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Becoming an Adult Educator in Greece: Past Experiences, Existing Procedures and Future Challenges

Abstract: The professionalization of adult educators is a topic that has been under discussion for many years in the field of adult education in Europe. In this paper we present the development of this discussion in Greece, where the field of adult education has displayed notable and variable growth within the last three decades. The paper outlines the initiatives that have been undertaken in various periods of Greece's adult education history to develop a professional body of adult educators. It presents and discusses the current system of certification of adult educators and criticizes the existing procedures in the light of the contemporary political and social conditions in Greece. The opinion of the authors is that in the existing socio-political framework there has to be a shift from a skills-oriented certified adult educator to a more critically reflective professional, capable of facilitating learning that fosters critical thinking and consequently leads to personal and social transformation.

Key words: adult educators, professionalization, certification, training of trainers, critical reflection.

Introduction

The field of adult education in Greece has presented a remarkable development within the last 30 years. In several papers published in the past, the development of the field has been presented and related to the existing conditions of certain

periods of the contemporary Greek history. Thus, the purpose of this paper is not to present once again the evolution of the adult education field in our country but to give a brief picture of a parallel story within that evolution: the story of becoming an adult educator. In the sections of this paper we will present the basic ideas and the efforts that were made in several periods and had as an aim to create a body of educators capable of facilitating adult learning. Moreover, we will comment on the existing system of becoming a certified adult educator and we will state our concerns about the present procedures. Finally, we will discuss the challenges of the profession of the adult educator in Greece in the light of the current political and social conditions. Our opinion is that now, more than ever before, there is a need to move from a skills-oriented certified adult educator to a more critically reflective professional, capable of facilitating learning that is able to foster critical thinking and consequently personal and social transformation.

Building on Experience

The roots of the adult education field in Greece may be traced at the beginning of the 20th century in the efforts of several organizations (private and public) to fight the illiteracy phenomenon (Boucouvalas, 1988). These efforts were scarce and not organized on the basis of a specific strategic plan. As a result there are no official records regarding the efficiency and the effectiveness of these endeavors. Moreover, there is no evidence regarding qualifications, competencies and the training of adult educators. This more or less trivial organization of the adult education field in Greece continues until the end of the 1950's. (Kokkos & Karalis, 2011). The justification for this slow development of adult education in our country during the first half of the 20th century is not an issue of this paper and we will not analyze it further. However, some explanation may be found if we consider the liquid and turbulent economic environment that existed after the catastrophic consequences of the two world wars and the tragic civil war that brutally destroyed the social cohesion of the Greek society. During this period, adult education is considered as a kind of complementary provision of primary education and, as a result, no special attention is given to the persons who undertake the difficult task of facilitating adult learning (Karalis, 2010).

During the 1960's and the 1970's, (that were) decades of economic growth, a number of activities connected with the training of adult educators were developed by a small number of institutions. According to Kokkos & Karalis (2011) in these efforts it is possible to find references to the role of adult educators. However, these references do not concern any systematic plan or any declared need

for the education of adult educators. In this period, educators and trainers in the field of general adult education and continuing vocational training are, in most cases, experienced teachers coming from the formal educational system (mainly primary schools but also secondary schools, high schools and universities). These educators were not trained methodically in adult learning theories and practices and, therefore, they transferred the teaching methodologies that were familiar to them from their main teaching activity in the formal system to the field of adult education (Karalis & Vergidis, 2004; Karalis & Pavlis-Korres, 2010).

The decade of 1980, however, was a period of significant developments in the field. Greece enters the European Community and funding becomes available for adult education activities. Moreover, at the beginning of this decade, Greece for the first time in its history has a social-democratic government that carries significant influences from the social and economic system of Northern Europe where there was a distinctive tradition of adult education activities. These traditions and especially the Swedish model with its emphasis on the relationship between learning, power and democracy was the foundation for the birth of a/the popular education movement in Greece. The result was a flourishing period of adult learning activities that was powered by the establishment of a General Secretariat of Popular Education that was committed to promoting adult learning on a national scale (from 1982 to 1987). During this period we have the first short term training of trainers programs within the framework of the popular education movement. These programs were based on the Freirean pedagogy and the aim was to transform experienced educators to cultural activists who would be capable of facilitating training sessions that could lead to the empowerment of the participants. In 1987, Paulo Freire visited Greece and contributed to the further development of these programs. In parallel, several other organizations of the broader public and private sector with a more instrumental approach to learning aiming to employability (e.g. the Hellenic Centre for Productivity) organized and implemented training programs in order to create a body of qualified adult trainers. These programmes shared a common element: the fact that they tried to “construct” a body of adult educators based heavily either on the existing teaching experience of educators who were coming mainly from the formal educational system or on the broader experience of professionals who were interested in coordinating groups of adult learners.

