

Vandenabeele, Joke

Studying the legacy of second-chance adult education in Flanders. The regional university and the professionalisation of adult educators

European journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults 15 (2024) 3, S. 367-381



Quellenangabe/ Reference:

Vandenabeele, Joke: Studying the legacy of second-chance adult education in Flanders. The regional university and the professionalisation of adult educators - In: European journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults 15 (2024) 3, S. 367-381 - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-319286 - DOI: 10.25656/01:31928; 10.3384/rela.2000-7426.5029

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-319286>

<https://doi.org/10.25656/01:31928>

in Kooperation mit / in cooperation with:



<http://www.ep.liu.se>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Dieses Dokument steht unter folgender Creative Commons-Lizenz: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de> - Sie dürfen das Werk bzw. den Inhalt vervielfältigen, verbreiten und öffentlich zugänglich machen sowie Abwandlungen und Bearbeitungen des Werkes bzw. Inhaltes anfertigen, solange Sie den Namen des Autors/Rechteinhabers in der von ihm festgelegten Weise nennen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

Terms of use

This document is published under following Creative Commons-License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.en> - You may copy, distribute and render this document accessible, make adaptations of this work or its contents accessible to the public as long as you attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.



Kontakt / Contact:

peDOCS
DIPF | Leibniz-Institut für Bildungsforschung und Bildungsinformation
Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung
E-Mail: pedocs@dipf.de
Internet: www.pedocs.de

Mitglied der


Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

Studying the legacy of second-chance education in Flanders: The regional university and the professionalisation of adult educators

Joke Vandenabeele

KU Leuven, Belgium (joke.vandenabeele@kuleuven.be)

Abstract

Every year, third-year bachelor students participating in a course on adult education at the University of Leuven (Belgium) conduct an interview with adult educators working within a particular setting of adult education, such as civic integration courses, detention education, etc. In this article, we elaborate on one particular case, viz., adult educators working in second-chance education for adults who still want to obtain their secondary diploma. We show how their profession as an adult educator can become a common concern for both third bachelor students of educational sciences and for adult educators in second-chance education celebrating in 2021 their 40 years of existence in Flanders. This means that our analysis in this article will also show how a university can become a place where the daily professional practice as adult educators, viz., their ambitions and doubts, ambiguities and contradictions, can fully materialize as collective study material.

Keywords: second-chance education for adults, civic university, citizen science initiatives, professionalisation of adult educators

Introduction

What happens when third bachelor students in educational sciences study the daily enacted profession in adult education together with the adult educators themselves? This article gives a retrospective account of such a study exercise with bachelor students participating in a course on adult education at the University of Leuven (Belgium). It is a course that focuses on theories and practices of adult education and which is part of the curriculum of the third bachelor in educational sciences. Students have the option to choose for this course, but it is not part of the compulsory curriculum that all students



must take. The bachelor in educational sciences at KU Leuven aims at a general introduction to educational sciences, and from the master onwards, students must choose between special education or educational sciences (formal and non-formal education).

In this article, we look back on one particular two-year collaboration with second-chance educators within the setting of this third bachelor course on adult education. In 2020 and 2021 students conducted biographical interviews with adult educators working within second-chance education. Leuven was the first city where second-chance education for adults was organized. One year after this first year of pioneering a professional Federation of second-chance adult educators was established and second-chance education very quickly started to be organized in various places in Flanders. The two anniversaries of 40 years existence, in 2020 and 2021, were an unique occasion for both the university and adult educators to address the question of how, over a forty-year period, second-chance educators in Flanders (Dutch-speaking region in Belgium) have come to understand their profession and in doing so, study the legacy of so many years of professionalisation within this specific setting of adult education.

In the first part of this article we present some key figures on second-chance education in Flanders and elaborate on the kind of research-teaching practice we developed together with third bachelor students and adult educators. In the second part of this article we discuss what the key issues are in the professionalisation of second-chance educators, based on the analysis of 15 interviews with second-chance educators. In the third part of this article, we reflect on how this research-teaching practice is one of many attempts to experiment with the public role of universities today and in this particular case, become (again) a place for imaginative forms of knowledge that address key issues of adult education. It challenges both students, adult educators and academic scholars to collaborate and contribute to a university where the daily experiences of adult educators, viz., their ambitions and doubts, ambiguities and contradictions, can fully materialize as collective study material. The key question that this research-teaching initiative touches on is what Olesen (2006) and many others (West, 2020; Kreber, 2015) have already posed as an important concern: how both research and the profession of adult education can move beyond abstraction and neoliberal ideology.

