Empowerment and adult education: A multi-level perspective

Julia Saam
University of Würzburg, Germany (julia.saam@uni-wuerzburg.de)

Regina Egetenmeyer
University of Würzburg, Germany (regina.egetenmeyer@uni-wuerzburg.de)

Abstract

Empowerment, as a goal of adult education, seeks to support people to critically reflect on structural settings and to take constructive action towards social equality and social change. This article analyses empowerment and adult education from a micro-, meso-, and macro-level perspective. The key assumption is that these levels cannot be considered in isolation. Drawing on Freire (2014) and Sen (1993), the article outlines how empowerment can be fostered through adult education at each level, while also analysing the interdependencies between them. We propose a heuristic model that identifies seven characteristics for assessing the promotion of empowerment through adult education, providing a foundation for empirical research: (1) knowledge and abilities, (2) active agency, (3) cultural realities, (4) pedagogical self-conception, (5) dialogic spaces, (6) representation of interests, and (7) educational mandate.

Keywords: adult learning and education, empowerment, active agency, multi-level perspective

Introduction

In international discourse, empowerment is frequently highlighted as a key goal of adult education (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2023; Veloso & Guimarães, 2014). Over the past three decades, use of the term *empowerment* has increased exponentially across academic papers in a range of fields. McLaughlin (2023) even describes empowerment as a 'buzz-word' (p. 3), emphasising its widespread proliferation. It also plays a significant role in political discourse. For instance, the United Nations (2023) identify empowerment as both a key dimension of global development and a crucial aspect of

'human well-being' (p. 44). More specifically within adult education, the UNESCO (2016) *Recommendation on Adult Learning* stresses that adult education 'empowers people to actively engage with social issues' (p. 7) and aims 'to equip people with the necessary capabilities to exercise and realise their rights and take control of their destinies' (p. 8).

Understandings of empowerment vary considerably in scope (McLaughlin, 2023). While some approaches focus on specific groups and situations, others leave the concept open to wide interpretation (McLaughlin, 2023). This breadth is also reflected in the diverse ways empowerment is conceptualised across disciplines, as will be discussed briefly in the following section. The term is 'often used but rarely defined' (McLaughlin, 2023, p. 64). It may be understood as an 'interpretation of the relationship between the individual and the state' as a structural frame (Lupton, 1998, p. 110). Institutionally organised adult education can help to mediate this relationship (Grotlüschen et al., 2023). Against this backdrop, this article proposes a theoretical framework for examining empowerment in adult education. Using a multi-level perspective of empowerment through adult education, we develop a heuristic multi-level model that links characteristics at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. The article begins with a brief overview of the state of research on the relationship between adult education and empowerment, before analysing the three levels with reference to the approaches of Freire (2014) and Sen (1993). From this analysis, a multi-level model is introduced, and interdependencies between the different levels are addressed.

Empowerment and adult education: Previous research

The concept of empowerment shifts between two broad understandings: one centred on social adaptation, the other on social change. From the perspective of social adaptation, Inglis (1997; see also Galié & Farnworth, 2019) points out that empowerment focuses on fostering individual learning to enhance competences and efficiency in the workplace, enabling adaptation to rigid existing structures. In this understanding, existing structures are accepted rather than questioned. By contrast, during the social movements of the 1960s, an emancipatory conception of empowerment emerged, positioning social change, rather than social adaption, as a central goal of empowerment. Women's and civil rights movements, for instance, sought equality and challenged structural inequality and subordination. Empowerment, in this sense, can be conceptualised as a concept of agency, capability, and social change (Unterhalter, 2019). Emancipatory empowerment, therefore, is focused 'not only upon changes within individual persons, but also on the ways power structures relationships within and between different (...) levels' (Galié & Farnworth, 2019, p. 13) while critically reflecting on those structures. Empowerment as social change can be described as a bottom-up principle (Stromquist, 2015). Social change is initiated by (disadvantaged) groups, beginning at the level of the individual. By contrast, social change resulting from political decisions is seen as a top-down process. Initiated by policy bodies at a high level, decisions are transmitted downward and implemented by organisations and individuals, directing the course of social change from the top rather than the individual level (Campbell, 2001).

The concept of empowerment appears in diverse discourses, including medicine, psychiatry, social work, and adult education. In psychiatry and medicine, it refers to supporting patients in coping with illness and developing self-efficacy (Knuf, 2016; Schulz & Hartung, 2017). The focus here lies on enhancing individual competences; people are expected to become 'more self-aware, self-confident, assertive, effective, and dynamic so they can do better within the existing system, rather than change it' (Inglis,

1997, p. 10). This orientation leans towards social adaptation. In social work, however, Herriger (2020) describes empowerment in terms of disadvantaged individuals achieving 'self-determination over the circumstances of one's own everyday life' (Herriger, 2020, p. 20, authors' translation). Social work services support individuals in directing and managing their daily lives, guided by the principle of resource orientation, with the long-term aim of enabling independence from social workers' support. Here, empowerment is described as both an individual and collective process aimed at active participation in processes of change (Herriger, 2020). This understanding of empowerment in social work oscillates between adaptation and transformation: While it seeks to strengthen individual competences for navigating everyday life (adaptation), it also aspires to broader participation in processes of social change. Whether such processes transform power structures or merely alter individual behaviours within existing structures often remains open to question.

In the discourse of adult education – the focus of this article – empowerment can be seen as a process promoting equitable opportunities. It is implied that 'empowerment in and through (adult) education' (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021, p. 4) supports groups to understand, shape, and improve the contexts in which they live. From this perspective, social change emerges as the ultimate aim (Freire, 2014), with adult education serving as a means of fostering empowerment. Unlike social work, medicine, and psychiatry, adult education takes a broader view by considering groups as agents of change in their own worlds, positioning social change at its core.

A distinction can be made between institutionally organised and non-organised forms of adult learning and education (Nolda, 2015). This article focuses on organised adult education, which can initiate empowerment by providing opportunities for participants to discuss and reflect on their knowledge and abilities to understand social demands and structures, overcome obstacles, and develop their world in a constructive way (Freire, 2014). In this sense, empowerment can be understood as a social practice 'so that learners can be subjects and actors in their own lives and in society' (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988, p. 382). According to Campbell (2001), learning processes supported by adult education can lead to bottom-up social change.

