. 75).

It can be argued that adult educators and their PD need to be connected to the struggle for social justice. This is because their learners (e.g. migrants, second-chance students, early school-leavers, senior citizens, prisoners) often do not fit into mainstream education, their voices are rarely heard and they are not taken into account when educational policies are developed. Adult educators require expertise both in terms of content and in terms of pedagogy, but they must also have an awareness of the political consequences of the choices and decisions they make. In addition, special attention should be given to the PD requirements of the different sectors in which adult educators are employed. It might be important, for instance, to establish professional requirements for those working in formal adult education which are different from those working in the non-formal sector, since the two have different structures, follow different processes and provision modes and address different aims and educational needs.

Over time, voices have demanded support for a stronger focus of adult education on personal development for adults and better provision for those in need (EAEA 2019). These voices claim that adult education has been conceptualised at the European level predominantly in terms of vocational training or training for the job (Holford and Milana 2014). In this vein, EU adult learning policy in

part becomes an instrument, where economic growth outranks other priorities (Rasmussen 2014) and the availability of “equal opportunities” seems to refer to those individuals who have financial, personal and time resources to access education: the “high knowledge-skilled learners” identified by Brine (2006, p. 649). Terms such as *employability*, *productivity*, *mobility in a modern labour market* and *competitiveness* are identified as dominant discourse in European policy documents on adult education. This emphasis raises questions on how adult education and adult educators consequently may embrace the vision of a more just and humane society and what the role of adult educators should be in this context.

The focus of EU adult education policies on skills acquisition to address the needs of the labour market and to make economies more resilient raises questions about the role of the adult educator in this context. Learning is about becoming resilient, and adult education is about learning to live better. Resilience embeds the learning dimension, but is not learning resilience itself? Perhaps the correct question to ask ourselves is not how to make the economy more resilient but how to make people less vulnerable, equipping them with the attributes and skills to become more resilient. Thus, adult educators’ PD can be defined as equipping them with the competences to achieve the adult education goals of resilient communities and people, as well as social justice (Tuckett 2015) and more transformative and holistic visions of lifelong learning (Duckworth et al. 2018). It should also give them the chance to contribute to the effort of building more inclusive and resilient societies and, through teaching, helping individuals to actively engage in their societies. Adult educators’ PD, therefore, requires a more holistic approach focusing on social issues and extending its spectrum to goals that go beyond the economic remit of the adult education sector.

The heterogeneity of adult education, as described in the introduction of the present article, requires a “looser” conceptualisation of PD for adult educators in order to “denote the building of an organised community of practitioners, who are somehow both visible in and able to shape their field” (Lassnigg 2011, p. 38). Adult educators should be able to influence the development of adult learning. However, in EU policy documents, PD is seen more in terms of the adoption of performance indicators, benchmarks and quality assurance. This is a new model of governance for adult education at European level, which is based on accountability and conformity and seems to have a joint aim: to improve the sector and enable adult educators to perform their tasks effectively.

This envisioned uniformity does not, however, fit all countries. Appreciating the differences at either national or European level as a richness and benefit of adult education might help towards achieving the sector’s aims and improving the field. Introducing systematic PD to adult educators and supporting their participation should be seen as a means of improving conditions in the field of adult education. There is a tension between adult educators’ views of the field and what policies say, which, along with the contradictions presented in this section, inhibits the expansion of PD opportunities for adult educators.

Challenging European policies on the professional development of adult educators and proposing further improvements

In the aforementioned policy documents and EU reports, it has been identified that many adult educators enter the profession without specific training, although they often have experience from other work settings (RvB and PLATO 2008). Many also lack specific preparatory training for adult education and learning, as well as a deep understanding of their role as adult educators. Since adult learning professionals often enter this field later in life, after gaining work experience elsewhere, the provision of training needs to be particularly flexible and respectful of adult educators' past experiences. This state of affairs demands that training programmes must address the multiple roles of adult educators in terms of curricula and forms of training, and this needs to be taken into account when considering the present situation of adult education providers in Europe. The need for qualitative PD of adult educators is stated in the relevant report of the European Commission (EC 2015a, p. 51), which, although it pays particular attention to basic skills in adult education, supports that highly professional adult teaching staff need quality initial teacher training followed by CPD which focuses on adult-specific teaching strategies (*andragogy*) as well as subject matter (*ibid.*, pp. 3, 51).

