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Qualification, socialisation and/or subjectification – three international organisations’ prioritisation of the purposes of adult education and learning from the 1970s until the 2010s

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Abstract

This article examines the purposes UNESCO, OECD and EU historically have attributed to adult education and learning. The aim is to explore changes in international adult education and learning policies from the 1970s until the present day and outline how different international organisations have pushed for specific conceptualisations of what ‘adult education and learning is good for’. The analysis draws on Biesta’s domains of educational purpose to demonstrate how the functions of adult education and learning have changed as the welfare state has transformed into a neoliberal competition state. Based on an analysis of key policy documents, the article shows how each of the organisations has sought to set an agenda in line with its founding visions. UNESCO pushing for an agenda centred on subjectification and the aim of empowering the individual, but also including strong elements of both qualification and socialisation. OECD, on the other hand, having a more narrow understanding, seeing the purpose of adult education and learning as qualification for the labour market as part of a growth ideology. Finally, EU pushing both socialisation of European citizens and labour market qualifications. The analysis shows how, over the decades, adult education and learning policy has narrowed to focus on a primarily instrumental purpose, which creates new attributed meaning for both the purpose of socialisation and subjectification.

Keywords: adult education; lifelong learning; adult education policy, Biesta’s domains of educational purpose

Introduction

What is adult education and learning good for? This question is at the centre of this article, which examines how UNESCO, the OECD and the EU historically have attributed different purposes to adult education and learning¹. Since the end of the Second World War, these international organisations (today perhaps more correctly termed transnational

¹ We use the concept adult education and learning as a broad term when referring to policy across timespans and organisations, while when referring to the policy of a specific organisation at a specific time, we use the concept(s) used by that organisation at that time.

organisations as they have become policy agenda-setting organisations in their own right) have increasingly influenced the development of national adult education and learning policies through joint declarations, research and, not least, comparative surveys and assessments (see e.g. Breyer & Schemmann, 2018; Evans, 2019; Jacobi, 2009; Lee & Friedrich, 2011). Over the years, the organisations have proffered different conceptualisations of adult education and learning and what it is good for, which have spilled over into national policies and into the practices of adult educators.

In the article, we focus on how UNESCO, OECD and the EU have prioritised different purposes of adult education and learning in order to discuss the shifts in policy over time and the consequences for adult educational practices. We argue that each of the three organisations has sought to set an agenda in line with its founding visions, but over time, the OECD's growth and market ideology has become dominant, which today has resulted in a narrow instrumental purpose of adult education and learning: qualification for the labour market. We begin by positioning the article in the somewhat crowded field of studies dealing with international organisations' policies within the area. As reflected in the article's title, we draw inspiration from Biesta and his distinction between three functional domains of education: qualification, socialisation and subjectification. We therefore outline our understanding of his work before describing our methodological and analytical approach. Next, we analyse the policies of each of the three organisations and how, over time, they have attributed different educational purposes to adult education and learning. We discuss our findings before presenting our conclusions and proposing a future research agenda for the field with the potential to revitalise discussions of what adult education and learning should and could be good for.

Taking stock

The focus on the role of international organisations in research on adult education and learning is not new. Especially since the 1990s, researchers have been increasingly interested in the interplay between the policies of international organisations and national governments. As such, the growing influence of international organisations in relation to adult education and learning policy has been discussed in a wide range of studies (e.g. Centeno, 2011; Duke, 1982; Engesbak, Tønseth, Fragoso, & Lucio-Villegas, 2010; Field, 2001; Field & Schemmann, 2017; Lee & Friedrich, 2011; Rubenson, 2006). Rubenson distinguishes between three generations of adult education and learning policy: a humanistic approach in the 1970s; a strong economic focus in the late 1980s/1990s; and a softer version of the economic approach after 2000 (Engesbak et al., 2010; Rubenson, 2006). Similarly, Engesbak et al. (2010) identify five stages in the development of adult education and learning: a focus on vocational training and general education in the 1960s; a focus on cultural democracy and equality in the 1970s; on competencies and market liberalisation in the 1980s; globalisation and technological development in the 1990s; and an almost all-encompassing concept after 2000. While these studies describe developments by referring to various international organisations en masse, other studies focus on the differences between the approaches of organisations such as UNESCO on the one hand and organisations such as the OECD, the EU and the World Bank on the other hand (e.g. Milana, 2012), typically stressing the economic approach of the latter compared to the former's more humanistic focus. Another group of studies focus mainly or solely on a single organisation, such as UNESCO (e.g. Lee & Friedrich, 2011; Preece, 2011), the OECD (e.g. Duke, 1982) or the EU (e.g. Cort, 2008; Holford, Milana, & Špolar, 2014). However, in an article from 2001, Field warns against an overly simplistic understanding of the changes, stating: 'Lifelong learning was never

intrinsically a particularly radical concept, nor is it a particularly conservative project in the contemporary context. Its fate displays at least as many continuities as discontinuities' (Field, 2001, p. 3). In addition, the different international organisations have also inspired each other in their policies towards adult education and learning over the lifespan (Centeno, 2011).