Even though adult education is widely regarded as contributing to empowerment (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021; Kröner, 2020), the 'relationship between empowerment and education is (…) neither simple nor clear' (Unterhalter, 2019, p. 75). Two aspects help clarify this relationship: 'an individual's capability to gain control over the environment, and (…) reflecting the available opportunity structures' (Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova, 2023, p. 175). Capabilities, embedded in a structural setting, enable individuals to overcome obstacles and pursue personal aspirations in everyday life (Sen, 1993; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). At the same time, these structural settings must be critically reflected upon, as they define the boundaries of individual capabilities (Sen, 1993; Freire, 2014). By reflecting on those structures and initiating consciousness-raising (*conscientização*), individuals can understand societal structures and mechanisms, thereby creating the possibility for collective action and social change. Organised adult education can support this empowerment process (Freire, 2014).

For adult education, considering both aspects of empowerment together implies that analysis limited to the individual level is insufficient to understand how organised adult education can encourage empowerment. This leads to the main assumption of this article: empowerment through institutionally organised adult education must be examined from a multi-level perspective. At the individual (micro) level, the organisational (meso-) level, and the (macro-) level of umbrella organisations and associations, empowerment processes can support equal opportunities, self-determination, and social transformation.

Given the interdependencies between the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of adult education (e.g., Egetenmeyer et al., 2019; Lima et al., 2016), it seems inadequate to consider only one level in isolation.

The relationship between empowerment and adult education as a multi-level phenomenon

Promoting empowerment through adult education can be considered across the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. The micro-level focuses on the individual and their 'range of specific factors' (Boeren, 2016, p. 145), including close (peer-)relationships. The meso-level addresses 'learning providers' (Boeren, 2016, p. 147), who can create both 'barriers and support mechanisms' (Boeren, 2016, p. 145) regarding empowerment opportunities. Within adult education, teaching-learning settings can be oriented either towards empowerment for social change or towards social adaptation. The meso-level, therefore, represents an organised constellation of interactions among multiple individuals (Boeren, 2016), and in the context of this article refers to teaching-learning settings within adult education organisations that provide and (co-)design learning opportunities. The macro-level encompasses umbrella organisations and associations in adult education, understood as an amalgamation of organisations that establish support structures for their work. They operate at the interface between societal frameworks and the work of organisations (Breitschwerdt, 2022). Boeren (2016) stresses that these levels interact closely with each other in ways that reflect the complexity and multifaceted nature of people's social reality.

Empowerment and adult education at the micro-level

Adult education can promote empowerment by supporting people's agency (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021), seeing individuals as the starting point for strengthening the bottom-up principle (Campbell, 2001). At the micro-level, three aspects can be identified that organised adult education can target to foster adult empowerment: (1) *knowledge and abilities*, (2) *active agency*, and (3) *cultural realities*.

Knowledge and abilities

Knowledge and abilities are necessary for recognising and scrutinising existing power relationships, dynamics, and the broader social environment, with the aim of enabling social change. This capacity is central to empowerment (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). Research shows that adult education programmes can support adults to construct and expand their knowledge and abilities, while also strengthening their belief in their own abilities – particularly given the diverse experiences accumulated across their lifetimes (Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2023; Iñiguez-Berrozpe et al., 2019).

Drawing on Polanyi (1958), knowledge can be differentiated into explicit and tacit forms. Explicit knowledge – sometimes described as *know-what* and *know-why* (Jensen et al., 2016) – refers to knowledge that is formulated, communicable, and reproducible (Dinkelaker & Kade, 2011). Tacit knowledge, by contrast, encompasses experience-based or action-based knowledge and is sometimes equated with abilities (Katenkamp, 2011). This form of knowledge can only partially be transmitted through explicit knowledge and is tied to the individual in their dynamic life situation. Individuals are not immediately aware of their tacit knowledge (Dinkelaker & Kade, 2011). Building on this, Lundvall (2016) identifies *know-who* as part of tacit knowledge, referring to a person's

social networks and 'knowledge based networks' (Lundvall, 2016, p. 237) that provide access to expertise: the knowledge of who knows what and how something is done (Lundvall, 2016; Jensen et al., 2016).

Knowledge is dialogic in nature: it is not created through the passive absorption of information but through co-construction, critical engagement, and constant revision. The 'act of knowing' (Freire, 1985, p. 17) is therefore both an exploration of the world and a means of transforming it. Discussing, understanding, and critically interrogating information are central for co-constructing knowledge and fostering empowerment (Freire, 2014, 2021). The act of knowing and the resulting critical consciousness are a prerequisite for assessing situations, recognising one's possibilities, and making one's own decisions (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Critical consciousness involves actively questioning and engaging with a given situation or information and, according to Freire (2021), can be distinguished from 'naive consciousness' (Freire, 2021, p. 42), in which individuals fail to reflect on structural conditions and instead attribute their oppressive situation solely to themselves, and 'fanatical consciousness' (Freire, 2021, p. 42), which rejects oppression but does so in an 'irrational'(Freire, 2021, p. 42) and dogmatic way without engaging in structural critique (see also Freire, 2014). The decisions and actions resulting from critical consciousness are also critical, transformative in nature, and directed towards empowerment, social justice, and social change (Freire, 2014). Ibrahim (2017) summarises that a person 'needs to *reflect* critically about his/her current status, *perceive* and aspire for better living conditions and decide and plan an *action* to bring about this aspired change' (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 206, emphasis in original). Individuals are thus positioned as agents of social change, critically assessing situations and 'actively engag[ing] in pursuing solutions to address them' (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 206).

