



Can Adult Education Become a Sphere of Empowerment?

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ECER Plus (online): Education in a Changing World: The impact of global realities on the prospects and experiences of educational research
1st- 10th September 2022





Outline

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- Theoretical considerations
- Data and methodology
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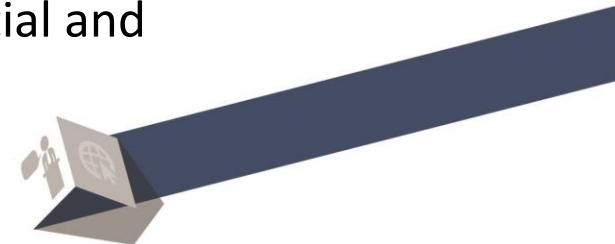
Introduction (1)

Background

- ❑ There has recently been growing research interest in going beyond the instrumental and economised understanding of adult and lifelong education and learning and focusing on its empowerment potential (eg. Baily, 2011; Tett, 2018).
- ❑ Attempts have also been made to provide a more comprehensive view of the mission and roles adult education (AE) serves by revealing its substantial transformative power at individual and societal levels (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021).
- ❑ Policy documents have been published which acknowledge the complexity of adult educational goals and the contributions made to individual and societal development, and also explicitly emphasise the emancipatory role which lifelong learning can play (eg. UNESCO, 2016).

However,

- ❑ More research is needed in order to better conceptualise and empirically demonstrate the complexity of the empowerment potential and implementation of AE in different socio-cultural contexts.





Introduction (2)

Aims:

- 1) *to outline a theoretical framework for conceptualising the role of AE in individual empowerment from a capability approach perspective; &*
- 2) *to provide some empirical evidence about how AE can contribute to individuals' empowerment.*

Main thesis:

Adult education is a distinct sphere of empowerment:

- ✓ at the individual level and from a capability approach perspective, empowerment in the sphere of AE and through the acquired AE is a process of expanding both agency and capabilities, enabling individuals to gain power over their environment as they strive for their own well-being and a just social order;
- ✓ AE as a process and as a result become a factor of empowerment;
- ✓ empowerment through AE should be carried out with individuals, not imposed on them from 'above' structures and institutions; &
- ✓ the empowerment role of AE is embedded in the available opportunity structures.





Theoretical considerations (1)

Empowerment as a contested concept

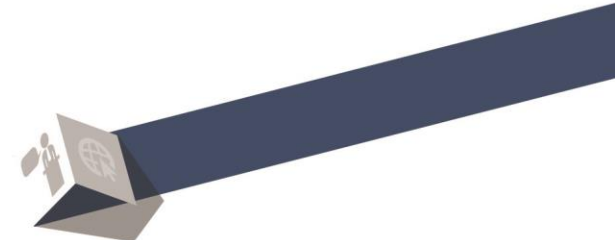
- ❑ Many studies have emphasised that the notion of empowerment is inherently complex and open to many interpretations, that there are internal contradictions in this concept, and that it remains under-theorised and contested (eg. Monkman, 2011; Pruijt & Yerkes, 2014).
- ❑ Some of the problems and confusion which prevent our understanding of empowerment arise from the fact that its “root-concept – power – is itself disputed” (Rowlands, 1995, p. 101).
- ❑ Unterhalter (2019, p. 86) outlines “that empowerment as a concept can be deployed in multiple ways.”
- ❑ In a comprehensive review of works on empowerment, Ibrahim and Alkire (2007) systematize 29 understandings of the concept of empowerment used in the period 1991–2006.
- ❑ It should be emphasized that “although different kinds of empowerment may be interconnected, empowerment is domain specific” (Ibrahim & Alkire 2007, p. 383).