Studying the legacy of second-chance education for adults within the setting of the university

Second-chance education in Flanders addresses (young) adults aged 18 and over who did not obtain a secondary education diploma during their compulsory education period, which is internationally equivalent to an ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) level 3 or 4. A review of international policy documents and academic literature that examined educational provision for low-skilled adults in European countries (Boeren & Whittaker, 2018) shows seven forms of education for adults with limited formal education, with 'second-chance education' occupying a distinct position alongside categories such as basic education and post-secondary vocational education and training (VET). In not all European countries (Eurydice, 2015), second-chance education programs leads directly to a certificate. Students have to take a central exam (e.g. in German-speaking region in Belgium, Finland, Poland or Slovenia) and in the UK, for example, second-chance education can prepare students to take General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) or the A-level exams (again) and thus gain access to higher education. In Flanders, second-chance education differs from regular schools in terms of organisation and didactics. They differ, for example, by their personalized teaching programs, they are organized in Centres for Adult Education and they also offer flexible

learning pathways. Another special feature of second-chance education in Flanders is that they can give successful students a single or double accreditation which is accepted as merits for certain skills needed on the labour market and/or allows students to continue studying within the regular higher education system. As our analysis will show below, second-chance education in Flanders was initially focused on women over the age of 40 (Raes, 2008) who still wanted to obtain their diploma after raising their children. Compulsory education up to the age of 18 only started in Belgium from 1983, and so until today, in the older part of the population (55-74 years) 37.1% have only obtained an ISCED 0-2 in Belgium. According to the EU Labour Force Survey (Eurostat, n.d.), 21.6% of all adults aged 25-64 in the European Union, have a maximum education level below ISCED 3, representing 51.5 million people. Big outliers are Portugal (47.8 %), Malta (44.8 %), Spain (38.7%), Italy (37.8%), Greece (23.2%), but also Belgium (21.3%), Romania (21%), Luxembourg (20.7%) and the Netherlands (20.4%). Research shows how within second-chance education in Flanders there is a gradual rejuvenation of the student population but also that diversity of ages remains to this day an important feature of the student population within second-chance education in Flanders. Around 60% of enrolled students are younger than 25 years old and around 30% are within the age of 31 to 50 years old and 6% are at the age of 51 or older (Raes, 2008; Monteyne, 2021). While students in initial education almost all live with their parents or another care figure, 38% of students in second-chance education still do, while the same percentage of students in second-chance education (39%) live with a partner (with or without children) (Monteyne, 2021).

As we have already mentioned in the introduction to this article, second-chance education in Flanders already exists for more than 40 years. In the preface to the celebration book on 40 years of second-chance education in Flanders, Dirk Van Damme (Former Senior Counsellor Directorate for Education and Skills at the OECD) reflects on how school education is a big tanker struggling to adapt to the atypical life courses many young people and young adults are experiencing nowadays and how this has far-reaching consequences in terms of job opportunities, income, health, participation and much more. This is why 'second chance education' is so relevant and topical and why the notion of 'second chance' is 'an expression of elementary justice: adults who, for whatever reason, have missed out on opportunities during pre-arranged educational paths are entitled to a fair second chance. It does not matter whether they missed the first chance due to external circumstances or to their own decisions' (Dirk Van Damme, our translation in Federation for second chance education Flanders, 2021, p. 5).

As we will elaborate below, it is this life-changing or emancipatory power of adult education that we choose to focus on in a third bachelor's course on adult education in a specific way: by reading adult education literature together but also by doing biographical interviews with adult educators. In the first part of this course, students study texts written by authors everyone in the field of adult education has heard of and still frequently refers to. Often, however, these authors have become so well known that their theoretical basis on what the specific emancipatory power of adult education may actually entail is no longer widely discussed or even read. So, each year we give a voice (back) to a number of books and theories in adult education, such as the learning principles of 'andragogy' according to Knowles (1980), the importance of 'critical learning' according to Brookfield (2005), the 'situated learning of a community of practice' according to Etienne Wenger (2008), the 'transformative learning' according to Jack Mezirow (1978, 2012), 'biographicity' as an important adult source in education according to Alheit (1996) and Alheit & Dausien (2002) etc. A post-humanist reading of adult education practices (Fenwick & Edwards, 2013, 2014) is also covered in this course and where for example