Shifting from Experience to Expertise: the Certification Saga

A very important development that had a direct effect on the training of adult educators was the foundation and operation of the Hellenic Open University offering the first graduate programs in adult learning and teaching. This happened in the late 1990's when at the same time several European organizations stressed the need for a systematic education of adult educators which was considered as a quality parameter especially for EU funded training activities. Moreover, executives of institutions, researchers, and other national bodies stressed the need for the advancement of the skills of adult educators and their consequential certification. To correspond to this demand but also to a broader demand for accreditation led to the foundation of the National Accreditation Centre for Continuing Vocational Training (EKEPIS) in 1997.

Within this environment the Ministry of Labour launched a call for proposals in 2002 for the "Development of a methodology and training material for the education of educators". After a careful study for the identification of training needs, it was decided to develop a training programme that combined distance learning and conventional training method (Vergidis, 2002a; Vergidis, 2002b). The program which is known as the "National Program for the Training of Trainers" (hereafter NPTT) consisted of 225 training hours of distance learning and 75 training in small group meetings. An initial team comprised mainly of HOU faculty trained 250 adult educators who later trained – using the same method - the significant number of 10.000 adult trainers. The aim of the NPTT was to upgrade the profile, knowledge and skills of the continuing vocational education and training educators introducing for the first time the principles of Adult Education and practices that can increase the efficiency of their teaching. All the participants were assessed through the evaluation of a microteaching exercise. The evaluation was completed by the educator of every group based on an evaluation grid and afterwards the videotaped microteachings were given to another colleague for a "blind evaluation" in order to ensure the transparency of the process. In the final meeting, trainees in working groups analyzed all microteaching sessions, and in collaboration with the educators, identified the points in which they could improve. The objective was to decrease the justified stress of the trainees in view of their accreditation process and to use all the meetings for the improvement of their practices. The first phase of the program, the training of the first 250 adult educators, was completed by the end of June 2003.

However, a change in the administration of the Ministry of Labour due to national elections resulted in the delay of the process and thus the second phase of the program, the actual implementation at a national level, started in

June 2006. The substantial delay of the responsible State agencies, between the completion of the first phase (2003) and the generalized implementation of the program (2006-2007), was an unfavourable development for the smooth implementation of this innovative action. Finally, close to 8.000 adult educators participated in the NPTT and were awarded an official state recognized certification (Kokkos, 2005). That innovative project led to the accreditation of adult educators for the first time in Greece. The project was evaluated without any governmental contribution by the team that originally developed it under the auspice of the newly formed (the) Hellenic Adult Education Association (Kokkos, 2008). The evaluation was very positive for all the aspects of the program (educational material, methodology, microteaching sessions and exercises, accreditation process, etc.). Moreover, as it was clearly shown in the evaluation report, there was a significant improvement of the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the participated trainers who, after the training sessions and their certification, seemed to have a better understanding of the adult learning theories and the corresponding teaching techniques. The participation of the educators in the training sessions was considered as a critical component of the NPTT. This program was an important event in the historical development of adult Education in Greece, as it was the first time that an intervention for the education of adult educators at a national level was taking place. Nevertheless, after the completion of that project there was no continuation simply because the political leadership of the relevant ministries failed to understand the importance of a continuous system for the accreditation of adult educators. The governmental officials did not valorise the important experience of that national program and did not use it as the basic form for the education and accreditation of adult educators in various other settings (CVET, General Adult Education, the training of public employees, etc.). This incomprehensible practice left an open space for an endless duplication of that project in various versions.