Active agency

A person's or group's agency can be crucial for empowerment, as it aims, according to Freire (2014), 'not to "integrate" them into the structure of oppression, but to transform the structure so that they can become "beings for themselves"' (p. 74). Agency can be defined as a person's ability to achieve what they desire (Sen, 1993), while the aim of agency is social change. Agency not only pertains to one's well-being but also considers an action's social component: the contribution that action makes to society (Pelenc et al., 2015). However, a person's agency depends both on their '*capability*' (Sen, 1993, p. 32, emphasis in original) and on their 'beings and doings' (Robeyns, 2005, p. 99) – what a person achieves – which Sen (1993) calls 'functionings' (p. 32). Capability focuses on possibilities to act, asking whether opportunity or freedom exists to achieve something that one values. 'In this terminology, a capability is synonymous with a capability set, which consists of a combination of potential functionings. Functionings could therefore be either potential or achieved' (Robeyns, 2005, p. 100). Sen (1993) summarises this as follows:

> *Functionings* represent parts of the state of a person – in particular the various things that he or she manages to do or be in leading a life. The *capability* of a person reflects the alternative combinations of functionings the person can achieve, and from which he or she can choose one collection (emphasis in original). (Sen, 1993, p. 32)

This distinction is crucial, as it allows assessment of whether something can be implemented, whether alternatives exist, or whether it is possible to decide for oneself what the result should be (Sen, 1993).

Agency is shaped by available resources – economic, cultural, or social (Abel & Schori, 2009) – and by conversion factors, which determine the degree to which a resource can be utilised to achieve goals. These include personal, social, and environmental factors. Resources alone are insufficient to assess well-being; they only become meaningful when they can be used for the desired purpose (Robeyns, 2005). In addition to conversion factors and available resources, capability and the functionings ultimately achieved are influenced by the wider social context (Robeyns, 2005).

The context is crucial for effecting change (Freire, 2014), and agency must always be understood in relation to lived circumstances. As previously discussed in the knowledge and abilities section, critical reflection on one's life context is essential to empowerment. Agency 'cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism' (Freire, 2014, p. 85); it is interdependent with the surrounding world. Situational awareness and assessment enable individuals to 'critically recognize (...) [the] causes [of a situation], so that through transforming action they can create a new situation' (Freire, 2014, p. 47).

Taking action should be emphasised at this point. Agency alone stands for the ability to achieve something, but it does not include the action which is necessary to achieve social change. To emphasise this active component, this article uses the term *active agency*.

Active agency can be strengthened through reflection (Freire, 2014). The aim is to foster consciousness-raising that is shaped by action and reflection, critically examines conditions, and embodies participation (Freire, 2014). Freire emphasises the active role of each individual in empowerment. Action and reflection are two vital, interconnected features. Action without reflection, according to Freire (2014), is mere 'activism' (p. 87). Reflection is essential for empowerment as it helps to better understand conditions, tasks, or obstacles and supports change (Flecha, 2000). However, reflection without action amounts to 'verbalism' (Freire, 2014, p. 87). In such cases, the capacity to bring about change is absent. Empowerment therefore requires reflection and action in equal measure.

Organised adult education can strengthen active agency by providing spaces for dialogue, reflection and collaboration (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2023). Such programmes often allow participants to choose their groups autonomously (Kade, 1989). Flexibility and environments that align with participants' needs and integrate their social contexts form the foundation for adult education (Kade, 1989).

Cultural realities

According to Sen (1985), (active) agency and capability are shaped by individuals' values and beliefs. Both the ability and the opportunity to act depend on what a person considers desirable (Pelenc et al., 2015). Kluckhohn (1962, as cited in Endruweit et al., 2014) defines *values* as a 'conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable' (p. 610), which guides actions and behaviour. Values therefore function as orienting principles, themselves shaped by the prevailing culture. Through actions, values can either be reproduced or changed, meaning they do not have universal validity. Culture, understood as a system of norms, behaviours, and values, is dynamic: norms operate as situation-specific guides for shared by a group and shape perceptions of one's life context (Endruweit et al., 2014).

For empowerment, Freire (2014, 1985) emphasises the importance of a culture of respect, openness, collectivity, and action. Respect for others involves viewing them as equals, refraining from imposing one's own ideologies, and entering into dialogue openly. This aligns with a culture of collectivity, as dialogue – the foundation for co-constructing

knowledge and for reflection – can only occur through mutual exchange, as well as collaborative action towards social change (Freire, 2014, 1985).

Reflecting on one's own and society's values, norms, and cultural realities can foster an understanding of individual and societal situations and contexts, as well as promote active agency. As Frediani et al. (2019) note: 'to develop people's agency, it is necessary to incorporate reflection and critical deliberation of the reasons and values that underpin it' (p. 120). Analysing prevailing norms, values, and culture can be considered part of empowerment because it encourages reflection on life circumstances and exposes oppressive structures and processes (Freire, 2014). Such reflection enables individuals to enhance social change by breaking open oppressive structures and processes (Freire, 2014). Culture as a superordinate concept and everyday cultural realities can be understood as an interplay of social relationships and experiences 'in the world and with the world' (Freire, 2021, p. 44).

Organised adult education programmes can support reflection and dialogue about values, norms, and beliefs (Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2023), creating spaces to experience openness, respect, and collectivity (Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2023; Kade, 1989; Freire, 2021) At the micro-level, then, adult education and empowerment are understood as a dynamic interplay of knowledge and abilities, active agency, and cultural realities. Rooted in dialogue, these processes enable individuals to critically interpret their life contexts and to act collectively towards social change. Both aspects draw on the culture of individuals and society.

Empowerment and adult education at the meso-level

Teaching-learning settings in adult education organisations constitute the meso-level of adult education. From an empowerment perspective, organised adult education enables participants to experience community and initiate learning processes (Kade, 1989). The community dimension of adult education fosters relationships, belonging, and mutual exchange (Park et al., 2016). Within this context, teaching-learning settings can be seen as sites with the potential to support and frame empowerment, especially through the interaction between adult educators and adult learners. Two central characteristics at this level are: (1) *pedagogical self-conception* and (2) *dialogic spaces*.

Pedagogical self-conception

According to Freire (2014), the pedagogical self-conception of adult educators can support empowerment. It either enables or undermines participants' ability to engage in dialogue in adult education organisations. Education and the construction of knowledge occur in dialogic settings (Freire, 2014), but dialogue cannot flourish within hierarchical or paternalistic structures (Freire, 2014). Instead, it requires a 'horizontal relationship' (Freire, 2014, p. 91), based on equality. Flecha (2000) refers to this as *egalitarian dialogue*, emphasising that communication must rest on arguments rather than power. This principle applies not only among participants but, crucially, between teachers and students. Freire (2014) highlights this reciprocal relationship through the concepts of the *teacher-student* and the *student-teacher*: 'The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach' (Freire, 2014, p. 80).