the performativity of online platforms, specific software, classroom furniture, etc. is scrutinized along the active role of teachers, trainees, policy makers etc.. In the second part of this course, following the lectures and reading seminars on these guiding theories of adult education, the students are asked to engage in an interview with an adult educator about the educational work she does with adults. The topics of this interview are inspired by the biographical research tradition (Kelchtermans, 2009) but also questions on the role of materials and material setting are added to the interview template. With this interview, each student invites an adult educator to narrate the kind of events, people, settings and materials that have formed and are still constituting their professional lives. The interview itself is structured in three parts. The first part of the interview focuses on the motives and circumstances that were involved in the choice to become an adult educator. In the instructions accompanying this first part of the interview protocol, we advise bachelor students to use sub-questions to probe into the kinds of emotions that were at play at that time: were they hesitant about this choice or was it actually very clear that they wanted to work as an adult educator? Were the first years of teaching in line with their own expectations or did things turn out quite differently after all? In the first part of the interview, adult educators are also asked to share their thoughts on the kind of changes they have experienced with regard to who has attended adult education over time, the kind of learning materials they have used, the digital support they got over time, the kind of school building(s) they have worked in and so on. The second part of the interview zooms in on how adult educators have addressed their teaching over time. What are moments of pride and moments of disillusionment for them? Who or what has contributed to these moments? In the instructions accompanying this second part of the interview protocol, we advise bachelor students allowing moments of silence and to reflect together on the key skills and attitudes that are important to them as adult educators. In the third and final part of the interview, we focus on the social contributions adult education has to offer and how adult educators perceive and value policies related to adult education. In the instructions accompanying this third part of the interview protocol, we advise bachelor students to encourage teachers to describe concrete situations and also to encourage adult educators to give concrete suggestion on how adult education related policies should change. The focus of the entire interview protocol is also discussed during one workshop with bachelor students and the questions are also tailored each year specifically to the setting where the adult educators are working. Over the many years of this course on adult education, we have been able to conduct interviews with adult educators working in detention centres, refugee integration centres, adult literacy courses and second-chance education.

Once the interviews are completed, students, in groups of four, analyze how assemblages of people, events, settings and materials have made up the professional life of adult educators. Students are asked to report their analysis in the form of a brochure and poster, and the role we take on as lecturers and teaching assistant is that we address students as researchers. We offer them the structure of three successive workshops and we move from group to group to co-support the discussion. During one workshop, students participate in deciding the specific layout of the brochure and poster. In two more workshops and in groups of four, students discuss with each other the kind of analysis they want to present using the following three headings: (1) an appealing presentation of the narrative or learning history that adult educators told them during the interview; (2) an analysis of how adult educators described their teaching practice. Students are asked to analyze this narrative on teaching practices using two crucial concepts that each student can choose from two adult education texts they have studied during the lectures and reading seminars in this course; (3) an analysis of how adult educators critically reflect

during the interviews on the kinds of contributions they can make to society and an assessment of how they are supported in doing so. At the end of the course, all groups presents their analysis to an audience of adult educators and in doing so, they articulate an answer to the following straightforward question: how do adult educators reflect on their profession and on the specific contribution they can make to adults' lives.

The audacity of a minor pedagogy in second-chance educators in Flanders

The analysis below is based on interviews with 15 second-chance educators and which are part of the 25 interviews bachelor students have conducted during the academic year 2020-2021. All the interviews with adult educators were digitally recorded and bachelor students transcribed one interview each word for word, including both verbal utterances and non- and para-verbal behavior to minimize loss of biographical narratives. With our selection of 15 interviews, we set the condition that the interviewed adult educators had all been teaching for at least 15 years within second-chance education. Nine of the selected teachers have been teaching since the very beginning of second-chance education in Flanders and six teachers started teaching twenty years ago. In the selection of the 15 teachers, we equally chose to include the experiences with second-chance education in eight Flemish 'cities' (Leuven, Mechelen, Hasselt, Kortrijk, Antwerp, Roeselare, Genk and Vilvoorde). With the analysis below we give an insight into how 15 adult educators narrate on their professional life in second-chance education. The three steps that we followed in our analysis make a comparative analysis possible of how this professional life developed during the 40 years of second-chance education in Flanders. In a first step of the analysis we reconstructed the 15 careers of adult educators, based on all factual data that was given during the interview and also on the short questionnaire that each adult educator completed in preparation for the interview. In a second step we analyzed these 15 careers of adult educators by using a limited set of codes (key or vital events, persons, settings, materials, ...), exploring the biographical dynamic and the materiality of the professional life of these adult educators. In the third and final step, we examined how each adult educator understands his or her profession, including task perception, professional craftsmanship and future perspectives of these adult educators. Based on the first two steps we could connect this professional self-understanding to the specific settings of second-chance education and thus also to the events, turning points, persons, materiality and policies that helped to shape these settings during 40 years of second-chance education in Flanders.

Fifteen adult educators narrate in an interview with bachelors how people, settings and events has shaped their professional practice over the 40 years of second-chance education, first in Leuven and later on in several Flemish cities. These interviews offer a rich description of the particular circumstances under which second-chance education emerged in Flanders. It is the late seventies and women, inspired by the emancipatory ideas of May 68, regularly meet within the Folk High School in the city of Leuven. A study trip to a school in the Netherlands where mothers attend classes in the same school building as their children led to an 'eureka experience'. At that time in Flanders, housewives didn't have the opportunity to go back to school and still get a secondary education degree. At the Folk High School, completing a degree was not an issue and its teachers told housewives that they could make valuable contributions to society even without a degree. But many of these working-class housewives had witnessed the May 68 student demonstrations and had shouted to the students '*go back to school, you girls are capable and allowed to do so*'. Many months after the study trip to the Netherlands,

a group of women in Leuven were able to make this second-chance school for adults also possible in Leuven. The records of the discussions between the city council of Leuven and these women, show how a lot of courageous perseverance was needed to make this change towards education for all adults and thus also for women happen.