In this article, we follow in the wake of the previous studies by examining the policies of the OECD, UNESCO, and the EC/EU from the 1970s until the present day, explicitly adding to the discussion of what adult education and learning is good for by drawing inspiration from Biesta. In our opinion, it is important to revive this discussion in a climate that calls for radical answers to radical changes. To this end, we combine our own analysis and existing research to highlight the (unsurprising) fact that adult education and learning can and should play a(nother) role in today's international policyscapes. By applying Biesta's distinction between three functional domains of educational purpose, we are able to shed light on the different purposes ascribed to adult education and learning in the three organisations' policies.

Three domains of educational purpose

Since the mid-2000s, Biesta has pushed a research agenda to reinstate a democratic discussion concerning the purpose of education (Biesta, 2005, 2006, 2013, 2016, 2020). In his critique of the concept of learning, he has drawn attention to how it tends to render invisible important questions about educational content, purpose and relationship (Biesta, 2005, 2016, 2020). In his inaugural address as a professor at the University of Stirling, he advocated for a discussion about 'good education' (Biesta, 2009), offering a functional framework for this discussion through three domains of education: qualification, socialisation and subjectification. In his later work, he has elaborated on these domains, specifying that they constitute three domains of educational *purpose* (Biesta, 2020), which are intricately linked

and where overlaps are inevitable. However, as analytical categories, it is useful to ‘tease them out’.

Qualification is about the provision of knowledge, skills and understandings that enable the individual to do something. This can involve preparing individuals for entry to the labour market – or ensuring they can stay there – but it can also involve providing them with the knowledge and skills they need to take active part in a democratic society. As such, there is always socialisation going on. Socialisation is about becoming ‘part of particular social, cultural and political ‘orders’ (Biesta, 2016, p. 20) — we would add ‘economic orders’. Socialisation can both be the explicit aim of an educational activity and an ‘unintended’ result. According to Biesta, education will therefore always lead to some kind of socialisation. The third domain, subjectification, is about becoming a subject in one’s own right. In a recent article (2020), Biesta provides further clarification of this domain since it – in his opinion – has been mistakenly understood as ‘identity’ or ‘personality’. Subjectification is about making individuals ‘more autonomous and independent in their thinking’ (Biesta, 2016, p. 22), and thus equipping them to navigate the world from inner values. Subjectification is about freedom: the freedom to choose whether or not to act (Biesta, 2020). This is a normative (and in our opinion idealistic and humanistic) conceptualisation of subjectification that to some extent seems to set this domain apart from those of qualification and socialisation. We suggest that subjectification could also be an unintended result of the other domains as subjects are always in the process of becoming within a cultural and structural framework where ideals about the ‘good student’, ‘the good learner’ and ‘the good citizen’ tend to become internalised. So perhaps we need to distinguish between, on the one hand, cultural and political ideals that contribute to a ‘conditioned’ subjectification that overlaps the purpose of socialisation inscribed in education systems and policies, and, on the other hand, the

transgression of such reproductive ideals in a Biestaean understanding (Biesta, 2012).

According to Biesta, interruption, suspension and sustenance are three central components required of an education ‘that takes subjectification seriously’ (Biesta, 2020, p. 98). However, if subjectification is to be used as an analytical concept through which shifts in adult education and learning policies can be identified, we need to make it responsive to the meanings it is ascribed in policies.

In our analysis, we draw on Biesta’s distinctions between the three domains in order to shed light on the purposes ascribed to adult education and learning by the three international organisations.

Methodology

Our analysis of the purposes ascribed to adult education and learning in the policies of the three organisations builds on a qualitative analysis of key policy documents published from the 1970s until the present day. By key policy documents, we refer to those policy documents that have influenced adult education and learning policy in Europe and which have been central to transnational policy agenda setting. The original documents included in the analysis are listed below:

Table 1: Original documents included in analysis

UNESCO	Learning to be (1972) The development of Adult Education. Aspects and Trends (1985) Learning: The treasure within (1996)
OECD	Recurrent education: A strategy for lifelong learning (1973) Recurrent education revisited (1987) Education and the economy in a changing society (1989)

	<p>Lifelong learning for all: meeting of the Education Committee at ministerial level, 16-17 January (1996)</p> <p>Literacy skills for the knowledge society (1997)</p> <p>Literacy in the information age (2000)</p> <p>Beyond rhetoric: Adult learning policies and practices (2003)</p> <p>Policy brief – Lifelong learning (2004)</p> <p>The potential of online learning for adults (2013)</p>
EEC/EU	<p>For a Community policy on education (1973)</p> <p>Growth, competitiveness, employment (1994)</p> <p>White paper on education and training (1995)</p> <p>Presidency conclusion. Lisbon European Council (2000)</p> <p>A memorandum on Lifelong Learning (2000)</p> <p>Education and training 2010 (2003)</p> <p>A strategic framework for European Cooperation in Education and training (ET2020) (2009)</p> <p>Declaration on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom (2015)</p> <p>Adult Learning and COVID-19 (2020)</p>

In addition, documents referred to by other authors and in prior studies have been included in the analysis as secondary sources.