Theoretical considerations (2)

Theorising the relationship between empowerment and education

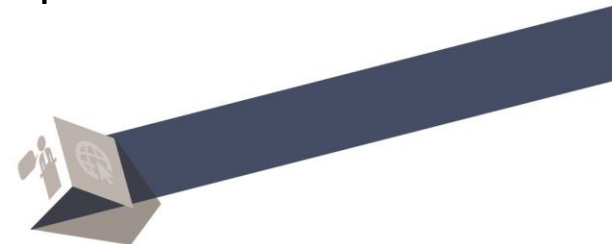
- ❑ As Unterhalter (2019, p. 75) acknowledges, “the relationship between empowerment and education is neither simple nor clear”. She concludes that education “can be positioned as an outcome of empowerment or as a process associated with its articulation” (Unterhalter, 2019, p. 80).
 - ❑ The diversity of theoretical approaches which could be applied towards an understanding of the relationship between empowerment and education is clearly evident in the special ‘Gender, education and empowerment’ issue of the journal *Research in Comparative and International Education*, published in 2011 (eg. Stromquist’s (1995) model of empowerment; Cattaneo and Chapman’s (2010) Empowerment Process Model, Rocha’s model (1997), the capability approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000).
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Theoretical considerations (3)

Crucial points regarding the relationship between empowerment and education which the studies in this issue agree upon:

- ✓ education does not automatically or simplistically result in empowerment;
- ✓ empowerment is a process; it is not a linear process, direct or automatic;
- ✓ context matters; decontextualized numerical data, although useful in revealing patterns and trends, are inadequate for revealing the deeper and nuanced nature of empowerment processes;
- ✓ individual empowerment is not enough; collective engagement is also necessary; empowerment of girls and women is not just about them, but perforce involves boys and men in social change processes that implicate whole communities; &
- ✓ it is important to consider education beyond formal schooling: informal interactional processes and multi-layered policy are also implicated.





Theoretical considerations (4)

The capability approach towards the relationship between empowerment and (adult) education

- ❑ The capability approach is a social justice normative theoretical framework for conceptualising and evaluating phenomena such as inequalities, well-being, and human development.
- ❑ According to the capability approach, it is not so much the achieved outcomes (functionings) that matter; rather, one's real opportunities (capabilities) determine whether those outcomes can be achieved.
- ❑ For Sen, capabilities are freedoms conceived as real opportunities (Sen, 1985, 2009).
- ❑ More specifically, 'capabilities as freedoms' refer to the presence of valuable options – in the sense that opportunities do not exist only formally or legally but are also effectively available to the agent (Robeyns, 2013).





Theoretical considerations (5)

There are three strands of research relevant to any attempt at understanding the relationship between empowerment and (adult) education from a capability approach perspective.

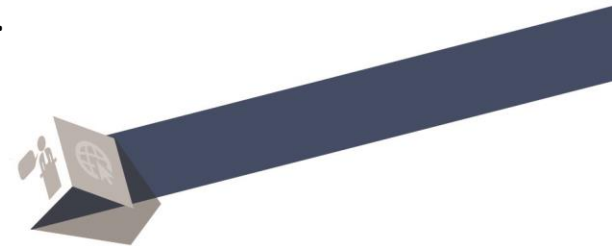
- 1) discusses the meanings of empowerment by drawing on different concepts associated with the capability approach, but it does not reflect upon any possible connections between education and empowerment (e.g., Alsop et al., 2006; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Samman & Santos, 2009);
- 2) includes literature on education and empowerment, also often referring to the debate over capabilities and empowerment (e.g., Loots & Walker, 2015; Monkman, 2011); &
- 3) studies which aim to reveal the heuristic potential of the capability notion in understanding the relationship between empowerment and education (e.g., DeJaeghere & Lee, 2011; Seeberg, 2011; Unterhalter, 2019).





Theoretical considerations (6)

- ❑ On the foundations of this literature, we define empowerment in and through (adult) education from a capability approach perspective as an expansion of both agency (process freedom) and capabilities (opportunity freedom).
- ❑ Empowerment and adult education have one characteristic in common: neither is a single act, but they are rather lifelong processes embedded in the available institutional structures and socio-cultural context. The empowerment role of (adult) education is purposeful and matters both intrinsically and instrumentally.
- ❑ Empowerment in and through (adult) education is closely related, but not identical, to agency enhancement.
- ❑ It is not only an expanded agency but one which has a clear goal – gaining control over an individual’s environment with the aim of improving their own well-being and that of society.
- ❑ The empowerment role of (adult) education has two sides:
 - ✓ a **subjective** one, referring to an individual’s capability to gain control over the environment (individuals’ capacity to act through increasing their self-confidence and capacity to control their daily life), &
 - ✓ an **objective** one, reflecting the available opportunity structures.