I will never forget that conversation and the first response we got. He said in a sneering tone: 'But madam, please make sure that your husband gets his soup at his lunch'. To which our reply was: 'we've been doing that for years' and to which his second advice was: 'then go and have a cup of coffee with your girlfriends'. We persisted and said: 'Sir, we are here for more serious matters. We would like to get classrooms and equipment free of any charge from the city'.

In the early years of second-chance education in Flanders, there was little or no budget to pay adult educators a full salary for their work. Many of them received a modest living wage within a then-existing regulation for long-term unemployed people who were willing to return to work. In those days, it was also not easy to find sufficient and good classrooms. The title chosen for the jubilee book of 40 years of second-chance education in Leuven is 'Making school together'. This book contains many photos of the very different buildings that have hosted second-chance education throughout the years, e.g. an old convent building, a music conservatory, a shabby grammar school building, etc. But today, second-chance education in Flanders is part of large adult education centers and in Leuven this center is situated in one of the business zones of the city. Adults of all ages and backgrounds can attend there courses on a variety of subjects related to professional education, leisure education and second-chance education. In the interviews the older adult educators point to an important consequence of working in these large adult education centers. They indicate how difficult it has become to meet colleagues during breaks and talk to each other in a more informal way about teaching and profession-related issues. Even the number of formal meetings where adult educators can talk with colleagues has been reduced to a minimum, and it is no longer clear what the agenda of such a meeting among colleagues might be.

In the past, we had weekly meetings with all our colleagues and during these weekly meetings we literally made school together. With the increase in scale of our organization, the frequency of these meetings decreased. It became less and less clear what we still had a say in and what we could therefore discuss with each other. Now, the experience is that we are part of 'a very big organization' and have ended up in the position of executors.

During the interviews adult educators comment on how they come to operate in an environment where the stakes of becoming an entrepreneurial self are very high, both for adults taking courses as for adult educators teaching these courses. They refer to counsellors and employment consultants who are now present in these centers for adult education and who give advice on how adult education can help students to keep pace with what society expects of them in the labour market. Yet, the metaphor many adult educators use to describe their profession is that they go on a study journey with their students. They search for ways to bring the world into the attention of students and encourage students to encounter this world together. During the interviews adult educators emphasized that they don't experience this study journey as a challenge that each student has to conquer as an individual. Instead, they understand this study journey as a two-way pathway: building knowledge and capacities as individuals and, at the same time, building a commitment to a world worth living in together.

Students who are asked to engage in a group assignment on math's and for some of the students this also means that they break through the social isolation in which they got

locked. ... A student who is not fluent in Dutch is asked to read aloud in class and the other students are called to contribute to a class atmosphere in which this slower reading can be part of how this class is learning together.... A student can tell the stories of his grandparents on the war in and around Palestine in a history course and students are asked to articulate what living together with people of different religions can actually entail ...

What equally emerges from the interviews is that adult educators are well aware of how they are involved in many small gestures and how these small gestures are crucial for the education with adults. During the interviews adult educators reflect on how what second-chance educators do and say can open up adults' lives in very different directions.

For one student, it may mean that she can finally look for another job, for another student it may mean that she immerses herself in literature, for another student it may mean that she reads the newspaper more often, for yet another student it may mean that she decides to continue her studies at university, etc.

It is precisely because of this openness, which at the same time requires attention and commitment of both the students and the adult educator, that second-chance education is characterized by what Fenwick (2006) has called the audacity of a minor pedagogy in adult education. A key aspect of this audacity, as the transcripts of the interviews show, is that second-chance educators persist in uttering one of the following phrases more than several times: *'please, try' or 'please try again' or 'maybe you can try it in this or that way'*. Eventually what matters, is that adult educators give a second and even a third or a fourth chance. This is what many school teachers also do: 'to express the belief that everyone can learn everything' (Simons, 2022). Second-chance educators reinforce this belief and in doing so, they do not ignore students' past, but make it possible that traces of that past no longer cast a shadow on students' abilities in the present (Simons, 2022).