Very soon the Ministry of Education through its General Secretariat of Adult Education (now General Secretariat of Youth and Lifelong Learning) developed its own 100-long training program (75 hours of distance learning and 25 hours of meetings without the microteaching element) addressed to adult educators that were mainly employed in programs of general adult education (not CVET) (Koulaouzides & Palios, 2011). In this program approximately 5000 adult educators were trained and received a certificate but not a recognised state certification. Furthermore, the National Centre for Public Administration and Local Government also developed its own internal 100-long training program (75 hours of distance learning and 25 hours of meetings with the microteaching element) and through this process close to 1500 trainers were also trained but not

certified. Despite the fact that the previously mentioned programs were shorter in duration the methodology of the NPPT had a significant influence on their design and implementation. In addition, two years ago the training of trainers for the newly established Municipal Centres for Lifelong Learning was designed. In this case the effect of the NTPP is also evident. The training is once again commissioned to the Hellenic Open University while again the main contributors of the original project were present either as trainers or as coordinators. During 2014, and by applying again the cascade model of the NTPP, 4.200 instructors of general adult education were trained in adult learning theory and teaching methods. Other organizations (e.g. the Hellenic Confederation of Professionals, Craftsmen & Merchants, the Greek General Confederation of Labour, etc.) also created their own cohorts of certified adult educators and trained them in many different ways using the same, more or less, methodology and educational material. All the aforementioned programs were based on the same methodology; the main axes of the educational material were the same, while the scientific coordinators were in both cases from the same pool: the teaching staff of the adult education graduate program of the Hellenic Open University.

Nevertheless, there was not in existence any open procedure for someone who wished to acquire the necessary certification in order to enter the field as a professional adult educator. As a result many young professionals, especially in the field of CVET, who wished to enter the profession, were simply left with no option. This ambivalent condition lasted several years and the future of the certification process was quite ambiguous. To make things worse from 2009 onwards, Greece entered one of the most shocking periods of its modern history experiencing - more than any other European country - the consequences of a financial crisis that had severe effects not only on its economy but also on every single social dimension. The field of adult education was not excluded from the consequences of the crisis. In the area of the training and certification of adult educators, the most important development was that in an effort to reduce costs in the public sector the government merged many organizations and, among them, the National Accreditation Centre mentioned above. The new organization was named National Organisation for the Certification of Qualifications & Vocational Guidance (EOPPEP - see www.eoppep.gr) and had, as of 2011, the responsibility to certify the teaching proficiency of adult educators.

In 2011, EOPPEP - in order to continue the training and the certification of the adult educators that was initiated in 2002 - assigned the update of the professional profile of the adult educator to a group of expert organizations which was led again by the Hellenic Open University. The research group which included the main contributors of the aforementioned national training of trainers

program proposed to reform and update the training program and to maintain the same training and certification procedures. The rationale behind this proposal was that an individual oriented examination process that simply verifies knowledge and skills was not sufficient but it was necessary to provide all interesting educators with an organized training program that would be validated by the state. The research group reached this recommendation considering the evaluation of the previous implemented program where the participants clearly declared that their participation in the group meetings and the exchange of ideas was a valuable experience that offered them the opportunity for self-reflection (Kokkos, 2008).

After a long period of consultations and discussions in 2012, the Minister of Education, Religion, Culture and Sports, issued a decision (20082/2012) establishing a new system for the accreditation of adult educators in informal education. However, the procedure that was adopted and is in progress today does not include the recommended state-validated training dimension. The training of anyone who wishes to become a certified adult educator is now an open-market non-regulated procedure where the responsibility to choose the appropriate program belongs to the individual educator. It is obvious that in the existing process there are two new elements: (a) there is a focal shift from the education and training of the adult educators to their certification and (b) there is a clear withdrawal of the state from its obligation to fund a crucial component of the quality system in adult education, that of the training of trainers.

Epilogue: from Certification to Critical Reflection

From the above sections it is rather clear that besides its possible imperfections we do have (in Greece) a rather systematic procedure for becoming a certified adult educator or better a procedure that certifies the necessary teaching skills in order to facilitate learning in groups of adults. But, is this the end of the journey? Is this certification or any other form of official recognition the Ithaca for an adult educator? To answer this question, at least for the case of Greece, we have to examine some issues through our current experience.

