

# RESEARCHING ADULT LEARNING AND EDUCATION: INTRODUCTION

*Simona Sava*

The field of adult learning and education (ALE) is a very diverse, heterogeneous and complex one, as it covers all the issues related to the learning of adults, from a lifelong learning (LLL) perspective, both for personal and professional development. Researching the field therefore requires different and specialized approaches, according to the respective sector of adult education being studied. For instance, in the field of vocational adult education quantitative research approaches are more relevant, partly because the politicians are more interested in hard data. In civic adult education one encounters more qualitative, biographical, ethnographic or even action research. Journals may be dedicated to different sectors thus researchers in ALE can belong to different scientific communities or research traditions.

A large body of knowledge and data exists to be used while researching in adult education. The researchers can use more and more statistical data collected at macro level, with the associated statistical analysis. For instance, the «Rolling Review» covers the following three collections in the area of education statistics: UNESCO Institute of Statistics/OECD/Eurostat (UOE) data collection on education systems, Continuous Vocational Training Survey (CVTS) and Adult Education Survey (AES). «The three collections constitute the main instruments for data collection relating to the EU (and sometimes Candidate and EFTA countries) Lifelong Learning statistics [...] The UOE comprises administrative data collected yearly, and cover enrolments, new entrants, graduates, educational personnel and educational expenditure» (EC 2011).

The systematic data gathering in recent years, both by European Commission (see the yearly published *Monitor on Education and Training*, or the data on Eurydice), and by OECD (*Education at a Glance* with its different editions, OECD 2015), allows researchers to use and reflect on official data which gives a longitudinal view. This big body of data is a starting point for researchers in the attempt to redress the balance against the dominance of qualitative research in recent years. Using the facilities the new technologies offer also leads to a debate based on positivism, and big data (Cope 2015). It is true that the data is linked more to policy priori-

ties and targets to be met, and this is also a trend which has a big influence on research priorities in adult education, as the money governments put into research very much connected with their policy priorities. Therefore, in the last few years much research was devoted to the development of skills and competence, to improving basic skills, to recognizing them, to workplace learning, and pathways to the labour market, work and employment, and improved transition from education to work etc.

Independent research, driven by the research interests of the researchers, is usually on a small scale, and more qualitative than quantitative. This situation can be explained on one hand by the specificity of adult education, with it being very nationally oriented and reliant on the cultural and historic traditions of the countries, but, on the other hand, by the difficulty of collecting large scale empirical data, without the required resources.

The studies undertaken reflect different *theoretical perspectives*. The most influential ones proved to be the critical social theory (mainly concerned with social movement, the neo-liberal influence in educational policy for adults, social inequalities, community learning etc.), and the socio-cultural and situational perspectives on learning. Other important influences are: the post-structuralism theory, the theory of transformative learning and ideas associated with personal perspectives on learning, the empowerment perspective, and the actor-network theory. This latter theory influences biographical research and narrative or auto-biographical writing (Fejes, Nicoll 2013), and is used to a larger extent in ALE research than in other fields of educational sciences. It takes into account the wide life experience of adults, but also gives the discipline of adult education an epistemological status. All the afore mentioned theoretical perspectives and trends in researching the adult learning and education can be noticed while surveying the activity of the research networks set up within the European Society of Research in the Education of Adults (ESREA).

Another consideration is the effect the dominance of the English language has. Although it serves to build a wider research community internationally, it severely limits access to research data due to publishing policies of dedicated scientific journals. Furthermore, the language competencies of the researchers and their ability to make use of scientific literature in different languages may limit the possibilities for comparative research. A possible solution therefore is that doctoral students from different countries, for instance, might have the same topic to research and would then discuss and compare the data gathered.

Such an idea can be implemented within the European Doctoral School set up in the ESRALe project (*European Studies and Research in Adult Learning and Education*, an Erasmus project, run between 2013-2016, under the coordination of University of Kaiserslautern, Germany). This book is produced in the frame of ESRALe and complements two

books developed in that project, *Empirical Research Methodology in Adult Learning and Education. Authors and Texts* (editors V. Boffo, P. Federighi, E. Nuissl), and *Comparative Adult and Continuing Education: Authors and Texts* (edited by M. Slowey). Whereas the first two books aim to map, as compendiums, the main methodological aspects while doing empirical and comparative research in ALE, this third book aims to offer an illustration of possible research being, or to be carried out.

The authors of this book give illustrations from topics approached in their own research: the mapping of research carried out on a chosen topic, highlighting the state of the discussion, and the controversial issues still to be researched. The book is, like the other two, a 'manual' addressed to students of ALE, at both Master- and Doctorate level. The contributors to the book, who represent the partners in the project, were asked to overcome the limit of the native English dominance and to 'Europeanise' the discussion on the different subject areas within ALE, chosen as the topic of their contribution. So, even though they are not in a perfect English, the contributions to this book are clear enough to understand and are meant to offer a mainly European state of discussion (but also sometimes reflect an international perspective).