At the end of the course the bachelor students presented their analysis of the interviews in groups of four to an audience of adult educators. A key topic that emerged in these presentations are two very different forms of vulnerability that are part of how adult educators narrate on their profession today. First, there is a formal or political vulnerability and which is about how to survive in times of performativity with its exclusive focus on effectivity, strict standards and output measurement. A second aspect of this professional narrative of adult educators is about an existential form of vulnerability and appears to be a characteristic feature of the way adult educators are involved in their teaching practice. It is about the day-to-day experiences that what is happening in teaching is 'both more and less than one had planned for' (Kelchtermans, 2009, p. 267). What these presentations showed is how this existential form of vulnerability of adult educators should be understood as a structural condition of adult education. In the discussion following these presentations, an important concern came to the fore: how second-chance educators find themselves in a double-binding situation. They experience that adult education is increasingly embedded in a policy discourse that strongly argues for a functional and economical approach of the profession of adult educators. What matters in this approach is that adult educators are capable to respond flexibly to the needs of adults and effectively support them in acquiring the necessary skills to find a job in the labor market. Yet, this research-teaching initiative sparked a reflection on how second-chance educators are equally involved in many small and emancipatory gestures. Making students within second-chance education read a newspaper or practice the grammar of a foreign language, having them discuss the history of the war in Palestine together, for example, are all important but nevertheless 'small' educational gestures. They do not create clear signposts of what students should become after graduating from second-chance education. Moreover, rather than starting from well-

diagnosed needs or specific social outcomes to be achieved, these gestures draw on what Manning (2016) understands as an ‘immediation force’, that is a force that generates a sense of heightened affect or maneuverability in a world that holds very specific expectations on what adult life should look like. It is a force that can alter ‘the valence of what comes to be’ (Manning, 2016, p. 6) and has to do with an experience that adult education encourages each and every adult to contribute in his or her specific way to a democratic society. Acknowledging that these small gestures are part of an existential vulnerability of adult educators is ‘not an alibi for lousy lesson plans, careless interventions or technically bad teaching performance. On the contrary, only carefully prepared and professionally enacted teaching allows the unforeseen and meaningful to happen’ (Kelchtermans, 2009, p. 267).

The regional university and professionalisation of adult educators

In the third part of this article, we reflect on how a research-teaching collaboration between universities and adult educators working in nearby practices of the university can enrich reflections on the profession of adult educators. The distinction Egetemeyer and Käpplinger (2011) make between quality management and professionalisation as two distinguishable logics in adult education is crucial in this respect. In their analysis of the European report on the ‘Key competences for adult learning professionals’ (Research voor Beleid, 2010) they indicate how the logic of professionalisation is easily sacrificed for the logic of a quality management approach. A quality management approach drives on written guidelines, mission statements and fixed goals and governs through the formalization of benchmarks and standards. It is a logic that optimizes the organizational capacity to deliver a product according to predefined performativity criteria. This key focus on standardization and formalism makes this approach different from the logic and issues that a professionalisation approach is concerned with, driven as it is by professionals who try to act and think from an adult education perspective. The reference point of reflection within a professionalisation approach is not an organisation, but the actual teaching practice where an adult educator responds to the situations in which she finds herself in. This professionalisation approach captures what Evans (2008) has called ‘enacted professionalism’ which has a focus on how the profession of adult educators emerges and becomes visible in their actual teaching practice, reflecting both their expertise and commitment to educational issues.

Based on their analysis, Egetemeyer and Käpplinger (2011) argue against mixing the two logics and to avoid having a profession be assessed only according to the logic of quality management. Freidson (1986) makes a related argument about the importance of what he calls a third logic of professionalisation and how this logic is different from both a free market logic and a rational-legal bureaucratic logic. The observations Freidson (2001) makes is that, in the minds of both bureaucratic managers and free marketers, professionalism tends to be treated ‘as an aberration rather than something with its own logic and integrity’ (Freidson, 2001, p. 11). For Freidson, professional associations can create a set of institutional conditions in which it becomes possible to cultivate this third logic of professionalism through certain values, knowledge and services. In the initiative this article discusses, it is instead the university and, more specifically, a group of students and a lecturer who, together with adult educators, study 40 years of professionalisation within second-chance education. What is at stake in this research-teaching exercise is how an academic course on theory and practice of adult education can become a place where the daily engagement of adult educators viz., their ambitions and doubts, ambiguities and contradictions, can fully materialize as collective study material. We can only briefly

discuss how universities, along at least two different paths, contribute to the profession of adult educators. This brief and more general note is meant to raise the question how the research-teaching exercise on second-chance education is part of this second and more regional approach of how universities can contribute to the further professionalisation of adult educators.

A first and perhaps the most common practice of universities today is stimulating professionalism through the improvement and accurate application of evidence-based expertise. Universities are seen as the producers par excellence of solid and up-to-date knowledge to combat the questions and problems of 21st century society. It is quite recently that policy documents explicitly define the mission of universities in terms of producing a highly qualified workforce that meets the demands of industry, the market and the public sector (Rider et al., 2014). Training professionals involves learning to improve the predictability of their own actions as professionals, while focusing on delivering effects or products according to well-defined quality standards. Such a focus on professionalism as a quality management issue of organizations has weakened other approaches to professionalisation and this is particularly the case for adult educators. In their research on the current European discourse on lifelong learning, for example, Egetemeyer and K  pplinger (2011) examine how New Public Management has become a powerful tool in thinking about the education of adults as a learning market to be managed according to economic principles, such as competitiveness, cost efficiency, quality frameworks and consumer-centred service delivery. What this quality management approach lacks is the ability to foster a reflection on issues that are considered important from a professionalisation approach, such as for example:

a discussion about whom quality is meant for and what are the real objectives in daily practices. Is quality meant for the government? Or for learners? Or for enterprises? Are the needs of these different stakeholders in adult education identical? How should we deal with different interests? Is there a hierarchy of needs, meaning that some needs are more important than others? (Egetemeyer & K  pplinger, 2011, p. 27).