Theoretical considerations (6)

Adult education as a sphere of empowerment

- ❑ In conceptualising (adult) education as a sphere of empowerment, we have drawn upon the heuristic potential of Sen's concept of conversion factors and the crucial significance of context for agency within the capability approach (Sen, 1985, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000).
- ❑ Conversion factors are defined as a range of factors influencing how a person can convert the characteristics of his/her available resources (initial conditions) into freedom or achievement.
- ❑ The empowering role of (adult) education depends on and is realised through the very way it is established and organised in a given society. That is why revealing and evaluating the empowerment role of AE requires “understanding the contexts of learning, teaching, and education governance, considering whether the content of education encourages an individualistic or an inclusive and solidaristic sense of agency”, and looking “both at organisations and the norms that govern them” (Unterhalter, 2019, p. 93).

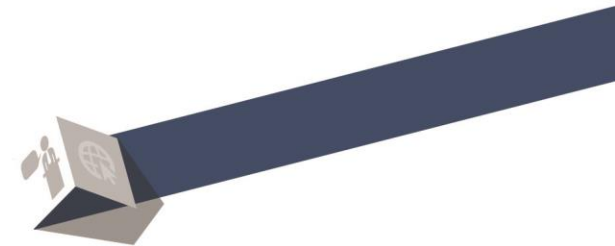




Theoretical considerations (7)

Expanded agency with a clear goal

- ❑ The empowerment role of (adult) education is purposeful and matters both intrinsically and instrumentally. Empowerment in and through (adult) education is closely related, but not identical, to agency enhancement. It is not only an expanded agency but one which has a clear goal – gaining control over an individual's environment with the aim of improving their own well-being and that of society.
- ❑ The empowerment role of (adult) education has two sides: a subjective one, referring to an individual's capability to gain control over the environment, & an objective one, reflecting the available opportunity structures.
- ❑ Empowerment and AE have one characteristic in common: neither is a single act, but they are rather lifelong processes embedded in the available institutional structures and socio-cultural context.





Theoretical considerations (8)

Adult education as a factor for empowerment

- ❑ AE can function as a factor for empowerment at three levels – individual, collective/group, and societal.
 - ✓ At an individual level, empowerment through AE relates to its role in further developing individual capability sets, thus increasing their potential to make high-quality choices and allowing them the freedom to act.
 - ✓ At a collective/group level, AE can empower different social groups, especially vulnerable ones, by helping them to organise and express their interests and to achieve upward mobility.
 - ✓ At a societal level, empowerment through AE reflects the role of education towards achieving important public goods – such as social equity, trust, and environmental conservation – and thus making the world a better place to live in. According to Sen (2009, p. 249), development is “fundamentally an empowering process”, and one of its important aims is to preserve and enrich the environment. Education plays a crucial role in this empowering process, as “the spread of school education and improvements in its quality can make us more environmentally conscious” (Ibid).





Theoretical considerations (9)

Intrinsic and instrumental value of the empowerment role of AE

- ❑ The capability approach requires looking beyond achievements and relating the real freedoms or opportunities an individual has to the “goals or values he or she regards as important” (Sen, 1985, p. 203).
- ❑ As far as AE can have both intrinsic and instrumental value, its empowerment role also matters both intrinsically and instrumentally.
- ❑ Empowerment through AE has intrinsic value: similarly to agency (Sen, 1985), it is the result of a “genuine choice” made by a “responsible agent”, and as such this is an important end in and of itself. Instrumentally, empowerment through AE matters because it can serve as a means to develop other capabilities and achieve different outcomes.





Data and methodology (1)

Data

- ❑ Adult Education Survey (AES) 2007;
- ❑ In-depth interviews with young adults involved in AE programmes. They were carried out within the ENLIVEN project (May, 2018 in a small city in Bulgaria). We have used quotations from these interviews mainly to illustrate the results obtained based on qualitative data. 7 in-depth interviews were conducted: 5 with participants from low-income households in the Roma ethnic community lacking education and work experience; 1 with a staff member running the programme (the school principal); and 1 with a representative at the level of the learning setting (a teacher).