Adult learners are understood as experts of their own lives, and learning and teaching are framed as a joint process. Unlike the *banking method*, learners' self-determination and active participation are prioritised (Freire, 2014). As Flecha (2000) observes, learners

'stop being passive receptors of knowledge and begin actively to generate knowledge' (p. 4). Egalitarian dialogue ensures that all voices are valued, deepening communication and reflection while connecting directly to learners' lived contexts (Flecha, 2000). Learners are understood as subjects of their self-education. Given that 'education can be a source of symbolic violence and exclusion (…) as much as that of empowerment and inclusion' (Boyadjiva & Illieva-Trichkova, 2021, p. 68), Freire's (2014) conception of education stands as an instrument against oppression, aiming for empowerment and achieving equality through social change.

For Freire (2014) and Sen (1985), active agency is crucial for empowerment. According to Freire (2014), adult educators need to adopt an activating stance that fosters dialogue, reflection, and action, promoting active agency. Furthermore, a participatory stance is essential for empowerment at the meso-level. Viewing adult education participants as equal partners in dialogue, supporting their active agency, and promoting action and reflection as pathways to empowerment requires involving them in all areas. For adult educators, this participatory stance, which involves recognising participants as subjects of their empowerment and valuing their perspectives and experiences as central to their learning, is crucial for promoting empowerment (Freire, 2014).

Such a stance also demands critical consciousness: educators must be prepared to question structural conditions to understand the context and needs of participants. Through critical consciousness, positive development can be stimulated. The opposite approach would be to adhere to familiar structures without bringing about any change, thereby restricting the empowerment of participants (Freire, 2014): 'For the critic, the important thing is the continuing transformation of reality, in behalf of the continuing humanization of' (p. 92) people. Critically questioning power relations and asymmetries fosters creative thought and practice. This can reveal alternative courses of action, which is particularly important when learners act beyond the safe space of adult education programmes in contexts pervaded by marginalisation and domination (Murray, 2013).

In the protected environment of adult education organisations, where equality and active participation are core pedagogical principles, adult educators must continually reflect on their actions to align their pedagogical self-conception with promoting the empowerment of participants. They can create a framework for empowerment, with the aim to support participants to change situations themselves (Freire, 2014). Adult educators can adopt a non-hierarchical understanding of their relationship with participants and reflect on their own role:

> In effect, this means that (...) [adult educators] must enable (...) [participants] to understand (...) the strategies and tactics by which they could be empowered to take control of their own learning. This involves enabling (...) [participants] to recognize and challenge the structures, hierarchies, privileges, rhetoric, rules and regulations of the educational institution within which they operate. (Inglis, 1997, p. 10)

Through such reflection, adult educators can align their practice with participants' needs, ensure equitable inclusion, and model empowerment in their own actions. This requires ongoing exchanges with participants (Kröner, 2020).

In summary, a pedagogical self-conception oriented towards empowerment for social change is characterised by a dialogic, activating, and participatory stance. By meeting participants on equal terms and engaging in critical questioning of structures, educators can co-create conditions for transformation and empowerment together with participants. Engaging in self-reflection allows adult educators to repeatedly question their stance and actions to align their work with the needs of participants and to accompany them in their empowerment process.

Dialogic spaces

If dialogue is understood as a practice that enables empowerment, then creating spaces for dialogue becomes a central mission for adult education organisations. Teaching-learning settings can serve this function. Freire (2014) argues that 'the starting point for organising the programme content of education (…) must be the present, existential, concrete situation' (p. 95). Empirical evidence confirms that dialogic spaces are important for 'sharing experiences and reflections, contributing to the development of argumentation' (Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2023, p. 13), for dismantling stereotypes, co-creating knowledge, and supporting both self-esteem and sense of belonging (Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2023). Such spaces also stimulate reflection on, and interpretation of, one's own world.

In dialogue with participants, addressing their world and examining their context are essential for mutual understanding (Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2023). Understanding participants' context and aligning teaching-learning settings with it involves recognising 'that education is not neutral and takes place in the context of peoples' lives' (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988, p. 381). According to Sen (2002; see also Abel & Schori, 2009; Unterhalter, 2019), a person's possibility to act is always situated within the context of their world. Recognising participants as experts of their own lives requires the participatory design of teaching-learning settings to ensure adequate contextualisation. Without such egalitarian collaboration, adult educators cannot adequately respond to learners' realities. As Freire (2014) emphasises, genuine participatory dialogue integrates participants' perspectives and ensures that learning settings are tailored to them. Wallenstein and Bernstein (1988) summarise this process in three steps:

> The first is listening to understand the felt issues or themes of the community. Step two is participatory dialogue about the investigated issues using a problem-posing methodology. Step three is action or the positive change that people envision during their dialogue. (Wallenstein & Bernstein, 1988, p. 382)

This means that in practice teaching-learning settings in adult education must be co-designed to support empowerment. Sen's (1993) concept of freedom is applicable here: individuals' ability to benefit from empowerment opportunities is constrained if access to programmes is limited. To achieve the equality envisaged by Freire (2014), ensuring low-threshold access to adult education is therefore essential.

In summary, at the meso-level, organisations can support and frame empowerment through the design of teaching-learning settings and through the subsequent interaction between educators and learners. It is crucial to adopt a dialogic, participatory, and egalitarian approach that guides interactions, both between adult educators and participants and among participants themselves (Freire, 2014; Flecha, 2000). Tellado (2012) emphasises that the success of organised adult education depends on such participatory and dialogic approaches, which require educators to critically reflect on their pedagogical self-conceptions. Additionally, research shows that participation in these forms of adult education can encourage individuals to take active roles in community processes and activism (Tellado, 2017). In Sen's (1992) terms, this expands participants' agency, functionings, capabilities, and conversion factors by making them accessible in practice. However, teaching-learning settings in adult education organisations also depend on available resources, which directs attention to the macro-level and the broader structures and decisions that shape adult education.