Rubenson and Elfert (2019) equally examine how academic research on adult education ‘finds itself in a precarious situation’ (Rubenson & Elfert, 2019, p. 24). It has a weak disciplinary core, and two particular features of academic research suffer from a lack of focus on how adult education actually unfolds on a daily basis: the huge drive for evidence-based policy research on lifelong learning on the one hand, and the merit system itself for academic research on the other.

The proposal of this article is that this trend can be bent. A university course where biographical reflections of adult educators are stimulated through interviews and where re-reading classical theories of adult education happens together with practitioners is one way to do this. It involves a much broader and ongoing quest to engage as a university in regional study practices that works with the site-specific people, issues, materiality’s and discourses in its surroundings. Universities have always been a hub or a concentration of intellectual life in a region but with the rise of global rankings many universities compete for position on a scale where worldwide prominence is pitted against regional affiliation. In contrast, universities seeking to serve the public good are increasingly recognizing the region as a source for ‘fostering a scholarship that breathes the air of the region, of its people and their history, memory, communities and environment’ (Ingold, 2020). This quest of universities for regional engagement has so far focused mostly on sustainable development goals, in-service learning projects or citizen science initiatives. The argument of this article is that a regional course on adult education can cultivate a

sensitivity to the everyday engagement of adult educators working in proximity to the university and so contribute to the further professionalisation of these practitioners.

To further underline the importance of this form of sensitivity and reflection on adult education practices, we turn to some key findings of Bowl's (2017) research. Via interviews Bowl explores how adult educators in UK and New Zealand try to exercise agency within current policies on lifelong learning. In doing so, Bowl examines how adult educators try to cope with the double-binding situation that was also highlighted in the discussion we had with second-chance educators in Flanders. The adult educators interviewed by Bowl indicate that the overall experience is that they have no choice but to accommodate to the expectations imposed on them by lifelong learning policies. They also indicate that they try not to get overly frustrated in pursuing certain measurable outcomes that are put forward by these policies. Bowl's research shows then how difficult it has become for adult educators to think and act beyond these measurable outcomes. Even when they do try to resist via small tweaks, adult educators live, according to Bowl's (2017) analysis, in the cracks of adult education. However, Bowl (2017) also notes that during the interviews, some of the adult educators talk about how they try to persevere in doing educational work with adults and how they try to respond to the many moments when important issues such as, for example, what is emancipation for a particular group of adult students emerge in their daily practice. A rather pessimistic reading of these findings is that these few adult educators seem to be mostly older adult educators who will soon retire and who can still draw on a past where emancipatory practices of adult education were mainstream. A more optimistic reading of these research findings, which we would like to endorse, is that Bowl's research equally demonstrates the importance of a professionalisation logic that keeps adult educators focused to the educational issues that emerge in the adult education practices they are involved in. As already indicated, the image that many of the second-chance educators used to tell about their profession during the interviews with bachelor students is that they set off on a study journey. In their conversations and the exercises they make with second-chance students, the issues they are confronted with as a professional have a double focus or concerns (Biesta, 2022). It's about, first, the question of what it means to be an adult in today's society and, second, how adult educators can address this question of adulthood in an educational way.

We argue that a regional approach to an academic course on adult education foregrounds in at least four ways the importance of an openness of the university for the daily involvement of adult educators in educational issues (Kreber, 2015). First, a course developed on the basis of a collaboration between students and adult educators has an open-ended or non-pre-defined outcome. Both the process of studying together and the daily practice of adult education is the actual curriculum of the course. This means also, secondly, that the process of annotating and documenting the insights that emerge from the interviews and from the discussions bachelor students and adult educators have together can contribute to a living corpus of biographies, statements, key insights and concepts, citations, etc. In the research-teaching initiative at the university of Leuven we have already experimented with a variety of different public formats (e.g. a paper, a poster, a book, an exhibition, a blog) and this body of knowledge will still grow over the years that this course will be taught. Third, in making a course together with students and adult educators, it is important not to approach a region as a well-defined area nor to reflect on the experiences of practitioners from a so-called regional identity. Studying adult education at a regional university is not about making this kind of knowledge claims but involves a thoughtful attention to the iterative nature of adult education practices. The biographical interviews and the added socio-material focus in these interviews, allows for a reflection on how what adult educators do, say and relate to is always in flux (Kemmis,