Limitations

- ❑ 13-15 countries: 13 (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia). Depending on the variable of interest, this data could also be found for 14 (+Poland) or 15 total countries (+Poland and the United Kingdom).
- ❑ Adults (25-64 years old).





Data and methodology (2)

Variables

Dependent variables

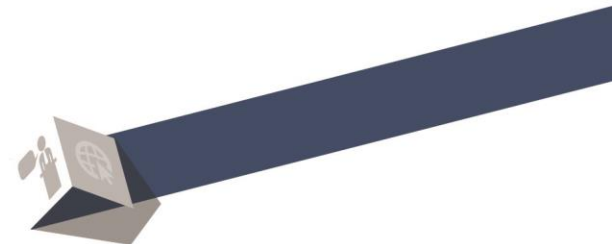
We measured **self-confidence** via two indicators:

- “Learning gives you more self-confidence”* and
- “If you want to be successful at work, you need to keep improving your knowledge and skills”*.

One indicator was used to measure the **capacity to control one’s daily life**:

- “Education and training can help you manage your daily life”*.

The scale for each dependent variable was dichotomized into two values: 1, which includes the answers ‘Agree’ and ‘Fully agree’, and 0, which includes the remaining three answer options.





Data and methodology (3)

Independent variables at individual level

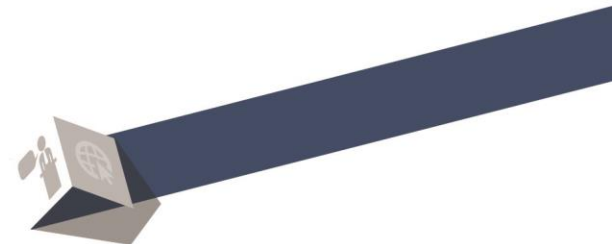
- participation in non-formal education or training (NFET) in the previous 12 months (dummy ref.: no = 0, yes = 1).
- highest educational level (three categories, ref.: ISCED 0-2 = low, ISCED 3-4 = medium, and ISCED 5-6 = higher)
- an interaction term between the highest educational level and participation in NFET

Control variables at individual level

- educational background (dummy ref.: 0 = no parents had higher education [low]; 1 = at least one parent had higher education [high]);
- gender (dummy ref.: 0 = male; 1 = female); and
- main activity (ref. employed; 1= unemployed, or 2= inactive).