Our reading of the policy documents is informed by Biesta’s domains of educational purpose in order to establish which functions (i.e. qualification, socialisation and subjectification) the organisations prioritise in their policies. As such, our analytical approach can be characterised as what Kvale & Brinkmann (2015) describe as a theoretical interpretation of text. Biesta’s concepts have been used as the analytical strategy to identify how the organisations ascribe purpose to adult education and learning through their conceptualisations.

As we have not had access to unpublished data, our analysis is restricted to public documents found mainly on the Internet. However, in our view these documents can be considered valid indicators of the actual policy as formulated and justified.

The following analysis is structured around the individual organisations, following a chronological logic for each organisation.

The purpose of adult education and learning – according to UNESCO, the OECD and the EU

The understanding that education and learning are not only relevant during childhood and adolescence, but also in adulthood, did not originate in the 1970s, dating back to the early 20th century. However, it was the subject of renewed interest in the 1960s and onwards, with adult education and learning subsumed into discussions about ‘learning for life’. Economic and political ideas about adults’ learning after initial education began to resurface during the 1960s (Barros, 2012). Initially, UNESCO and the OECD were especially active in defining the purposes of adult education and learning.

UNESCO – subjectification at the centre of adult education and learning policies

In order to understand the purposes ascribed to adult education and learning by UNESCO, we have to keep in mind why the organisation was established and for what reason. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) was established shortly after the Second World War (WW2) in 1945 as part of the United Nations. According to Titmus (1999), the aim of curbing nationalism meant that UNESCO was born with a focus on education for critical citizenship, and Elfert (2013) describes how the founders of the UNESCO Institute for Education, which was to become an important actor with regard to lifelong education, ‘emphasised the value of the human being’ (p. 268). Hence,

an understanding of the dignity of the individual was established as a central value and consequently subjectification in the Biestaean sense was perceived as the core purpose of adult education and learning. Education, it was suggested, should play a role in fostering an independent citizen who would ‘realize his own potential and take share in the building of his own future’ (Faure et al., 1972, p. vi). The aim of the organisation, according to its constitution, was

... to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion (UNESCO, 1945).

More specifically, the constitution highlighted ‘the free flow of ideas’, popular education and ‘the spread of culture’, as well as the maintenance, increase and diffusion of knowledge in a broad understanding.

Already in 1949, UNESCO held its first international conference on adult education (CONFINTEA I). Adult education was here equated with liberal adult education, while vocational training, for instance, was not included (Titmus, 1999). This focus on education for life (rather than for work), continued to characterise UNESCO’s policy during subsequent decades.

According to Lee and Friedrich (2011), during these first decades, UNESCO’s policy for adult education was mainly influenced by social democratic liberalism, but also contained aspects of classical liberalism, as well as Marxism. In the 1970s, UNESCO was active in promoting what they called lifelong education, most famously in ‘Learning to be’, produced

by a commission headed by the former French education minister Edgar Faure (Faure et al., 1972). With this publication, UNESCO continued to set a humanistic direction for lifelong education, focusing on the ‘fulfilment of man’ (Faure et al., 1972; Field, 2001), which in Biestaean terms means placing an idea of subjectification at the centre of education. In addition to the Faure Report, UNESCO published numerous other papers on adult education (Rivera, 1983). In 1976, UNESCO broadened its understanding of adult education to include vocational training in the definition (Titmus, 1999). In its draft recommendation on the development of adult education in 1976, UNESCO provided a broad understanding of the purposes of adult education that included all three purposes in ‘the two-fold perspective of full personal development and participation in balanced and independent social, economic and cultural development’ (UNESCO, 1976, p. 346). Despite its focus on vocational training, there was still a broad understanding of the purpose of adult education and learning that went beyond providing qualifications for the labour market. In this document, UNESCO further called for each nation to ‘recognize adult education as a necessary and specific component of its educational system and as a permanent element in its social, cultural and economic development policy’ (UNESCO, 1976, p. 113), thus also including economic aims.

The broad understanding of the purposes of adult education and learning seen in previous publications continued in the working documents for CONFINTEA IV, which took place in 1985. Education was treated as a right of the individual, and adult education was perceived as a way to make access to education more democratic by reaching out to those groups in society who received little education as children and young people. Not surprisingly, this approach meant that combating illiteracy played a significant role in the text (UNESCO, 1985).