Empowerment and adult education at the macro-level

Empowerment through adult education can be supported by structures at the macro-level. Umbrella organisations and adult education associations play a central role in this regard: they provide support both internally – by assisting associated organisations in their work – and externally, by communicating needs and requirements regarding empowerment in adult education to societal and political bodies (Seitter, 2016). At this level, two characteristics are particularly relevant: (1) *representation of interests* and (2) *educational mandate*.

Representation of interests

Umbrella organisations and associations in adult education have a cooperative function by consolidating the perspectives and needs of adult education organisations and their stakeholders. These collective positions can then be channelled into educational policy processes (Seitter, 2016; Breitschwerdt, 2022). Grotlüschen et al. (2023) describe their role as follows:

> to collect opinions from their members, organise a consultation process, develop drafts, negotiate different perspectives, make common interests explicit, work in councils, committees, and expert groups, prepare scientific reports, address (...) bodies [of educational policy and government], and advocate for the implementation of (…) [adult education]. (Grotlüschen et al., 2023, p. 66)

To advance empowerment, this cooperative process must be based on mutual exchange (Freire, 2014) and conducted through 'egalitarian and collaborative dialogue' (Flecha, 2015, p. 93) across and between levels, as well as with educational policy bodies. Umbrella organisations and associations in adult education can thus be seen as initiators of dialogic spaces that bring together all stakeholders. A starting point for such representation is joint reflection on structures and needs across the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. Educational policies supporting empowerment for social change must strengthen '*bottom-up* dynamics: activities are conceived locally and are self-managed, displaying an intervention that grants agency to educational association' (Lima & Guimarães, 2011, p. 42). At the same time, they should foster '[c]ollaborative efforts (...) in an attempt to establish a radical or participatory democracy and to foster social transformation' (Lima & Guimarães, 2011, p. 43). Dialogic spaces also play a crucial role in ensuring that (international) initiatives – such as the CONFINTEA conferences or the Sustainable Development Goals – are not sidelined, but that their results, recommendations, and goals are integrated into educational policy discourses and translated into actions (Grotlüschen et al., 2023).

   Educational policy decisions are crucial for adult education: they give impulses for the teaching-learning setting, provide resources for the work of organisations, and establish educational mandates for adult education (Gieseke, 2003; Egetenmeyer et al. 2019). Yet, as Murray (2013) observes, 'decision-making has been moved further and further away from the general populous' in recent years, partly due to increasingly 'centralised and (...) transnational political bodies' (p. 16). Power asymmetries play an important role in this regard, as existing structures can exclude agents of adult education (Murray, 2013). Flecha (2022) calls for both bottom-up and top-down approaches to support social change and impact. Decisions of policy bodies and social change initiated on an individual level need to work together, while being grounded in dialogic policymaking and the integration of all levels in the decision-making processes.

Educational mandate

Besides facilitating exchanges on the perspectives and needs of adult education towards social change, umbrella organisations and association also play an important role in shaping and discussing the educational mandate of adult education. This mandate, and the orientation of adult education organisations, are highly influenced by educational policy decisions and strategies (Gieseke & Opelt, 2003). Through dialogue with policy bodies, umbrella organisations can advance an understanding of adult education as a supportive setting for critical reflection and action directed towards empowerment. The opposite, by contrast, would be to construe the mandate of adult education as merely an instrument of social adaptation to rigid structures.

By involving both meso-level organisations and micro-level actors in dialogue on the mandate of adult education, umbrella organisations and associations can support a shared understanding, and hence the work done in each organisation. In this sense, they take on a cooperative and mediating role within the broader discourse on empowerment through adult education.

In summary, macro-level structures can promote empowerment through adult education by supporting the representation of interests and by shaping educational mandates in ways that enable empowerment. Umbrella organisations and associations, in particular, have the capacity to strengthen empowerment internally – within the field of adult education itself – and externally, through dialogue with educational policy bodies.

A multi-level model of the relationship between empowerment and adult education

The preceding analysis demonstrates that empowerment and institutionally organised adult education intersect at multiple levels. Interdependencies can be identified between these levels (Egetenmeyer et al., 2019), and all must interact in order to support empowerment processes.

At the meso-level, teaching-learning settings in adult education organisations can provide dialogic spaces that support empowerment. Within such spaces, learners and educators can co-construct knowledge and abilities and foster active agency. Ensuring low-threshold access to adult education programmes further facilitates participation (Nolda, 2015; Kröner, 2020). Meso- and micro-level actors co-create programmes to address the lived realities of learners, who must be recognised as experts of their own world. This forms the basis for collective action (Freire, 2014). To sustain empowerment processes, participants at the micro-level and organisations at the meso-level require support from macro-level actors. Umbrella organisations and associations can provide such support structures while also initiating dialogue with educational policy bodies to articulate interests. In particular, by working with micro- and meso-level actors, umbrella organisations and associations 'collect, bundle and select the interests of (…) micro [and meso] level members and advocate for their collective interests to influence the policy makers' (Grotlüschen et al., 2023, p. 65). Grotlüschen et al. (2023) therefore attribute a special mediating role to umbrella organisations and associations in this process. Additionally, the educational mandate of adult education can be discussed across all levels, as well as in dialogue with policy bodies. An educational mandate oriented towards empowerment for social change can shape meso- and micro-level practice and guide the work of adult education organisations.

On the basis of the discussion of all three levels, the following definition for empowerment and adult education as a multi-level phenomenon is proposed:

Empowerment through organised adult education manifests in an egalitarian and participative stance that supports active agency while strengthening action and reflection as aspects of critical consciousness. This requires contextualisation and dialogue, underpinned by mediation between adult education and educational policy. Empowerment through organised adult education must therefore be understood through the combined interactions of the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels.

This definition is elucidated in the following heuristic model (Figure 1). The model incorporates the three levels and depicts their interrelationships, with each level characterised by specific features. Of particular importance is the positioning of the three levels relative to one another. The circular arrangement highlights an egalitarian examination of all three levels and their interconnectedness. This follows from the mutual dependencies that bind all levels to each other individually. As Lima et al. (2016) argue, while the macro-level may wield more influence than the meso-level, and the meso-level more than the micro-level, processes cannot be understood as one-sided. The use of arrows highlights the dynamic interactions between the levels. By rejecting a linear stage model in favour of a circular representation, the model also emphasises that empowerment is incomplete if any level is excluded. This means that all three levels are needed to promote empowerment through adult education.