Method

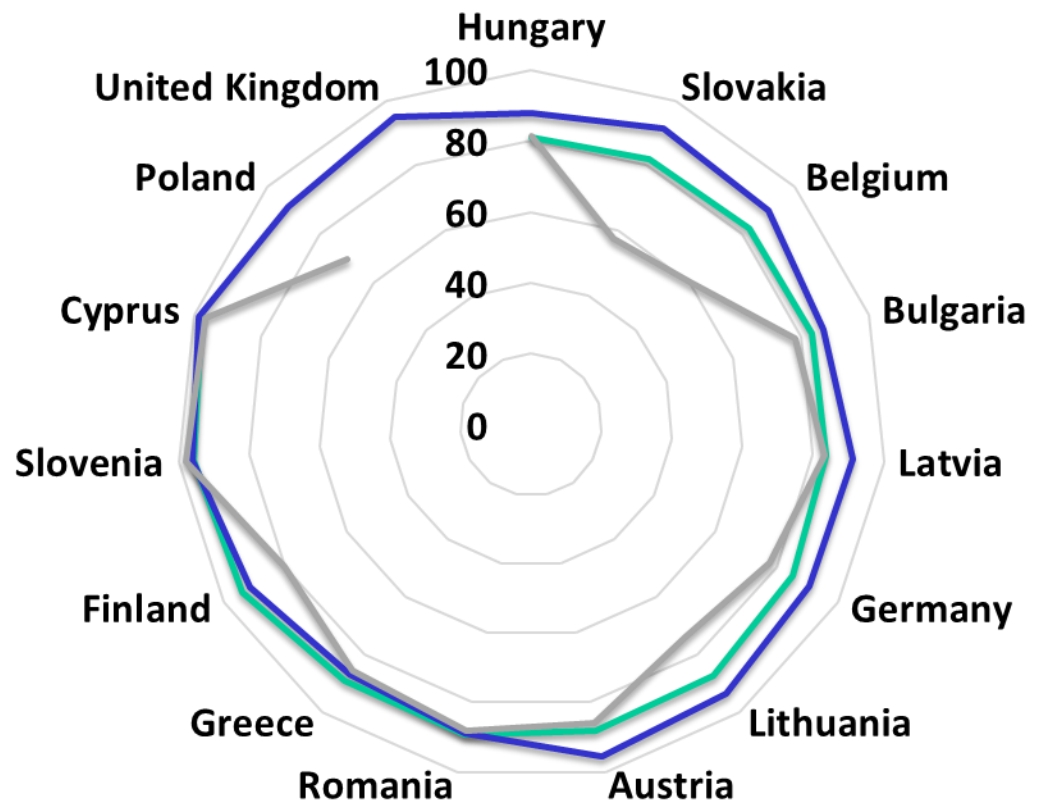
- Multilevel modelling technique





Attitudes towards the benefits of learning for adults aged 25-64 (Percentages of those who agreed with the three statements of interest)

Source: AES 2007, own calculations, weighted data.



- Learning gives you more self-confidence
- If you want to be successful at work, you need to keep improving your knowledge and skills
- Education and training can help you manage your daily life





Learning provides more self-confidence

(Results of two-level random intercept logistic regression models concerning whether adults aged 25-64 agreed with this statement).

	Model 1 e(b)	Model 2 e(b)	Model 3 e(b)
Gender, Ref. <i>Male</i>			
Female		1.522** (0.036)	1.527** (0.037)
Educational background, Ref. <i>Low</i>			
High		1.160** (0.061)	1.159** (0.061)
Age		1.009** (0.001)	1.009** (0.001)
Main activity, Ref. <i>Employed</i>			
Unemployed		0.706** (0.029)	0.708** (0.030)
Inactive		0.900** (0.027)	0.904** (0.027)
Educational level, Ref. <i>Low</i>			
Medium		1.678** (0.047)	1.688** (0.049)
Higher		3.188** (0.137)	3.695** (0.191)
Participation in NFET, Ref. <i>No</i>			
Yes		1.703** (0.057)	2.145** (0.188)
Participation in NFET*Medium			0.843+ (0.080)
Participation in NFET*Higher			0.580** (0.064)
Constant	8.306** (1.681)	2.523** (0.538)	2.461** (0.526)
Country-level variance	0.529 (0.211)	0.546 (0.217)	0.547 (0.218)
Intraclass correlation	0.139	0.142	0.143
Observations	71339	71339	71339



Learning provides more self-confidence (Results from a qualitative study)

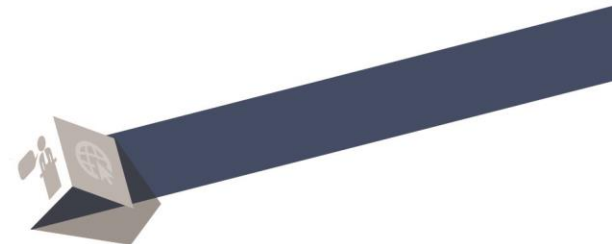
Interviewer: **“How do you feel now?
Do you have a higher level of self-confidence?”**

Respondent: **“Yes, I feel good about it. Even when
they evaluated me, I felt really happy.”**

[BG2_P5_108]

Respondent: **“It was really pleasant.
I actually liked it. I’m satisfied.”**

[BG2_P1_147-148]





If you want to be successful at work, you need to keep improving your knowledge and skills

(Results of two-level random intercept logistic regression models concerning whether adults aged 25-64 agreed with this statement).

	Model 1 e(b)	Model 2 e(b)	Model 3 e(b)
Gender, Ref. Male			
Female		1.369** (0.033)	1.371** (0.033)
Educational background, Ref. Low			
High		1.321** (0.081)	1.323** (0.081)
Age		1.007** (0.001)	1.007** (0.001)
Main activity, Ref. Employed			
Unemployed		0.801** (0.033)	0.802** (0.033)
Inactive		0.978 (0.029)	0.981 (0.029)
Educational level, Ref. Low			
Medium		1.759** (0.048)	1.777** (0.050)
Higher		3.717** (0.172)	3.969** (0.212)
Participation in NFET, Ref. No			
Yes		2.045** (0.078)	2.479** (0.232)
Participation in NFET*Medium			0.829+ (0.085)
Participation in NFET*Higher			0.700** (0.086)
Constant	12.644** (2.079)	4.011** (0.681)	3.951** (0.671)
Country-level variance	0.402*	0.378**	0.378**
Intraclass correlation	0.109	0.103	0.103
Observations	95949	95949	95949