According to Lee and Friedrich (2011), the increased influence of radical Marxist ideology in the UNESCO policy led to a crisis for UNESCO, resulting in the loss of both members and political power during the 1980s. However, with the report 'Learning: the Treasure within' (Delors, 1996) from the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, headed by the former president of the European Commission Jacques Delors, UNESCO attempted to reassert its position within international adult education policy (Lee & Friedrich, 2011). In the foreword to the report, Delors stressed the importance of education for personal and social development, and for fostering '...a deeper and more harmonious form of human development and thereby to reduce poverty, ignorance, oppression and war' (Delors, 1996, p. 11), thus highlighting the purposes of socialisation and subjectification. The report further stated that '...all-out economic growth can no longer be viewed as the ideal way of reconciling material progress with equity, respect for human conditions and respect for natural assets...' (p. 13). UNESCO thereby continued to promote a radical understanding of the purposes of adult education and learning, which perceived education as a means of empowerment and societal change. Adult education and learning was to change the world: 'the Enlightenment belief in progress, the full development of the human potential, and the ability of human beings to change their world' (Elfert, 2015, p. 91) was at the centre of the organisation's policy. Nevertheless, UNESCO did not entirely neglect the qualification aspect of education. Education for economic aims was also present in UNESCO's understanding of the purpose of adult education after CONFINTEA V in 1997, the aim being:

to develop the autonomy and the sense of responsibility of people and communities, to reinforce the capacity to deal with the transformations taking place in the economy, in culture and in society as a whole, and to promote co-

existence, tolerance and the informed and creative participation of citizens in their communities; in short to enable people and communities to take control of their destiny and society in order to face the challenges ahead (UNESCO, 1997, p. 4).

But qualification was understood in a broad sense, referring to qualifications for both work and life in general, not a narrow learning for earning. However, with the rising tides of neoliberalism, where a market and a human capital ideology of education were to become increasingly influential globally, UNESCO's more balanced outlook no longer set the agenda. As such, the belief that adult education should serve several purposes, but with the individual – and especially those individuals who struggled to access the education system – was increasingly sidelined. In 2006, Rubenson concluded: 'With UNESCO, at best, only reluctantly promoting a vague idea of a humanistic inspired paradigm of lifelong learning, today's policy debates are almost exclusively driven by the OECD paradigm of lifelong learning and with the EU as its prophet' (p. 167). Elfert (2015) argues that the UNESCO concept of lifelong learning is 'at odds with today's utilitarian view of education' (p. 88), whereas Breyer and Schemmann (2018) point at a tendency towards harmonisation of adult education policy across international organisations. However, looking into the UNESCO policy it is perhaps less radical in its visions today than in the 1970s, but it still promotes a more balanced policy for adult education and learning in which all three domains of educational purpose are prioritised. Not least in the network of learning cities, which connects to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, attributes a greater purpose to adult education and learning than mere qualification for work (UIL, 2017).

OECD – qualification in the logic of human capital

Like UNESCO, the OECD has roots dating back to the period shortly after WW2 with the establishment of the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), an organisation established to administer the Marshall Plan. In 1960, the OEEC was transformed into the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Istance, 2011). According to the convention signed in Paris December 1960, the aim of the OECD was to promote policies designed:

- (a) to achieve the highest sustainable economic growth and employment and a rising standard of living in Member countries, while maintaining financial stability, and thus to contribute to the development of the world economy;
- (b) to contribute to sound economic expansion in Member as well as non-member countries in the process of economic development; and
- (c) to contribute to the expansion of world trade on a multilateral, non-discriminatory basis in accordance with international obligations (OECD, 1960).

Among the more specific focus points in the convention was the promotion of vocational training. It should thus come as no surprise that adult education and learning in OECD policy has from the beginning been closely linked to the economy rather than to cultural aspects, and hence to the purpose of qualification for the labour market rather than socialisation and/or subjectification.

In the late 1960s, the Swedish Minister of Education Olof Palme promoted the concept of ‘recurrent education’, presenting it to the Conference of European Ministers of Education (Centeno, 2011; Duke, 1982). His successor as Swedish Minister of Education, Ingvar

Carlsson, later presented the following reasons for recurrent education at an OECD conference on policies for educational growth:

... first in order to achieve a more equitable distribution of educational resources between the younger and the older generations; second in order to reduce the gap between theory and practice and between worker and student. An additional benefit would consist in the moderation of the educational demand from the younger generation (cited from Duke, 1982, p. 324).

In 1973, the OECD launched a strategy for recurrent education (Kallen & Bengtsson, 1973)². The report stated that educational expansion had not led to a decline in social inequalities. It was assumed that recurrent education could help reduce the gap in educational opportunities between the older and younger generations resulting from the expansion of education. Adult education and learning was perceived from a 'second chance' perspective, adding an element of equal distribution of education among generations. In the strategy, the focus was mainly on 'manpower planning and the demands of the employers' (Duke, 1982, p. 325), but also on aspects of socialisation into a democratic society.

² In spite of a significant interest in the principle of recurrent education by many OECD member countries in the 1970s, according to Schütze and Instance (1987), the barriers preventing a full-scale adoption of the principle were huge, not least in light of the economic crises in the 1970s and 1980s that replaced the widespread optimism of the 1960s. Nevertheless, elements of recurrent education were implemented in the 1970s and 1980s, especially in the Nordic and developed socialist countries (Tuijnman, 1991). In light of economic challenges, including widespread youth unemployment, qualification for the labour market gained increased attention at the expense of other purposes of adult education. Studies of the implementation of 'recurrent education', however, point at the dominance of vocationally oriented education programmes with a direct skills and employment orientation by the end of the 1980s (Tuijnman, 1991).