The contributors are outstanding specialists in the topic they present and are well known at national level and at a European level as well. Three contributions by doctoral students have also been included: from Florence, Kaunas and Brno. Thus, doctoral students in ALE, European-wide, can have an illustration of the way their doctoral thesis can be disseminated.

These three books aim to provide a guide for young researchers in the field of ALE, both from the methodological and the content point of view. They map the main scientific literature and developments. A more specific body of data and of research that has been disseminated can be found in specialized journals or studies and research reports, listed in references.

Dedicated journals on adult learning and education are an important source of inspiration and reflection on the state of, and trends in, research in ALE. Examples of these journals include: «Adult Education Quarterly», «Adult Learning» (UK), «European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults» (RELA – the journal of ESREA – European Society of Researchers into Education of Adults), «Andragogical Studies» (edited by the oldest Department of Adult Education in Europe, at the University of Belgrade), «Journal for Adult Educational Research/Report» (Germany), «International Journal for Lifelong Education», «Studies in Continuing Education» (Australia), «Studies in the Education of Adults» (UK), «International Journal of Continuing Education & Lifelong Learning» (Hong Kong), «Canadian Journal for Studying in Adult Education», or thematic numbers of different journals (i.e.

«European Journal of Education» – [51/2016 – Adult learning, Adult Skills and Innovation], International Review of Education – edited by the UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning, with a global coverage). Some of the journals reflect, to a certain extent, their geographical coverage, both in terms of contributors, and in terms of the subjects of the articles (i.e. more articles about the transformative theory of learning in the American space, Fejes 2013). Other journals are more concerned with balanced coverage of different fields in ALE, with a number of thematic editions on different important issues in ALE (basic skills, community education, professionalization in ALE etc.) (Fejes Nicoll, 2013, Fejes, Nylander 2014 e 2015). As mentioned at the beginning, it should be noted that some areas of study are becoming very specialized, like workplace learning, and have their own dedicated journals («Journal of workplace learning»). Also, research is included in journals with a wider organizational and human resource development focus (Rubenson, Elfert 2015). The same applies to other fields in ALE. Interesting research can be found in journals of sociological or cultural studies, although the research is not labeled or recognized as being about ALE.

As concerning data collection, *monitoring, and impact studies* done by specialized bodies at the international level, adult participation in life-long learning appears as a distinct topic. It is included, for instance, in all four editions of the European *Education and Training Monitor* (published annually since 2012), which is meant to measure the progress toward reaching the ET2020 goals. Other topics which also fit into the field of adult education appear in this work (i.e. «Matching educational outcomes and labor market needs», «Acquiring skills needed for the future», «Facilitating transition from education to work», «Upgrading skills», «Investing in skills and qualification», «Policy levers for inclusiveness, quality and relevance», «Opening up education and training through new technologies», «Facilitating lifelong learning after initial education», «Introducing new pedagogies and technologies in education and training», «Strengthening the teaching profession» etc.).

All these reports not only contain a large body of data presented in a comparative perspective for all EU member states and associated countries, but they also have distinctive country sheets and recommendations on aspects to be improved for each of these countries.

The European Commission is monitoring the impact of the different policy measures meant to support improved education and training European-wide. One of the measures is to provide funding support to research projects. An analysis of the outcomes of the Framework Program (FP) advance research projects has been undertaken (Federighi 2013), pointing out the actions necessary to secure growth in skills. The Horizon 2020 is the main research program financed by the European Union, carrying out advanced large scale research.

Furthermore, the specialized research center of the European Commission, Centre for Research on Education and Lifelong Learning (CRELL), has tackled research areas such as learning mobility, EU2020 support, adult skills and adult lifelong learning, active citizenship, teaching and learning practices, educational investment, etc. It has also launched research studies on the data collected (Dinis de Costa *et al.* 2014; Flisi *et al.* 2015), or technical studies, explaining the indicators used in the monitoring process (Badescu, Garrouste, Loi 2011; Flisi, Goglio, Meroni 2014; Goglio, Meroni 2014). For evidence based policy making specialized research institutes have received financing from the EU for collecting the necessary data. The issues covered range from new technologies and innovations based on them to the field of social support and global security. The specialized centers of the European Union, CEDEFOP and ETF (European Training Foundation), also publish periodically their synthesis studies with Pan-European coverage. These studies are mainly in the fields of vocational education and training, skills anticipation, policy developments etc. Such data provided at European level is often complemented by short comparisons with the state of development in the main developed countries: from America, Asia and Australia. However, more in depth analysis from an international perspective can be found in studies of the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation of OECD, or of UNESCO: the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, the International Institute for Educational Planning, the International Bureau of Education, and the Institute for Information Technologies in Education. A broader analysis of the work of these institutions and the focus of their research has been provided in the second book of this series, on *Comparative Adult and Continuing Education: Authors and Texts*.