If you want to be successful at work, you need to keep improving your knowledge and skills
(Results from a qualitative study)

Interviewer: **“How has participating in the programme changed your life?”**

Respondent: **“Nothing happens without an education.”**

[BG2_P2_42]

Respondent: **“What’s changed, really, is that now I know more and things are clearer to me... And I want to continue studying... I’d really like to get a license for a car – a driver’s license. I’d feel a little better at least having my diploma. Everyone thinks they can go out and find a job, no problem. It’s not such a big deal after all, completing 7th grade, but every place wants a diploma now.”**

[BG2_P1_129-139]






Education and training can help you manage your daily life

(Results of two-level random intercept logistic regression models concerning whether adults aged 25–64 agreed with this statement).

	Model 1 e(b)	Model 2 e(b)	Model 3 e(b)
Gender, Ref. Male			
Female		1.180** (0.020)	1.184** (0.020)
Educational background, Ref. Low			
High		1.038 (0.036)	1.040 (0.036)
Age		1.009** (0.001)	1.010** (0.001)
Main activity, Ref. Employed			
Unemployed		0.840** (0.027)	0.843** (0.027)
Inactive		0.953* (0.021)	0.958+ (0.021)
Educational level, Ref. Low education			
Medium		1.370** (0.030)	1.382** (0.032)
Higher		1.856** (0.055)	2.133** (0.075)
Participation NFET, Ref. No			
Yes		1.379** (0.031)	1.845** (0.129)
Participation NFET*Medium			0.805** (0.060)
Participation NFET*Higher			0.589** (0.047)
Constant	4.923** (1.235)	2.035** (0.531)	1.968** (0.515)
Country-level variance	0.879	0.926	0.929
Intraclass correlation	0.211	0.220	0.220
Observations	92237	92237	92237






Education and training can help you manage your daily life
(Results from a qualitative study)

Interviewer: “Did you volunteer for the programme?”

Respondent: “**Yes, voluntarily, because they didn’t want to hire me because I am illiterate. And also [because I want] to be literate, not to be cheated with the bills, to understand numbers, to understand what is written.**” [BG2_P5_38-44]

Interviewer: “What motivated you to participate in the programme?”

Respondent: “**I want to get my driver’s license, since I have a small child who’s starting kindergarten, then school. I think we’ll have to travel a long way away because we’re from the ghetto. I’d still like for my kid to learn in Bulgarian.**” [BG2_P3_91-93]



The present study:

- ❑ develops a theoretical framework for conceptualising AE's role in individual empowerment using a capability approach perspective (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000);
- ❑ provides empirical evidence on how AE can contribute to individuals' empowerment. AE is both a sphere of, and a factor for, empowerment;
- ❑ views participation in non-formal AE as a means for empowering individuals through increasing their self-confidence and their capacity to find a job and to control their daily life; &
- ❑ demonstrates that the relationship between empowerment and AE policies and practices should be regarded as a complex field of study.



Conclusion (1)

The empirical evidence allows us to conclude that:

- ❑ empowerment through AE is embedded in institutional structures and socio-cultural contexts, and has both intrinsic and instrumental value; it is neither linear nor unproblematic. AE's empowerment role is revealed in expanded agency; this enables individuals and social groups to gain power over their environment;
- ❑ participation in non-formal AE can empower individuals, increasing their self-confidence, capacity to find employment, and to control their daily lives; &
- ❑ the empowerment effect of AE is greater among learners with low educational levels than it is among those with medium and higher educational levels. This means that in order to truly be sensitive towards vulnerable groups, AE policies have to more seriously consider the varying role AE can play in the empowerment of people from different social backgrounds.