However, from the 1980s, the OECD approach to adult education and learning would become more narrowly focused on the economy and the needs of the labour market. This is for instance evident in a report prepared for CERI/OECD by Schütze and Instance (1987), focusing on recurrent education in relation to labour market needs and on the economy in relation to recurrent education. In his opening statement to the Intergovernmental Conference on Education and the Economy in a Changing Society in 1988, the Secretary General of the OECD, J.-C. Paye, stressed the importance of education systems as the key to 'possible progress and that they determine each country's medium- and long-term prospects in world competition' (OECD, 1989, p. 7). The OECD, thus, was influenced by economic theories on the correlation between education (Becker, 1975) and the economy and how the competitiveness of nation-states is influenced by investment in national institutions (Porter, 1985). In this way, education was to become a – if not the - central parameter in global economic competition (foreshadowing Tony Blair's famous mantra: education, education, education). Meanwhile, socialisation was not entirely absent from Paye's address, as one of his statements shows:

Whether it is aimed at young people or adults, education has to prepare the individual for the changes that life will prescribe. It must make him aware of his historical and cultural roots; its object must be to make him better established in his social environment.

Education which was geared narrowly and exclusively to preparing for the exercise of a particular trade would fail to fulfil its true purpose (OECD, 1989, p. 7).

The OECD thus also included at least one of the two other domains of educational purpose in their policy, but as is apparent, in a less radical vision than that espoused by UNESCO. With the aims of social reproduction and individual adaptability to the social world, including the market economy, OECD's agenda was more conservative and with a

view to maintaining the existing social order. In the part of the publication dealing specifically with adult education and learning, however, the focus was on further education and training, i.e. qualification. Again, the educational purposes of socialisation and subjectification were mentioned, but only in a subordinate clause before the rest of the chapter continued the focus on qualification for the labour market until the conclusion where, once again, adult education for other purposes than qualification was briefly mentioned.

In the early 1990s, there was again increasing interest in adult education in some form of recurrent activity as an educational strategy among policymakers, resulting in the OECD education ministers' adoption of the 'Lifelong Learning for All' policy framework. In the report 'Lifelong Learning for all' (1996), the OECD stressed the importance of lifelong learning for 'promoting employment, economic development, democracy and social cohesion in the years ahead' (p. 13), emphasising once again the relationship between education and the economy, but also the importance of education for democracy and social cohesion.

Two years earlier, the OECD, in cooperation with nine member countries, had carried out the first international large-scale assessment of adult competences (the International Adult Literacy Survey – IALS). The first results of the survey covering seven of the participating countries were published in 1995 (OECD, 2000). In 1997, a second report was published, now with eleven countries participating. In the editorial to this second report, the aim of the survey was explicitly described as being 'to encourage the development of policies to raise skill levels' (OECD, 1997, p. 3). As such, the focus was on qualification in a narrower sense than in Biesta's understanding, i.e. only for work. The final report on the survey was presented in 2000, with nine additional countries taking part. There remained a significant focus on education for economic growth and qualification for the labour market: 'The results confirm

the importance of skills for the effective functioning of labour markets and for the economic success and social advancement of both individuals and societies' (OECD, 2000, p. iii).

In a document from 2003, the OECD defined adult education as: '...all education and training activities undertaken by adults for professional or personal reasons. It includes general, vocational and enterprise based training with a lifelong learning perspective' (p. 8).

In addition, the OECD explicitly mentioned as important aspects of lifelong learning:

'Learning for private, social and/or recreational purposes or for reasons not directly related to work' (p. 25). However, the OECD policy still perceived qualification for the labour market as the main purpose of adult education. In explaining why adult education and learning is important, focus was therefore on the development of human capital. Outlining the advantages of lifelong learning for the individual in a policy brief in 2004, the OECD again mentioned other aspects of life than work, but again only in passing, with far more attention given to the benefits related to work and the economy (OECD, 2004). The main objective of lifelong learning in the OECD's publications during the 2000s, as in previous years, was qualification of the labour force, rooted in a human capital understanding of education (see e.g. Istance, 2011).

In the 2010s, the OECD took its interest in adult education and learning a step further. Following up on IALS and an Adult Literacy and Lifeskills survey (ALL) from the 2000s, the OECD developed a study of adult competences resembling the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). This study (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies – PIAAC) was launched in 2011 and has since been carried out in more than 40 countries/economies. The first report from the programme was published in 2013. In the foreword to the report, the relevance of an international assessment of adult competences was described as follows: 'Governments need a clear picture not only of how markets and

economies are changing, but of the extent to which their citizens are equipping themselves with the skills demanded in the 21st century...’ (OECD, 2013, p. 3). Hereby, qualification becomes the purpose of education, subordinating socialisation as a means of ensuring that people commit to lifelong learning. It also creates an ideal of subjectification as an active lifelong learner, but in an instrumental perspective, not the transgressive subjectification described by Biesta (2012).

