

Editorial: 30 years of research on adult education, 30 years of ESREA

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Introduction

The European society for research on the education of adults (ESREA) was created late in 1991 in a time when Europe was drastically changing. Former states controlled by the Soviet Union had freed themselves. The Berlin wall had been torn down. War was raging in what was then Yugoslavia. The 1980s in Western Europe had also been a time of dramatic political, economic and cultural change with the shift to what is now called neoliberalism and globalization. Adult education in those days, as often, played an important role in many people's lives, trying to make sense of these changes. And researchers interested in adult education in Europe were, through the initiative of ESREA, offered a space to meet colleagues from all across Europe.

30 years later Europe has witnessed an extended financial crisis and the so-called migration 'crisis' without really being able to overcome the underlying causes. There is – fortunately – deep popular concern about precarity and growing inequality. But there is also a growing distrust in institutions and right-wing extremist parties have gained momentum across many countries in Europe. From 2020 and still, the spread of Covid-19 has posed Europe, and the entire world, one of the greatest challenges in modern times.

ISSN 2000-7426

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<http://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.4389>

www.rela.ep.liu.se



The war raging on European soil in Ukraine poses yet another great challenge. Once again, adult education may have an important role to play, supporting people in different strands of life, and in handling changing life circumstances.

The exact date is debatable and different between countries, but mainly in the 1960s and 1970s a new field of research emerged in the social sciences, in line with the growing recognition of adult education as a field of practice and a domain of policy making. In some cases, it was a kind of applied psychology aimed at improving teaching practices. In other contexts, it became codified as a new discipline dealing with adult education called andragogy (Knowles, 1980; Savi evi , 1999). The scholarly work then predominantly focused on the history and ideas of adult education in the context of social movements and local communities, such as cultural associations, workers' movements, folk high schools, etc. Adult education gradually gained new societal significance, influencing the international policy agendas, while taking up positions in line with UNESCO and the Council of Europe, and promoting the cause of enlightenment and the extension of democracy (Rubenson, 1996; Salling Olesen, 2006). At a later stage, new areas of education and training popped up as a response to societal needs and new cultural initiatives engendered diverging fields of practice – community education, popular/cultural education, further and higher education, vocational training and workplace learning. Much of this research was R&D, applied research supporting and evaluating labour market and social intervention. ESREA included these intellectual strands but also introduced new types of research emerging from the field of practice and in close connection with societal issues. Sometimes such research may have been parochial and limited by short-range interests and limited outlook. But most of it engaged in social change, gender issues and similar broad political issues, with a generally critical view of societal environments.

The neo-liberal dominance in the overall political climate from the 1990's onwards has privileged general policy agendas that prioritized concepts and practices of lifelong learning, thereby increasingly subordinating adult and continuing education to pressures of economic competitiveness, to labour market demands and to a narrow-minded concept of competence development (Nicoll & Salling Olesen, 2013). As the field of adult education and training has broadened and diversified and was no longer primarily based on social movements and classical popular/liberal adult education, the research field also developed more independently, recruiting new cohorts of researchers without any background in adult education practices, and drawing both on new research paradigms and the traditional discipline of education. As a consequence, practice and research have moved apart. Today it is also difficult to overview or define a practice field of adult and continuing education.

Alongside the rapid growth of the whole university sector, the influx of a new type of students, in combination with their political radicalization in the 1960s and 1970s, provoked an increased use of hermeneutic, phenomenological and critical perspectives. This development also paved the way for qualitative research methods that did not have much legitimacy and scientific status right from the start (see e.g. Larsson, 2006). In terms of methodologies, qualitative methods have long been dominant: biography and life history focusing on the adult learner, fieldwork and ethnographic studies focusing on cultural milieus but also institutions, and critical discourse analysis unveiling power relations (see e.g. Fejes & Nylander, 2019). Meanwhile, the research field of adult (and continuing) education and adult learning has developed into a rather multidisciplinary domain of the social sciences. At the same time also the institutional frameworks have developed in diverse ways. In several countries existing institutional seats of adult education research and scholarship have been integrated into traditional (school)

pedagogy institutions, or the other way round in organization and management institutions.

The theoretical interests and methodological expertise that has come to dominate adult education research since its emergence, connect with wider trends in society and within the social sciences and humanities at large. Much of what has dominated this field in recent times seems related to broader currents in the post-war era. The political importance of the lifelong learning agenda has now also materialized in research that – similarly to the education research – is focused on large scale surveillance and monitoring of policy initiatives (see e.g. OECD, 2016; UNESCO, 2016).