2019) and emerges in a multitude of interactions between human intentions, policy discourses, technologies, school buildings, particular communities, etc. Hence, a regional university engages in a 'practice turn' (Schatzki, 2019; Fenwick & Edwards, 2013) within adult education theory and enables the study of adult education practices from an ontological perspective. Fourth, opening the university to how adult educators enact or practice adult education on a daily basis is in itself understood as an ontological opening or a significant event that can shake up established ways of being and thinking as an adult educator, university lecturer and student (Savransky, 2021; Stengers, 2021; Schildermans et al., 2019). Professionalisation of second-chance educators is in this study practice not seen as a problem for which bachelor students and adult educators have to come up with a solution together, e.g. a new assessment method; a new manual for instructing adult second-language learners, etc. Instead, discussing a minor pedagogy in tandem with reading together classical authors on adult education encourages a reflection on how key issues of adult education, such as what emancipation is, what critical learning is or what adulthood is, take on a very concrete and binding importance in the work of second-chance educators.

This regional course provides then both bachelor students and adult educators with a language that allows them to discuss and inquire into key issues of adult education and the many small but very important gestures adult educators are involved in. The mobilization logic of a quality management approach is so strong today that it has become almost impossible for many adult educators to dwell on and recognize how an important aspect of their profession are these many small gestures when trying to build an educational relationship with students. Re-reading theories of adult education along the biographical stories of adult educators contributes to a form of reflection in which adult educators can articulate how they are involved in a process of an intelligent habituation of one's professional environment (Dewey, 1980). What Dewey pointed out so well is that the formation of habits as a professional requires acknowledging both an undergoing and doing with everything and everyone in that environment. In Dewey's thought, the first movement that happens in the process of intelligent habituation is one of "undergoing" or surrendering to a practice. It is the movement from the environment to the professional, which then undergoes these influences and can, in a second movement, choose how to act. For Dewey, intelligent habituation is not about adapting to one's professional environment, as if the world in which a profession exists does not matter, but to form intelligent linearities between action and consequences that always remain open to the response of the environment. It is first and foremost a capacity to consider or imagine the full bearing of an event and is a way of thinking and doing beyond immediate outcomes, strategies or pre-defined quality criteria (Römer, 2012). It is only by a thoughtful action in the environment that the environment responds, and that response can inform the next action of an adult educator. In other words, undergoing requires that adult educators pay attention to what the people and the materials in an adult education environment requires. For Dewey, this thoughtfulness and attention is the intelligence that is characteristic for an educational experience as a professional (Snedden & Dewey, 1977), and thus the intelligent part of both doing and undergoing can contribute to the professionalisation of adult educators. Dewey (1944) gives the example of how a general at war, an ordinary soldier or a citizen of one of the warring nations have to think in a very particular way. All of them find it difficult to think about the war scene from a certain distance, as their actions are overdetermined by the urgent need to win and survive this war. The ability to restore meaning to what is going on beyond immediate interests requires the free exchange between an actor and a spectator who is not directly involved but supplement this distance with a commitment to stay with the situation and what it

portends in its particularities (Römer, 2012). During the biographical interviews and also during the presentation of the analysis of these interviews second chance educators can take this engaged spectator distance and reflect on their everyday acting with adults. It shifts the focus from very general criteria of quality to a language that can articulate the educational issues adult educators are facing and the many different small gestures adult educators are engaged in while responding to these issues.

Discussion and conclusion

This article is an invitation to further unlock the university's potential to be a place where students, adult educators and lecturers are challenged to turn the daily engagement of adult educators into a common concern and in doing so, to collaborate and contribute to the further professionalisation of adult educators. This kind of study practice calls for courage and imagination and is in line with a certain understanding of graduation that universities can promote. In her speech to newly graduated educators at the university professor Hellemans (2010) once referred to how doctors in Belgium take the Hippocratic Oath while graduating at the university. It is a vow or a commitment in which the newly graduated medical doctors declare to dedicate their life to the service of humankind and to act according to their best judgement and ability. The importance of this vow that is expected of newly graduated medical doctors shows that at least two very different conceptions of what makes a good doctor and, by extension, according to Hellemans (2010), also what makes a good educator are present in university curricula. First, a university curriculum is designed to equip professionals to be specialists in a particular body of knowledge and the prevailing quality criteria of that knowledge. Second, a university curriculum is also designed to enable professionals to recognise that, as professionals, they will often be forced to leave the safety of their expertise and profess what may be possible. This second notion of being a professional is about a commitment to surrender oneself to the concreteness of a situation and in doing so, to do justice to the people and a cause considered important in society. As the interviews show, for second-chance educators this is about persisting the belief that everyone can learn everything and make it happen that traces of the past no longer cast a shadow on second-chance students' abilities in the present.