EEC/EU – socialisation and qualification as active European lifelong learners

While in the 1960s and especially the 1970s UNESCO and the OECD were both active players in reformulating adult education and learning into policies stressing the importance of being able to return to education and training throughout life, the European Economic Community (EEC) played a more subdued role. The Commission of the European Communities commissioned a number of reports on the EEC’s role in regard to education and training (Dahrendorf, 1973; Janne, 1973) which became important ‘in paving the way for a Lifelong Learning strategy 25 years later’ (Cort, 2009, p. 93), but was otherwise not (able to be) very active in relation to education and training. The Commission had actively pushed for the EEC to play a role in educational matters since the 1960s, but only had a mandate to work within the policy area of vocational training, which was included in the Treaty of Rome (Cort, 2009; Pépin, 2007).

In the 1990s, what was now the EU became a more active player in the field. With the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty, the Member States agreed to include general education as a policy area – although under the principle of subsidiarity. This became the turning point for the EU’s role in formulating a common lifelong learning policy (Cort, 2009).

In 1994, the European Commission published a white paper on growth, competitiveness and employment (CEC, 1994). In the preamble to this white paper, education

and skills were seen as among Europe's assets; they just needed to 'be exploited'. As a means to combat increasing unemployment, lifelong learning was promoted as one of the pillars on which the national employment situation rested. In this perspective, lifelong learning was closely related to the needs of the labour market.

A year later, the Commission published another white paper, titled 'Teaching and learning. Towards the learning society' (CEC, 1995). In the introduction, socialisation and subjectification were broached in the form of 'self-awareness, belonging, advancement and self-fulfilment' (p. 2). It was further explicitly stated, that:

To examine education and training in the context of employment does not mean reducing them simply to a means of obtaining qualifications. The essential aim of education and training has always been personal development and the successful integration of Europeans into society through the sharing of common values, the passing on of cultural heritage and the teaching of self-reliance (p. 3, bold in original).

The idea of creating a European identity through education had been implemented through mobility programmes for students, teachers and professionals at all levels of the education system. Socialisation was (and still is) an undercurrent in the Commission's interest in creating a sense of being a European citizen among member states' populations and in social cohesion. This focus on socialisation, however, was to become subordinate to a narrow understanding of qualification as the purpose of (adult) education, with lifelong learning in EU policy papers from the 1990s focused primarily on qualification for the labour market

(e.g. Griffin, 1999)³. To be a European citizen meant to become an ‘active lifelong learner’ who is flexible and mobile in an ever-changing labour market.

In the 2000s, lifelong learning (and eventually lifelong guidance) became a common policy to be pursued by the Member States and for which the Community would start to develop indicators and a framework for biennial evaluations. In March 2000, the European Council met in Lisbon to discuss a strategy for employment, economic reforms and social cohesion. In the conclusions from this meeting, it was stated that:

Europe’s education and training systems need to adapt both to the demands of the knowledge society and to the need for an improved level and quality of employment. They will have to offer learning and training opportunities tailored to target groups at different stages of their lives: young people, unemployed adults and those in employment who are at risk of seeing their skills overtaken by rapid change (EC, 2000, article 25).

Education and training (of adults) were thus at the forefront of the policy recommendations, but with a focus on qualification. In October of the same year, after further meetings, the European Commission published a ‘Memorandum on Lifelong Learning’ (CEC, 2000). In the memorandum, lifelong learning was linked to the European employment strategy and defined as ‘all purposeful learning activity, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence’ (p. 3). By focusing on knowledge,

³ The EU’s understanding of lifelong learning encompasses education and learning from ‘cradle to grave’, and adult education is thus no longer the policy’s exclusive focus (Holford et al., 2014). To some extent, it becomes everything and then diffusely nothing.

skills and competences, and linking lifelong learning to the employment strategy, the EU signalled an almost exclusive purpose of narrow qualification for the labour market. The purpose of socialisation was still present in the memorandum, with the EU calling for the promotion of an active citizenship. However, it was through their active participation in the labour market that European citizens were to be included rather than through democratic citizenship. As such, the dominant purpose was qualification for the labour market and being an active citizen was to take part in lifelong learning activities as a means of staying employable. The educational purposes of socialisation and subjectification were thus indirectly subordinated to the economy, as indicated in the following quote: ‘Today, a noticeable shift towards more integrated policies that combine social and cultural objectives with the economic rationale for lifelong learning is taking place’ (p. 9)

The meeting in Lisbon and following meetings, as well as the memorandum, laid out the agenda for EU policy in relation to (adult) education for the rest of the decade, with a clear focus on lifelong learning to secure a qualified European labour force. At a meeting in the European Parliament in April 2001, the European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities described lifelong learning as a horizontal objective of the employment strategy and emphasised the role of education for adults to ‘improve their employability, adaptability and skills as well as their participation in the knowledge based society’ (European Parliament, 2001).

Following consultation in the Member States, the definition of lifelong learning was enhanced to include more aspects of human life than work. Nevertheless, the policy remained largely focused on qualification, and to a lesser extent socialisation into the right kind of European citizen: the ‘active citizen’, taking responsibility for their own lifelong learning process (Cort, Mariager-Anderson, & Thomsen, 2017; Jackson, 2013). In a Communication

from the Commission in 2003 (CEC, 2003), following up on the initiatives taken to implement lifelong learning in the Member States, qualification as investment in human capital played a significant role. In highlighting the need for further reforms, it was thus stated that: ‘...the development of human capital is a prerequisite for the promotion of growth in the EU, notably with increased investment in education and a better integration with social policies and employment’ (p. 6).