For the past five years in Greece, more than other EU countries, we have experienced rapid changes mainly due to the financial crisis which has emerged within the dominating context of advanced capitalism. Within a short period of time many social structures that existed for over thirty years transformed rapidly. Working patterns have changed. Employees are gradually required to work in vaguely defined environments, to manage complex and unpredictable changes and to adjust to the transformations of the production process. On the other

hand, unemployment in Greece, went from 7.7% in 2008 to 27.3% in 2013 and in the young ages (<25 years old) the unemployment rate has climbed to the frightening 56.3%. (Poulopoulos, 2014). These developments lead many young adults to immigration creating a new brain-drain problem for the Greek society. Additionally, we have austerity measures that led to a dramatic reduction in family income. From 2009 to 2014, salaries were reduced by 21.7 % while there was an increase in direct in indirect taxation (Poulopoulos, 2014). These conditions created a new social group which is recognized as the “new-poor”. This new social group along with other groups that face exclusion like migrants, refugees need to adapt to new social conditions. The intensity of social exclusion raises the necessity for complex action plans, aiming at the participation of all citizens in socio-political developments. Moreover, the crisis led to the destruction of traditional social structures, such as family, communities and associations. From the above it is more than evident that, as the Greek society changes rapidly, learners of all ages need to be assisted in order to find the way to confront with all the modifications in their personal and social life. We feel that need intensively in Greece where every day for the past five years we see people that are not able to cope with the new financial, political and social data. In many cases, people are not in a position to challenge their assumptions and fail to respond to the new social environment. Consequently, the formation of new understandings and practices seems unavoidable if we wish to be able to deal with uncertainty and to leave behind what seems to be dysfunctional, while at the same time be able to replace it with something acceptable and practical. There is an imperative necessity to think our future from a new perspective and to redefine the terms of our meaning making processes. It becomes obvious that the challenge of living not only in our country, but, in general, in the modern world requires something more than the usual informational and instrumental learning which is validated through certifications and accreditations (Zarifis, 2015). We need to move rapidly to transformative learning processes: learning processes that include the element of radical critical reflection.

Thus, it is obvious that the development journey for the adult educator does not end with any certification or professionalization process. To our understanding, the acquisition of a certification is just the beginning of a new and more profound journey. To facilitate transformative learning processes, adult educators need something more than the conventional certified teaching skills. They need to develop their critical self-reflection skills in order to challenge, first and foremost, the components of their own frame of reference that concerns their professional role. They should understand that their task is not simply to provide their learners with knowledge and skills that are needed within their profes-

sional settings, but to reinforce their movement towards a stage of being which is characterized by a self-directed, emancipatory way of making meaning. They should also be able to develop, first for themselves and then for their learners, some important core skills, like critical thinking, creative adaptability, emotional intelligence, empathy, creation of solidarity relationships and learn how to learn. All of the aforementioned are necessary in order to allow human beings to deal with the complex and hard challenges of the modern world. Many adult educators feel this need already and they have formed unofficial groups that through informal training processes strive to understand their own disjunctures or disorienting dilemmas more. Such groups have been working for the last five years in Greece under the auspice of the Hellenic Adult Education Association. In these groups, adult educators from different practice areas apply innovative approaches that may foster the previously mentioned core skills, like the use of the aesthetic experience or the incorporation of the objectives of critical thinking and empathy within the learning outcomes of any adult education programme.

These efforts seem to be very successful and given the fact that the Greek state today does not seem capable of inaugurating any creative initiatives for the development adult educators beyond certification, we believe that the perspective of this formation is going to be found in the initiatives coming from the civil society. It seems that the formation of critically thinking communities of practice is the next step in becoming a critically reflective adult educator in Greece.

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Kako se postaje edukator odraslih u Grčkoj: prethodna iskustva, sadašnje procedure i budući izazovi

Apstrakt: Stručno usavršavanje edukatora odraslih je tema o kojoj se diskutuje niz godina u okviru obrazovanja odraslih u Evropi. U ovom radu predstavljen je razvoj ove diskusije u Grčkoj, gde je sektor obrazovanja odraslih pokazao značajan i promenljiv rast tokom poslednje tri decenije. Rad predstavlja inicijative koje su pokrenute u različitim periodima istorije obrazovanja odraslih u Grčkoj u cilju razvoja profesionalne grupe edukatora odraslih. Predstavlja se i razmatra sadašnji sistem sertifikacije edukatora odraslih i kritikuje postojeće procedure u svetlu savremenih društveno-političkih uslova u Grčkoj. Mišljenje autora je da u postojećem društveno-političkom okviru mora da se napravi pomak od edukatora odraslih sertifikovanih prema veštinama u pravcu izgradnje profesionalaca sa razvijenijim kritičkim sagledavanjem, sposobnima da pomognu u procesu učenja koje razvija kritičko mišljenje i posledično vodi ka ličnoj i društvenoj transformaciji.

Ključne reči: nastavnici u obrazovanju odraslih, profesionalizacija, sertifikacija, trening trenera, kritička refleksija.