Other fairly recent initiatives of the European Commission, the *New Skills Agenda for Europe* (EC 2016) and the *Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults* (CoEU 2016) focus on equipping Europeans with the skills they need to respond to changes in labour market requirements. They also advocate for the provision of opportunities to upskill and reskill so as to increase employability, active participation in society, enabling people to take on social and civic responsibilities and be better engaged in the labour market. In the 2016 *Recommendation* (CoEU 2016), teaching professionals' initial training and CPD are recognised as important support measures for the "delivery of upskilling pathways" (*ibid.*, p. 5). Both policy documents indicate that to achieve these goals, the promotion of initial training and CPD of staff engaged in the delivery of upskilling pathways is crucial. According to these documents, PD should also include the support of innovative teaching practices and ways of using digital tools into the classroom.

Finally, two recently published European documents pay particular attention to adult educators' PD. First, the report on the *Achievements under the Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning* takes stock of the achievements under the Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning (2011–2018) and identifies emerging topics and priorities that could be taken into account in the post-2020 period" (EC 2019, p. 4). The report indicates that

a distinction needs to be made between those adult educators involved in formal education programmes (e.g. second change [*sic*] secondary education; VET programmes for adults; higher education) and those adult educators not involved in formal education programmes (*ibid.*, p. 62),

since, for the first group, it is more likely that adult educators receive initial training and CPD similar to teachers in the formal system (i.e. secondary education,

VET and higher education). This falls under other broader VET reforms and initiatives, such as quality assurance and developing a quality culture which are slowly emerging, partly under the influence of European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET), a Europe-wide framework.

“For the second group”, the report goes on to say, “usually no specific arrangements or legal frameworks are established” (EC 2019, p. 62), since non-formal education is less systematised and monitored. Opportunities for this group’s professionalisation are still limited. Perhaps this scarcity is due to the fact that in some countries, the non-formal sector is increasingly supported by volunteers and part-time practitioners. Hence, it is less likely to raise debates about adult educators’ profiles, the competencies they require to undertake the job and their PD while practising the profession.

Interestingly, the aforementioned stocktaking report for the years 2011–2018 among EU Member States identified that the profession of adult educators remains challenging, and noted that clear developments in this area were difficult to identify (EC 2019). The report concluded that in spite of some EU-level developments in relation to improving initial training and CPD of adult educators, their PD presents more or less the same picture during these years in EU Member States; it remains limited and, when provided, happens at a sub-policy level (EC 2019). As a consequence, the quality assurance of the adult learning workforce is also an issue of concern, and there is not much evidence among EU Member States regarding progress on the professional quality and status of adult educators. This may also be caused by the fragmented nature of the adult learning sector, which is less cohesive and unified than the formal education sector at primary and secondary level. And where evidence of progress exists, it does not apply to all the formal, non-formal and informal sectors of the field, or the national, community, and even personal levels at which adult education is provided.

The second more recent European document, the Council Conclusions of the EU on “European teachers and trainers for the future”, pays particular attention to adult educators and the need to be

prepared so as to apply diverse and effective teaching strategies and methods, in order to meet the needs, stimulate motivation and cater for individual learning pathways of their learners (CoEU 2020, p. 14).

European countries are called on to improve the above areas through appropriate preparation of adult educators and suggested performance indicators, benchmarks and standards. In this context, different audiences are mobilised in various discourses, through which the profession of adult education may then be held accountable and subjected to scrutiny (Jütte et al. 2011).