Figure 1. Empowerment through adult education as multi-level phenomenon (Source: authors' own illustration)
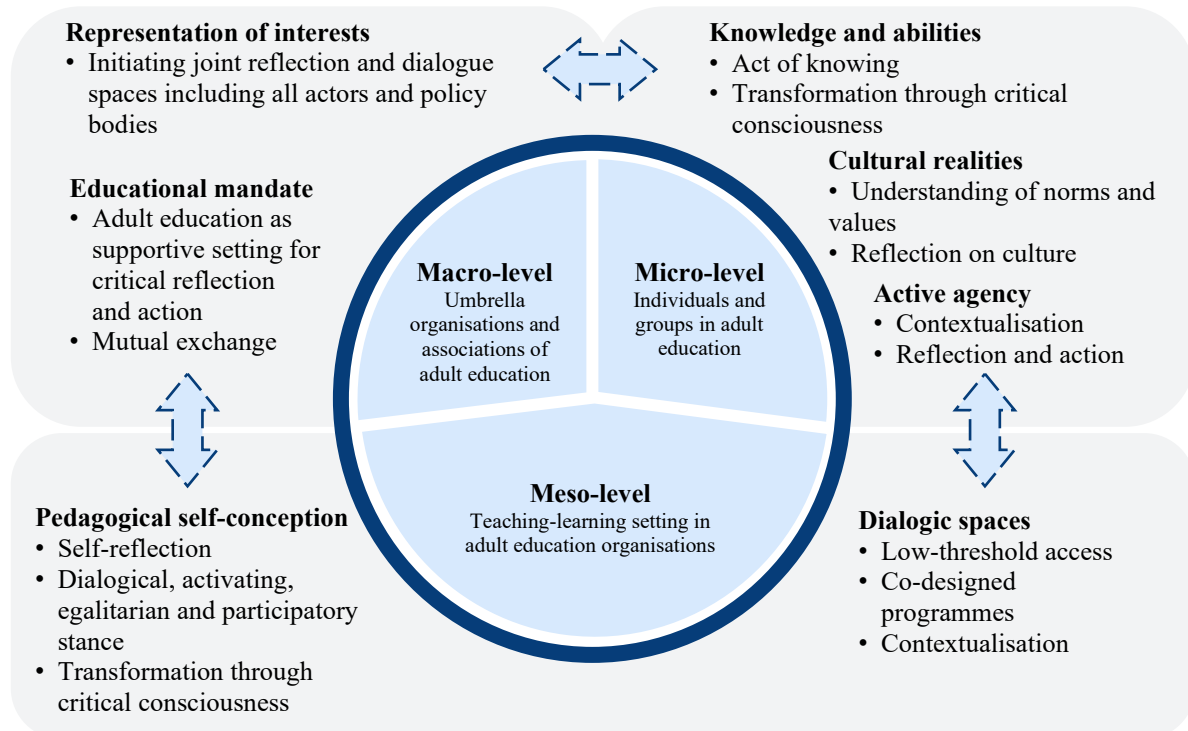
Conclusion

This article has examined empowerment through adult education from a multi-level perspective. A heuristic model was developed to connect the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels, featuring seven characteristics: (1) *knowledge and abilities*, (2) *active agency*, (3) *cultural realities,* (4) *pedagogical self-conception,* (5) *dialogic spaces,* (6) *representation of interests,* and (7) *educational mandate.* It was emphasised that empowerment processes cannot be promoted at a single level in isolation: all three levels must come together in dialogue. Only through their interconnection can the full potential of empowerment be realised. Dialogue is a central element across all levels, as it enables reflection on structures and processes at all levels and provides the basis for collective action towards social change.

The proposed model highlights the characteristics of empowerment in adult education and illustrates the interconnections between levels. It does not claim to be exhaustive but is offered as a theoretical framework on adult education that remains deliberately general in form. When applied to specific areas of adult education, the model can be refined and adapted. By integrating empowerment into a multi-level perspective, the model embeds empowerment and social change – already established as central aims of adult education (Freire, 2014) – into its conceptual foundation. Since the model is theoretically derived, empirical research should be the next step, providing evidence and further specification.

With regard to practice, the discussion shows that empowerment-oriented adult education requires organisational work (meso-level) that integrates both participant perspectives (micro-level) and supportive structures (macro-level). Moreover, all three levels must cooperate in dialogue to initiate processes of social change. Achieving this task requires a dialogic, participatory, and egalitarian stance. Within teaching-learning settings, this means ensuring the active participation of learners so that their needs and understandings are incorporated.

Beyond implications for practice, the analysis also points to directions for further research. Empowerment through adult education requires not only dialogic, participatory, and egalitarian practice, but also research approaches that embody these principles. Participative research can serve as an entry point to integrate empowerment into the research process (von Unger, 2014). Dialogue-oriented research, understood as a strand of participatory research, emphasises exchange between research and practice and seeks to shape research collaboratively for all actors involved (Breitschwerdt & Egetenmeyer, 2022). Such 'application-oriented research' (Breitschwerdt & Egetenmeyer, 2022, p. 19, authors' translation) generates scientific insights together in dialogue with practice. In this way, dialogue-oriented research enables the participation of actors across the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels – participants, organisations, and umbrella bodies – thus connecting the levels presented in this article within the research process itself.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

Funding

References

Abel, T., & Schori, D. (2009). Der Capability-Ansatz in der Gesundheitsförderung: Ansatzpunkte für eine Neuausrichtung der Ungleichheitsforschung [The capability approach in health promotion: Starting points for a reorientation of inequality research]. *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, *34*(2), 48-64. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11614-009-0012-9

Boeren, E. (2016). *Lifelong Learning Participation in a Changing Policy Context: An Interdisciplinary Theory*. Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137441836

Boyadjieva, P. & Ilieva-Trichkova, P. (2021). *Adult Education as Empowerment: Re-imagining Lifelong Learning through the Capability Approach, Recognition Theory and Common Goods Perspective*. Springer Nature Switzerland AG. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-67136-5