The EU in 2009 replaced its ‘Education and training 2010’ programme with a new ‘Education and training 2020’ programme that defined the EU policy for the 2020s (EC, 2009). The aim of the programme, as stated in the beginning of the communication, was twofold: On the one hand ensuring ‘the personal, social and professional fulfilment of all citizens’ and on the other securing ‘sustainable economic prosperity and employability, whilst promoting democratic values, social cohesion, active citizenship, and intercultural dialogue’ (p. 3). The focus was thus on all three functional purposes of education; however, closer scrutiny of the strategic objectives reveals that qualification and the needs of the economy receive highest priority. In terms of citizenship education, there is a shift from a focus on creating a European identity to fighting radicalism during the 2010s (EU, 2015).

Adult education policy in Europe in the 2020s continues the trend from the 2000s, with an overwhelming dominance of qualification as the purpose of adult education and learning, with socialisation and especially subjectification only referred to in subordinate clauses and introductory remarks.

Different founding visions, different purposes of adult education and learning

When examining the policies of the three organisations using Biesta’s concepts, it is not surprising that the purposes ascribed to adult education and learning vary across the

organisations, reflecting their founding values. UNESCO's policy is centred on a humanistic perspective, emphasising education as a human right but also an important aspect of emancipation. UNESCO's policy evolves around the individual and adult education as a right to overcome social inequalities. The purpose of subjectification is central as a means to empower the individual. The purposes of socialisation and qualification are also present, but with a focus on education as a human right and aimed at reducing inequalities. The aim is to change societies to overcome poverty and inequalities and in this sense, UNESCO perceives education as an emancipatory practice with the ability to radically change not only the individual, but whole societies. The OECD's adult education and learning policy is centred on the purpose of qualification and the idea of economic growth leading to more prosperous societies and hence to an overall higher standard of living. Socialisation and subjectification are subordinated to the growth ideology and hence the purpose of qualification, but qualification in a narrow instrumental sense of qualification for work.

Tuijnman (1991) highlights the difference between UNESCO's lifelong education policy and the OECD's focus on recurrent education as:

Models of lifelong education have tended to emphasize the extension of educational provision into adult life as a basic human right, whereas models of recurrent education have paid more attention to the degree of correspondence among the goals and functions of education and work. (p. 19).

Despite later using the same concept – lifelong learning – UNESCO still had (and still has) a distinctly different approach to adult education and learning than the OECD (and the EU). Although both the OECD and UNESCO have focused on those with the lowest levels of education, their approaches differ. While UNESCO argues from a democratic point of view, highlighting education as a human right that ought to be more equally distributed, the OECD

argues from an economic point of view and points not only to the role of nation states in offering educational opportunities, but also expects individuals to be motivated for education. From a human capital point of view, the individual benefits from investment in education and therefore needs to be actively engaged in educational activities; i.e., they not only have a right, but also a duty to education.

The EU also draws inspiration from its founding visions when developing its adult education and learning policy. The purpose of socialisation is central in the EU's push for a common European education and training policy, with the establishment of a sense of European identity among the citizens of the Member States a driving force. However, during the 1990s the EU seemed to adopt the OECD conceptualisation of lifelong learning and its emphasis on investment in human capital as a prerequisite for global competitiveness. The EU is to some extent caught between the fundamental vision of creating a common market and an 'ever closer union' in its adult education policy. In this sense, we add to Rubenson's (2006) distinction between (only) two different approaches to adult education and learning: a mainly humanitarian approach put forward by UNESCO that argues for the importance of socialisation and subjectification; and a human capital approach proposed by the OECD that focuses on qualification. We argue that the EU develops a third approach, which attempts to balance the purposes of socialisation and qualification, but also a policy that is to some extent more responsive to emerging societal problems such as radicalisation or crises such as COVID19 as the EU, through its legal framework, can push for new policies (see e.g. EC, 2020). However, we agree that the UNESCO policy differs from the policies of the OECD and the EU in the sense that it is much more humanistic and idealistic, focusing on the right to adult education and on adult education as a means in itself, whereas the OECD and EU policies take a technical-rational approach. In line with many other researchers (e.g. Barros,

2012; Boshier, 2012), we see the economic crisis in the late 1970s/early 1980s and the gradual rise of a neoliberal economic and ideological paradigm (e.g. Cerny, 1997, 2020; Harvey, 2005) as a lever for the dominance of the OECD's conceptualisation of the purpose of adult education and learning during the 1990s. Since the 1990s, all three organisations have adhered to the concept of lifelong learning when developing adult education and learning policy (Field, 2001).