The EU policy documents discussed here so far identify adult educators as essential factors for quality learning provision and outcomes, and recognise the priority of PD and the improvement of the quality of adult learning staff. Also, relevant research has shown that the enhanced quality of provision and staff can lead to decreased numbers of dropouts in adult learning (Broek et al. 2010). Adult educators’ PD is seen as a prerequisite to achieving this. Yet, in spite of the actions undertaken at European level, such as Peer Learning Activities among the EU countries,

Expert Groups and Working Groups to discuss these issues and exchange good practices, progress, both at European and national level, seems rather modest.

One of the likely explanations for this is that although European policies acknowledge adult educators and trainers' importance, particularly for quality teaching and learning (CoEU 2009, 2011; CoEU and EC 2015a, 2015b, 2015; EC 2010, 2019), they seem far removed from the practice of adult educators and their PD. Against this background, and taking into account the range of these European policies, consideration on how to best integrate them into national political agendas by taking into account national realities, is an issue that needs to be problematised.

Recent reports show that, although adult educators need more opportunities to engage in new pedagogies, and more time and resources to take advantage of such opportunities,

existing practices represent obstacles to such transformation, for example, rigid funding schemes and college admission criteria, hiring based on certificates, low recognition of non-formal and informal learning and lack of opportunities for teachers to introduce new pedagogies, among others (UIL 2020, p. 29).

Many reports also advocate for a shift in the teaching role, from an instructor of knowledge to a guide and facilitator of learning processes. In addition to subject-specific learning, teaching should focus strongly on fostering other competencies and attributes, to enable a qualified performance of professional tasks, determined by appropriate professional preparation and constant development. Hence, the issue of how to improve the conditions for the PD of adult educators and trainers to strengthen the idea of quality in adult education needs to be discussed by policymakers.

It must be noted though that during the past decade some EU countries introduced legal and other arrangements to assure the quality of provision and the quality of staff and developed national initiatives as a result of EU policy documents. Although this is not the purpose of the current article, some practices that promote PD are presented here very briefly to identify how the relevant EU policies affect national policies. In Ireland for instance, the PD of further education and training practitioners is part of the *Professional Development Strategy 2017–2019*, which aims to contribute to the needs of a constantly evolving economy and society. It also aims to build “a professional development framework and structures” to help the Education and Training Boards in meeting the needs of learners, employers and communities in further education and training (SOLAS and ETBI 2016, p. 3). Austria pays particular attention to the competences of adult educators acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts. The certification body for people working in adult education is the Austrian Academy of Continuing Education (WBA), which provides an in-service recognition procedure for adult educators for skills acquired in the aforementioned contents (EC 2022b). Finally, Slovenia is among the countries that run programmes promoting PD of adult educators. The Slovenian Institute for Adult Education (SIAE) provides basic and further non-formal training of adult educators either already working in the field of adult education or in other relevant fields. The programmes provided by SIAE aim to enable adult educators to acquire new knowledge and skills in order to perform quality work and develop their own

and a common professional identity through professional networking with others (Možina et al. 2015). The training programmes are built around competence-based PD programmes which are associated with a number of roles held by adult educators, i.e. heads, teachers and counsellors. Specifically, as Borut Mikulec concludes on the issue,

the focus is on the recognition of different professional roles and competences that adult educators require to work successfully in different contexts and not on the unification of their competences, which is the focus in the European framework of adult learning professionals (Mikulec 2019, p. 41).

The policy documents provide the European context of these competences, which are based on “a combination of knowledge ..., skills ... and abilities” (ibid., p. 39), and they can initiate national adult education policies and practices.