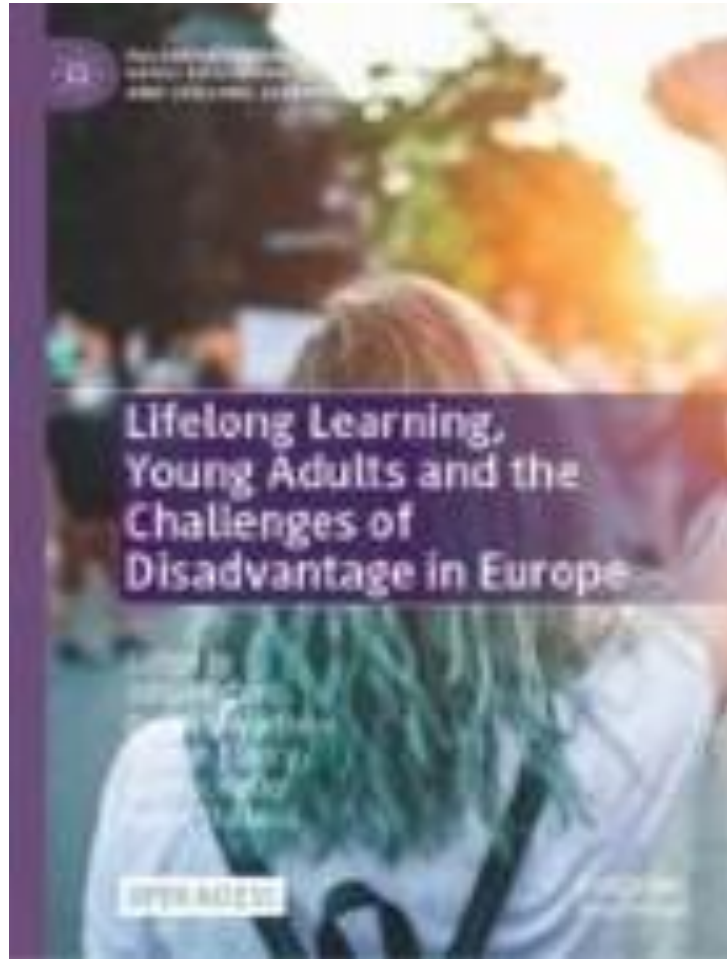


Conclusion (2)

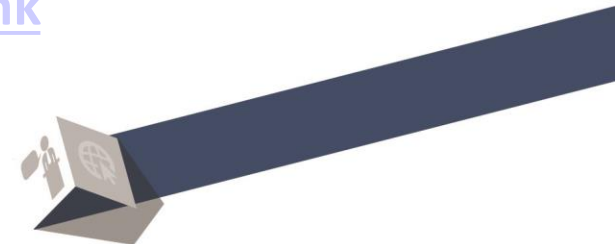
There are several challenges which require in-depth further study:

- how the empowerment role of AE differs in various socio-economic contexts and how to explain transnational differences;
- which dominant cultural norms in different countries impede parity of participation in AE and its empowerment role;
- how the empowerment role of AE is manifested in formal and non-formal AE;
- how to develop policies aimed at enhancing the role of AE in the formation of individual agency, self-esteem, and self-confidence;
- how to produce reliable data in order to study the relationship between empowerment and AE;
- how to hear the voices of participants and thus to accomplish empowerment with learners, not for them; &
- what kinds of methodological instruments may be needed to reveal different aspects of the relationship between empowerment and AE.





Boyadjieva P., & Ilieva-Trichkova P. (forthcoming).
Adult Education as a Pathway to Empowerment: Challenges and Possibilities. In: Holford J., Boyadjieva P., Hefler, G, Studená, I. (eds) *Lifelong Learning, Young Adults and the Challenges of Disadvantage in Europe*. Springer, Cham. [Lifelong Learning, Young Adults and the Challenges of Disadvantage in Europe | SpringerLink](#)





Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the projects:
“Encouraging Lifelong Learning for an Inclusive and Vibrant Europe”
– **ENLIVEN (2016-2019)** funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under Grant Agreement No. 693989 and **“Dynamics of inequalities in participation in higher and adult education: A comparative social justice perspective”** – **JustEdu (2020–2024)**, funded by the Bulgarian National Science Fund within National Science Program VIHREN, contract number КП-06-ДВ-2/16.12.2019.





THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!

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