The ability of the three organisations to influence the adult education and learning agenda has also changed since the 1970s in favour of the OECD, which has also become more influential when it comes to studies related to adult education (Rubenson & Elfert, 2019). Jacobi and Martens (2007) describe the OECD as the 'grey eminence' in international education policy. While a humanistic approach to adult education and learning focusing on socialisation and subjectification lived side by side with a human capital approach focusing on qualification in the early years – or to use Aspin and Chapman's (2007) wording, a 'triadic' nature of lifelong learning – since the 1990s, qualification has become the almost sole purpose of adult education and learning policy, subordinating socialisation and subjectification to an instrumental perception of adult education. Both the EU and the OECD mention aspects that can be interpreted as subjectification, but as an ideal of the active lifelong learner who develops throughout life in accordance with the needs of the labour market rather than an ideal of emancipation and self-determination. This is different ideal that Biesta probably would not perceive as 'subjectification', but in the competition state (Cerny, 2020; Pedersen, 2011), the ideal subject is no longer the critical citizen but the opportunistic and employable lifelong learner (Pedersen, 2011). According to Walker (2009), even when advocating for 'inclusion', the OECD has a focus on socialising the individual into a 'worthy' citizen, who contributes to the national economy. As such, it remains embedded in a

neoliberal understanding with a focus on the entrepreneurial individual:

...inclusion in and through lifelong learning is often issued as a moral quasi-religious imperative to activate individuals to undertake their citizenry duty to learn and, in doing so, adopt certain values, behaviours and personality traits [...] a worthy citizen is constructed as having a moral imperative to engage in learning to help their country grow in terms of GDP, to prevent the need for a broad social welfare system and to avert widespread social exclusion (p. 336).

The gradual shift that has taken place from the 1970s until today has not only changed the purpose ascribed to adult education and learning in policy. It has also changed the ideal of the 'good citizen' and instilled a less radical understanding of the purpose of adult education and learning than originally envisioned by UNESCO. Today, adult education and learning has become a matter of supporting the market economy by providing the necessary supply of skills to meet the demands of the labour market. In this perspective, adult education and learning is about social reproduction, and subjectification is about maximising one's profit through investment in one's own skills.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis presented above, we can conclude that in the 1960s and 1970s, the concepts of recurrent education and lifelong education underlined the importance of supporting adults' participation in education and training throughout their lives.

The three international organisations developed their policies based on their own founding visions. UNESCO saw lifelong education as a radical concept through which the individual develops the capacity to think critically and challenge existing economic and social structures. Lifelong education should offer adults possibilities of partaking in emancipatory democratic

processes through which they gain an insight into society and not least into themselves as human beings. In UNESCO's approach during this period, education was about creating a fairer and more equal society. However, UNESCO lost influence in the Western world during the 1990s and it was the OECD with its focus on the link between human capital and growth that came to influence both international and national adult education and learning policies. This approach is more concerned with a narrow purpose of qualification for work. Lifelong learning, in this perspective, is about skills and about up- or reskilling the labour force to meet labour market needs. Learning is for work and no longer a right but a duty. The EU has largely adopted the OECD's adult education and learning policies, although ideas of democratic citizenship and self-fulfilment remain a rhetoric undercurrent. The main purpose of adult education has become qualification, subordinating other purposes to neoliberal ideals of expanding the market economy and creating subjects who are entrepreneurial, competitive and adaptable to labour market needs. The ideal citizen is not one who challenges the existing order, but who contributes to the survival of the competition state. There is little transformative potential in this conceptualisation and it is a far cry from Biesta's understanding of subjectification as 'freedom'. Adult education and learning is a support function for a labour market demanding flexible workers. In our opinion, this calls for a research community that raises awareness of a broader understanding of the purposes of adult education and learning, not least the potential of adult education and learning as a radical practice. Adult education and learning still needs to address inequality and power relations and support political struggles for 'a better world for all' (Barros, 2012; Johnston, 1999). We hereby reveal our normative stance towards the emancipatory role of adult education and learning, as described by Freire (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010) and very much in line with Biesta and his understanding of subjectification as an emancipatory practice.

Today, the Corona pandemic has to some degree rekindled political interest in adult education and learning as a way to support workers during the pandemic (OECD, 2020). However, we would argue that there are other 'pandemics' that call for adult education and

learning to serve as a critical and democratising motor, such as neo-nationalism and the role of social media in propagating fake news and creating echo chambers dividing people. How can adult education and learning provide ways to support democratic debate and develop a critical stance among people enabling them to decode political spin/demagogy and social media, which seem to be a sometimes poisonous combination? In our efforts to answer such questions, we ought to start by investigating the movements that demonstrate resistance to the dominant discourses of learning as an instrument for the labour market and work for a sustainable future (English & Mayo, 2021; Tett & Hamilton, 2019). People engage in adult education and learning in many different contexts and for many different purposes. Climate change has given rise to movements in which new ideals of subjectification arise, transcending even a humanistic ideal by recognising that humans are interdependent and dependent on the Earth and other creatures (Worldwatch, 2017). Further, there are still educational traditions in which education serves all three purposes: popular education is still widespread and offers activities with functions other than pure qualification. Instead of a sole (dystopic) focus on the top-down aspects of adult education and learning, as researchers we need to actively engage with grassroots communities and focus on the bottom-up activities and their embedded emancipatory potential, raising the question of what adult education and learning should and could be good for.

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