The brief examples given above mirror some impact on national education policies and practices, such as the emphasis on competences. The improvement of the quality of staff working in the non-vocational adult education sector includes the development of competence profiles, which help adult educators carry out their task. These competences may be better understood and acquired through participation in PD. Also, a common core of required competences includes characteristics we may struggle to find in adult education (Sava 2011). In the examples provided above, the emphasis is on detailed competence descriptions (Buiskool et al. 2010) at the expense of “academic qualification, professional organisation and autonomy”, which “have been somehow neglected” (Mikulec 2019, p. 27). Moreover, coverage of a wider range of professional, social and personal attributes seems to be missing in the competence framework of adult educators in the EU policy (Buiskool et al. 2010). Adult education takes place in increasingly diverse, conflicting and complex settings which make great demands on the adult educator’s knowledge and competences. This calls for action to reconsider (a) what important elements EU policies identify as necessary for the PD of adult educators; (b) how these are transferred to national contexts and reflected in national policy documents; (c) what we can learn from each other and put into practice at national level; and (d) – most importantly – what the needs of adult educators are in terms of content, and competences they require to work successfully in the sector. The increase in situational complexity also calls for better evidence-based research into good practices which have an impact on the quality and the development of adult educators which, in turn, will inform the development of the relevant policies.

At the same time, the examples provided above bring out the complexity of policy implementation from the European level down to national level even within each country, in terms of the actors involved, the priorities, the content of PD, the competences to be developed, the expected results, and recognition, which is one important reason why progress on this front is still modest. There is no easy answer to how the situation may be improved. Stakeholders may represent different interests and needs, even within the same groups. For instance, many adult educators may demand better salaries and more permanent working conditions, while others may prefer more freedom to work as freelancers in a more flexible way. Nevertheless, national authorities, such as ministries, which are the main employers of adult educators, may favour

less structured working conditions since this translates to lower salaries and fewer obligations on their part, including the provision of PD opportunities.

This situation makes it difficult to improve the professional status of this group of educators and it calls for an honest and open dialogue among the different stakeholders to find solutions that better fit the interests and needs of those involved. Moreover, it can be said that European policy documents since 2006 mostly repeat more or less the same idea, the necessity for European countries to provide quality PD opportunities to adult learners, in a rather vague manner. This denotes the lack of specificity of policy documents with regard to the professional profile of adult educators. This stagnation in the content and the consistent vagueness of relevant policy papers may be a reason why many European countries have still not put systematic, effective and targeted PD systems for adult educators in place.

The above discussion identified some possible explanations and suggestions that currently affect adult educators' PD which may provide some insight into the differing perspectives of policymakers and the academics of the field. Notably, more determined and systematic actions are needed at national level in terms of policy implementation, along with a clear vision and mission, clear scope and aims of adult educators' PD to gain the attention it deserves.

Conclusion

The review of major EU policy documents on adult educators' PD, mainly of the past two decades, demonstrates that adult educators have been identified as key players in achieving the visions of quality adult education and addressing the demands of a rapidly changing society. The complexity of the adult education sector has a direct impact on those who work in it and places a significant responsibility on adult educators. Therefore, their role cannot remain the same, since there is a shift from more traditional roles to "new" and multiple ones, which put the adult learner at the centre of the teaching process, and call for a range of competences and attributes on the part of the facilitator. At the same time, adult educators are recognised as the most important factor for securing quality in the sector. They require specialised, targeted and systematic PD programmes which are based on their specific needs, identify the core competences they need to work successfully in the adult education sector, and focus on quality.

As identified in some of the most relevant European policy documents (EC 2006, 2018, 2019) there is a consensus that adult educators' PD is a necessary prerequisite for ensuring teaching quality. However, in practical terms, their PD is still an open issue in many European countries, and there is a lack of purpose-oriented PD opportunities. Participation in various forms of PD makes it possible for adult educators and their learners to adjust to rapidly changing environments. The role of adult educators is crucial and their effective preparation improves their teaching practices. Therefore, EU Member States need to pay particular attention to this issue and develop their PD schemes based on national contexts, in order to help adult educators fulfil the visions of the adult learning sector at European and national level.

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