The debates about the sovereign epistemological status of the field have almost disappeared. Previously there were discussions and debates on the status of the field, where some argued that adult education should develop its own theories and methodologies with the concept of ‘andragogy’ as an expression of that ambition (Knowles, 1980; Pöggeler, 1957). However, today this discussion might seem rather obsolete as many scholars suggest that the field is inherently interdisciplinary and pluralistic (see e.g. Fejes & Salling Olesen, 2010; Hake, 1992; Rubenson, 2000), while others stick to the idea of andragogy (see e.g. Popović & Reischmann, 2017).

ESREA becomes 30 years old

Against this backdrop, ESREA has become 30 years old. Since its birth, the Society has evolved into an important place for researchers, not only across Europe, but also from the world beyond, to meet, discuss and debate adult education research as well as practice. Each three years ESREA hosts a big triennial research conference, which has been analyzed in terms of who participates, what kind of research is being conducted as well as based on what theories and methodologies (e.g. Käßlinger, 2015). Today, twelve research networks are active under the ESREA umbrella. Network participants meet at conferences, and exchange result findings through papers, presentations, books and journal articles. The networks deal with a wide variety of topics related to adult education practices such as gender, work, globalization, migration, access to education, life histories, professional development, transformative learning, histories, policies, ageing and democratic citizenship. Through their activities the networks have further developed the scene of adult education research, contributed to the development and refinement of research methodologies, stimulated young researchers to find inspiration in international contacts and helped to improve the quality of adult education research. They have inscribed themselves in dominant research traditions but have definitely also contributed to the renewal of theoretical approaches and methodologies. Part of this story has already been told a few years ago (Nicoll, Biesta, & Morgan-Klein, 2014). It presents an open range of diverse contradictory developments after the millennium.

ESREA has also created two main publication outlets, both as open access to make research available freely to anyone who can access the internet: the journal RELA and a book series. RELA has since its establishment in 2010 established itself as one of the main peer-reviewed adult education journals in Europe currently publishing three issues a year. The book series is published by Brill/Sense, and contributions are mainly based on revised papers that have been presented at ESREA conferences.

ESREA has thus done a lot in its 30 years (now 31 years) of existence. RELA would like to celebrate the anniversary of ESREA by dedicating this issue to ESREA and all the work done by those involved in the organization. The issue contains six articles submitted

during the anniversary year that together provide a good example of what kind of research is being conducted in the field.

Introducing the articles

In the first paper *Barry Hake* reports on historical research revisiting the birth of UNESCOs take on the concept of lifelong education, a topic consistently addressed and even more frequently referenced. The author examines the nature of the Faure Report in a broad political and cultural context while focusing on some lesser-known facts. The paper is polemical in nature, offering an alternative to the usual perspective. Among other things, it aims to demonstrate that some problematic features oft-associated with the lifelong learning concept were already characteristic of the Faure Report – for instance, its technocratic and economistic orientation.

In the second paper *Halliki Põlda, Katrin Karu and Riina Reinsalu* focus on an important aspect of the wider field of adult education and learning – non-formal education. Based on metaphor analysis of interviews with participants in non-formal education in Estonia they argue that such a form of education provides space for purposefulness, collaboration, and tolerance towards difference.

In the third paper *Clara Kuhlen and Regina Egetenmeyer* provide an example of a research area that is common among adult education researchers in Germany – program planning. They specifically focus on program planners' reasoning regarding categories of distinction in relation to determining target groups of programs. The authors argue for a sensitivity towards categorization as such work might produce what it aims not to – inequality.

In the fourth paper *Jerald Hodonga, Manto Sylvia Ramaligela and Moses Makgato* address the general challenge of how schools equip school leavers with the necessary skills to access the labour market. More specifically they focus on the context of Zimbabwe and how school leavers there, who in turn migrate to Botswana, manage the labour market. Based on a survey and interviews they conclude that the school leavers' level of technical skills was sufficient to get low qualified jobs. However, the skills were too low to obtain more qualified jobs and a residence permit.

In the fifth paper, *Jan Kalenda and Ilona Kočvarová* join the long-term debate on motivations for and barriers to participating in adult education. It provides a clear overview of an important portion of the debate to date, following up on both older, classic authors and the most recent research. It puts the category of nonparticipants in the spotlight and offers a typology thereof. Indeed, since researchers have thus far focused on participants capable of overcoming barriers, nonparticipants can be considered a “neglected species” sui generis. The paper relies on qualitative data obtained through research on the Czech population. Given the nature of the question at hand, the paper provides an interesting contribution to the international debate.

In the sixth and last paper *Antonella Cuppari* provide a piece of autoethnographic reflection – a methodology that has been quite central to the biographical research network of ESREA. In this piece the author focus on a cooperative enquiry involving social workers, volunteers and family members of people with intellectual disabilities in Northern Italy.

We hope that the articles will stimulate more work by scholars in the field of adult education and learning as well as on the past, the present and the future of ESREA.

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