Boyadjieva, P. & Ilieva-Trichkova, P. (2023). Adult Education as a Pathway to Empowerment: Challenges and Possibilities. In J. Holford, P. Boyadjieva, S. Clancy, G. Hefler, & I. Studená (Eds.), *Lifelong Learning, Young Adults and the Challenges of Disadvantage in Europe* (pp. 169-192). Palgrave Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14109-6_7

Breitschwerdt, L. (2022). *Professionalitätsentwicklung in der Erwachsenenbildung und Weiterbildung Als Mehrebenen-Phänomen: Eine qualitative Einzelfallanalyse am Beispiel einer Organisation der beruflichen Weiterbildung. Theorie und Empirie Lebenslangen Lernens* [Professional development in adult and continuing education as a multi-level phenomenon: A qualitative case study based on the example of an organisation for continuing vocational education. Theory and empirical evidence of lifelong learning]. Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden GmbH. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-38076-2

Breitschwerdt, L. & Egetenmeyer, R. (2022). Dialogorientierte Forschung in der Erwachsenenbildung/Weiterbildung. Theoretische und forschungsmethodische Überlegungen zur Gestaltung des Wissenschaft-Praxis-Verhältnisses [Dialogue-oriented research in adult and continuing education. Theoretical and research - methodological considerations for shaping the science-practice relation]. *Bildungsforschung*, *2*, 1-23. https://doi.org/10.25656/01:25468

Campbell, P. (2001). Participatory Literacy Practices: Exploring Pedagogy. In P. Campbell & B. Burnaby (Eds.), *Participatory practices in adult education* (pp. 55-76). Erlbaum. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410600233

Cattaneo, L. B., & Chapman, A. R. (2010). The process of empowerment: A model for use in research and practice. *American Psychologist, 65*(7), 646-659. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018854

Dinkelaker, J., & Kade, J. (2011). Wissensvermittlung und Aneignungsorientierung. Antworten der Erwachsenenbildung/Weiterbildung auf den gesellschaftlichen Wandel des Umgangs mit Wissen und Nicht-Wissen [Knowledge transfer and acquisition orientation. Responses from adult education/continuing education to social change in the handling of knowledge and non-knowledge]. *REPORT - Zeitschrift für Weiterbildungsforschung*, *34*(2), 24-34. https://doi.org/10.3278/REP1102W024

Egetenmeyer, R., Breitschwerdt, L., & Lechner, R. (2019). From 'traditional professions' to 'new professionalism': A multi-level perspective for analysing professionalisation in adult and continuing education. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, *25*(1), 7-24. https://doi.org/10.1177/1477971418814009

Endruweit, G., Trommsdorff, G., & Burzan, N. (Eds.) (2014). *Wörterbuch der Soziologie* [Dictionary of Sociology] (3. ed.). UVK Verlag. https://doi.org/10.36198/9783838585666

Flecha, R. (Ed.) (2015). *Springer Briefs in Education. Successful educational actions for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-11176-6

Flecha, R. (2000). *Sharing words: Theory and practice of dialogic learning*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Flecha, R. (2022). *The Dialogic Society: The sociology scientists and citizens like and use*. Hipatia Press Association.

Frediani, A. A., Peris, J., & Boni, A. (2019). Notions of Empowerment and Participation: Contributions from and to the Capability Approach. In D. Clark, M. Biggeri, & A. A. Frediani (Eds.), *The*

capability approach, empowerment and participation: Concepts, methods and applications (pp. 101-124). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-35230-9

Freire, P. (1985). Reading the World and Reading the Word: An Interview with Paulo Freire. *Language Arts, 62*(1), 15-21. https://doi.org/10.58680/la198525786

Freire, P. (2014). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (4. ed.). Bloomsbury Publishing.

Freire, P. (2021). *Education for Critical Consciousness*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Freire, P., & Macedo, D. P. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word & the world*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203986103

Galié, A., & Farnworth, C. R. (2019). Power through: A new concept in the empowerment discourse. *Global Food Security*, *21*, 13-17. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2019.07.001

Gieseke, W. (2003). Programmplanungshandeln als Angleichungshandeln: die realisierte Vernetzung in der Abstimmung von Angebot und Nachfrage [Programme planning as a means of harmonisation: The realisation of networking in the coordination of supply and demand]. In W. Gieseke (Ed.), *Institutionelle Innensichten der Weiterbildung* (pp. 189-211). Bertelsmann.

Gieseke, W., & Opelt, K. (2003). *Erwachsenenbildung in politischen Umbrüchen. Programmforschung Volkshochschule Dresden 1945-1997* [Adult education in times of political upheaval. Programme research at Volkshochschule Dresden 1945-1997]. Leske & Budrich. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-322-92243-4

Grotlüschen, A., Belzer, A., Ertner, M., & Yasukawa, K. (2023). *Adult Learning and Education within the Framework of Lifelong Learning*. DVV International. https://www.dvv-international.de/fileadmin/files/Inhalte_Bilder_und_Dokumente/Materialien/IPE/IPE_81_ALE_within_Framework_04-2023_web.pdf

Herriger, N. (2020). *Empowerment in der Sozialen Arbeit: Eine Einführung* [Empowerment in social work: An introduction] (6. ed.). Kohlhammer. https://doi.org/10.17433/978-3-17-034147-0

Ibrahim, S. (2017). How to Build Collective Capabilities: The 3C-Model for Grassroots-Led Development. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, *18*(2), 197-222. https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2016.1270918

Ibrahim, S., & Alkire, S. (2007). Agency and Empowerment: A Proposal for Internationally Comparable Indicators. *Oxford Development Studies, 35*(4), 379-403. https://doi.org/10.1080/13600810701701897

Inglis, T. (1997). Empowerment and Emancipation. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *48*(1), 3-17. https://doi.org/10.1177/074171369704800102

Iñiguez-Berrozpe, T., Elboj-Saso, C., Flecha, A., & Marcaletti, F. (2019). Benefits of Adult Education Participation for Low-Educated Women. *Adult Education Quarterly, 70*(1), 64-88. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713619870793

Jensen, M. B., Johnson, B., Lorenz, E., & Lundvall, B. Å. (2016). Forms of knowledge and modes of innovation. In B. Å. Lundvall (Ed.), *The Learning Economy and the Economics of Hope* (pp. 155-183). Anthem Press.