Most of the topics listed as the main focus of research and trends in shaping the field of ALE are reflected by the contributions to this book, which aims to highlight actual developments, research findings and issues which are open for future research. The selected contributions are far from covering the whole field of ALE, but they do map some of the most important topics, as illustration, source of documentation, and of reflection for researchers, students and practitioners.

The contributions to the book have been grouped into two different parts, meant to reflect in a balanced way the paradigmatic shift from adult/lifelong education, to adult/lifelong learning, but still offering both perspectives: of institutions, services and organized contexts, as well as the different contexts in which adults learn (mainly through informal learning, in social media or in the community) and acquire new competencies which can be documented and recognized.

In the first part, the main trends and perspectives on ALE are mapped by Simona Sava, Ekkehard Nuissl and Anca Luștrea, in line with the topics already listed by EC/OECD/UNESCO. Some of the highlighted trends

are on (key/basic) competences and their recognition, on labor market orientation and instrumentalization, on outreach activities and counseling for an increased participation and inclusion in ALE; community learning, learning cities, learning through/with new technologies, and open educational resources, concern for increased quality and effectiveness, for monitoring and evidence based policy-making etc. The different factors influencing policy priorities, which govern the way educational policies are formed, determine which areas of interest dominate and they are discussed and analyzed by Balasz Nemeth. If the neo-liberal policy focus favors mainly labor market oriented competences. It is seen therefore to be important to provide a smooth transition from formal education to workplace (see Vanna Boffo and Gaia Gioli), with counseling services playing a determining role (Aleksandra Pejatovic and Dubravka Mihajlovic). Also, institutional contexts cannot be discussed without reference to the main activity happening in the educational institutions, namely teaching and learning (see Rolf Arnold), which is heavily dependent on the competent professionals meant to carry it out (see Susanne Lattke). The effectiveness of organized educational activity for adults, irrespective of whether it happens in a formal context (i.e. universities), or a non-formal one (i.e. workplaces), is analyzed in relation to its effects on the learning of adults.

In the second part of the book there is discussion on adults learning through a variety of complementary contexts.

The neo-liberal orientation in ALE also influenced research into the liberal adult education. There was a trend of decreasing concern towards research on the aspects of emancipation, empowering and cultural perspectives. The colleagues from the CREA – University of Barcelona revisit the problematic of active citizenship thereby, highlighting recent developments and future needs. Their reflections are complemented by concrete illustrations of the positive influence on adults' life trajectories of voluntary activity and informal learning (see Ondřej Bárta and Zuzana Šmideková). Informal learning happening even in formal settings is analyzed by Carlo Terzaroli and Nicoletta Tomei. They illustrate how learning can happen in different learning contexts which can be linked by guided reflection, ensured through validation of prior and experiential learning (Ruud Duvekot), articulating of the way the competencies were developed, fostered and evaluated (see Genutė Gedvilienė, Giedrė Tamoliūnė). One of the continually expanding layers of learning of adults in the digital society is analyzed by Gabriela Grosseck and Laura Malita. They illustrate, at the end of the book, how social media can articulate all contexts of learning, and definitely influence both the educational provision and the adults' learning. The expansion of new technologies for communication and information are placing all of us in the era of big data (Cope, Kalantzis 2015b) to be handled, both for

learning and development. It is also necessary to master the way the data can be stored, analyzed and used, for research purposes, and more. The big data that exists in the wide ALE field was, thus, synthesized in this manual, with the aim of providing a guide for young researchers approaching the huge body of data.

As an end note, it should be mentioned that the papers of Fejes (2010, 2013, 2014, 2015), Larsson (2010) and Rubenson (2015) with overviews on different research possibilities, have deliberately been included among the references of this introduction as analyses and synthesis of different research orientations in ALE. The authors draw together their reflections on the emerging trends in the field of ALE based not only on bibliometric analysis of the research articles in some of the most widely known scientific journals of adult education (with their methodology, content and approach – as examples and illustrations of different research), but also on theoretic reflections on future evolution in the field. The listed aspects in the mentioned articles deserve a more in depth examination, along with historic and fundamental types of research, which we did not manage to include in the book, due to the space restrictions.

However, students and researchers in the early stages of their career are provided with an articulated overview on the developments in research in ALE, as well as with useful tools and hints to further develop reflexivity in the field.

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