Kade, J. (1989). Universalisierung und Individualisierung der Erwachsenenbildung. Über den Wandel eines pädagogischen Arbeitsfeldes im Kontext gesellschaftlicher Modernisierung [Universalisation and individualisation of adult education. On the transformation of a pedagogical field of work in the context of societal modernisation]. *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*, *35*(6), 789-808. https://doi.org/10.25656/01:14536

Katenkamp, O. (2011). *Implizites Wissen in Organisationen: Konzepte, Methoden und Ansätze im Wissensmanagement* [Implicit knowledge in organisations: Concepts, methods, and approaches in knowledge management]. Springer VS. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-93194-4

Knuf, A. (2016). *Recovery und Empowerment* [Recovery and empowerment] (5. ed.). Psychiatrie Verlag.

Kröner, S. (2020). *Empowerment und Erwachsenenbildung: Eine Studie zu Frauen aus benachteiligten sozialen Gruppen in Indien* [Empowerment and adult education. A study on women in India who belong to underprivileged groups]. [Doctoral thesis, Würzburg University]. Würzburg University Press. https://doi.org/10.25972/WUP-978-3-95826-119-8

Lima, L. C., & Guimarães, P. (2011). *European strategies in lifelong learning. A critical introduction*. Verlag Barbara Budrich. https://doi.org/10.25656/01:8283

Lima, L. C., Guimarães, P., & Touma, N. (2016). Adult learning and education policies in Germany, Portugal and Sweden: An analysis of national reports to CONFINTEA VI. In R. Egetenmeyer (Ed.), *Adult education and lifelong learning in Europe and beyond: Comparative perspectives from the 2015 Würzburg Winter School* (pp. 29-65). Peter Lang.

Lundvall, B. Å. (2016). Post Script: Innovation System Research – Where It Came From and Where It Might Go. In B. Å. Lundvall (Ed.), *The Learning Economy and the Economics of Hope* (pp. 223-266). Anthem Press.

Lupton, C. (1998). User Empowerment of Family Self-Reliance? The Family Group Conference Model. *British Journal of Social Work*, *28*(1), 107-128. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23714792

McLaughlin, K. G. (2023). *Empowerment: A critique*. Routledge.

Murray, M. J. (2013). What Happens in the Classroom Stays in the Classroom: The Limits to the Transformative Approach to Education for Political Citizenship. *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education*, 15-28. http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1016077.pdf

Nolda, S. (2015). *Einführung in die Theorie der Erwachsenenbildung* [Introduction to the theory of adult education] (3. ed.). Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

Park, J. H., Lee, K. & Dabelko-Schoeny, H. (2016). A Comprehensive Evaluation of a Lifelong Learning Program: Program 60. *International Journal of Aging & Human Development, 84*(1), 88-106. https://doi.org/10.1177/0091415016668352

Pelenc, J., Bazile, D., & Ceruti, C. (2015). Collective capability and collective agency for sustainability: A case study. *Ecological Economics*, *118*, 226-239. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2015.07.001

Polanyi, M. (1958). *Personal knowledge. Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. University of Chicago Press.

Robeyns, I. (2005). The Capability Approach: A theoretical survey. *Journal of Human Development*, *6*(1), 93-117. https://doi.org/10.1080/146498805200034266

Ruiz-Eugenio, L., Soler-Gallart, M., Racionero-Plaza, S., & Padrós, M. (2023). Dialogic literary gatherings: A systematic review of evidence to overcome social and educational inequalities. *Educational Research Review, 39*, 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2023.100534

Schulz, P. J., & Hartung, U. (2017). The Future of Health Literacy. In D. Schaeffer & J. M. Pelikan (Eds.), *Health Literacy: Forschungsstand und Perspektiven* (pp. 79-92). Hogrefe.

Seitter, W. (2016). Herausforderungen und Möglichkeitsräume eines intermediär verorteten Verbandes [Challenges and opportunities for an intermediary association]. *Hessische Blätter für Volksbildung*, *66*(2), 116-123. https://dx.doi.org/10.3278/HBV1602W_

Sen, A. (1985). Well-Being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984. *The Journal of Philosophy*, *82*(4), 169-221. https://doi.org/10.2307/2026184

Sen, A. (1992). *Inequality re-examined*. Oxford University Press.

Sen, A. (1993). Capability and Well-Being. In M. Nussbaum & A. Sen (Eds.), *The Quality of Life* (pp. 30-53). Oxford University Press.

Sen, A. (2002). Response to Commentaries. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, *37*, 78-86. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02686264

Stromquist, N. P. (2015). Women's Empowerment and Education: Linking knowledge to transformative action. *European Journal of Education*, *50*(3), 307-324. https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12137

Tellado, I. (2012). Democratic Adult Education in United States. *Social and Education History*, *1*(1), 58-77. https://doi.org/10.4471/hse.2012.03

Tellado, I. (2017). Bridges between individuals and communities: Dialogic participation fueling meaningful social engagement. *Research on Ageing and Social Policy, 5*(1), 8-31. https://doi.org/10.17583/rasp.2017.2389

UNESCO. (2016). *Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education, 2015*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245179

United Nations. (2023). *Times of crises, times of change: Science for acceleration transformation to sustainable development*. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. https://doi.org/10.18356/9789213585115

Unterhalter, E. (2019). Balancing Pessimism of the Intellect and Optimism of the Will: Some Reflections on the Capability Approach, Gender, Empowerment, and Education. In D. Clark, M. Biggeri, & A. A. Frediani (Eds.), *The capability approach, empowerment and participation: Concepts, methods and applications* (pp. 75-99). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-35230-9

Veloso, E., & Guimarães, P. (2014). Education and empowerment in later life. In B. Schmidt-Hertha, S. J. Krašovec, & M. Formosa (Eds.), *Learning across generations in Europe: Contemporary issues in older adult education* (pp. 35-45). Sense Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6209-902-9_4

von Unger, H. (2014). *Partizipative Forschung: Einführung in die Forschungspraxis* [Participatory research: Introduction to research practice]. Springer VS. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-01290-8

Wallerstein, N., & Bernstein, E. (1988). Empowerment Education: Freire's Ideas Adapted to Health Education. *Health Education Quarterly*, *15*(4), 379-394. https://doi.org/10.1177/109019818801500402