As we already indicated, the main reason we also choose to read the so-called classical authors of adult education during this course is that these authors and their theories continue to express adult educators' commitment to important educational issues, such as the importance of critical reflection and democracy, the importance of transformative learning and biographicity etc. Yet, the aim of the analysis of the interviews with adult educators is neither to test particular theoretical assumptions, nor to develop a fine-grained critique about the dominance of a quality management approach in adult education today. The interest of this study practice we presented in this article is more modest and ambitious at the same time. It is an invitation to search for ways that can further unlock this commitment to educational issues in the profession of adult educators. In her analysis of the World Bank and the OECD discourse on lifelong learning, Elfert (2019) speaks of an unfailure of utopian visions in adult education, such as 'learning to be' (in Faure report, 1972) or 'learning to live together' (in Delors report, 1996). She borrows this concept of the unfailure of utopian ideas from social movement researchers in order to highlight both the limitations and the possibilities of prophetic visions, such as solidarity among all the people of the world or education for the betterment of both adult life and society. What Elfert's analysis indicates is that these

visions have failed in their impact on lifelong learning policy, but that they are still present in the way adult educators articulate the kind of educational work they do every day.

In the study practice with bachelor students, we took up the challenge to articulate this commitment: we invited both bachelor students and adult educators to reflect on what adult educators actually do, say and relate to while doing their educational work. This regional course blends teaching theory and doing empirical research in such a way that it becomes possible to articulate how the engagement of adult educators happens in the here-and-now of what we have called a minor pedagogy. This is about a skillful commitment to working with adults, materials and situations as they occur in day-to-day practice, and which makes adult educators reach out rather than retreat into preconceived quality rules or idealizations. In doing so, this minor pedagogy contradicts the quality management approach. Collecting and carefully analyzing these accounts of such an engagement of adult educators can stir up the emancipatory force of this minor pedagogy and can cultivate a sensitivity for the small gestures that are crucial in the profession of adult educators. In doing so, the university can become a place where both classical theories on adult education and the actual profession of adult educators are kept in a fragile and never closed order as they are exposed to the imagination and critical judgment of students, professionals and lecturers.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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

Acknowledgement

We want to express our gratitude to all the students for the interviews and analysis they conducted; to all the adult educators who engaged in this research-teaching practice and Viktor Swillens, the teaching assistant, for all the work he did to make this research-teaching initiative possible.

I dedicate this article to Goele Cornelissen. Goele encouraged me to engage in academic teaching and research on adult education. Goele died far too young, but her care for adult education is what I carry with me.

References

- Alheit, P. (1996). Biographical learning: Theoretical outline, challenges and contradictions of a new approach in adult education. In P. Alheit, A. Bron-Wojciechowska, E. Brugger & P. Dominicé (Eds.), *The biographical approach in European adult education* (pp. 57-74). Verband Wiener Volksbildung.
- Alheit, P., & Dausien, B. (2002). The 'double face' of lifelong learning: Two analytical perspectives on a 'silent revolution'. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 34(1), 3-22.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2002.11661458>
- Biesta, G. (2022). School-as-institution or school-as-instrument? How to overcome instrumentalism without giving up democracy. *Educational theory*, 72(3), 319-313.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12533>
- Boeren, E., & Whittaker, S. (2018). A typology of education and training provisions for low educated adults. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 50(1), 4-18.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2018.1520017>
- Bowl, M. (2017). *Adult Education in Neoliberal Times: Policies, Philosophies and Professionalism*. Springer.

- Brookfield, S. D. (2005). Undermining the very democracy we seek to create: discussion practices in adult education and the dangers of repressive tolerance. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 27(2), 101-115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01580370500169860>
- Dewey, J. (1944) *Democracy and Education*. The Free Press.
- Dewey, J. (1980) *Art as Experience*. Perigee Books.
- Egetemeyer, R., & K  pplinger, B. (2011). Professionalisation and quality management: struggles, boundaries and bridges between two approaches. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 2(1), 21-35. <https://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.rela0058>
- Elfert, M. (2019). Revisiting the Faure Report and the Delors Report: Why Was UNESCO’s Utopian Vision of Lifelong Learning an “Unfailure”? In B. Grummell & F. Finnegan (Eds.), *Power and Possibility in Contemporary Adult Education* (pp. 17-25). Brill Sense Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004413320_002
- Eurostat. (n.d.). *Population by educational attainment level, sex and age (%) -main indicators (EDAT LFSE 03)*. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDAT_LFSE_03/default/table?lang=en
- Eurydice. (2015). *Adult Education and Training in Europe: Widening Access to Learning Opportunities*. Publication office of the European Union. <https://op.europa.eu/s/o2qj>
- Evans, L. (2008). Professionalism, Professionality and the Development of Education Professionals. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 56(1), 20-38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8527.2007.00392.x>
- Federation for second chance education Flanders. (2021). *Indrukwekkend onderwijs dat werkt: 40 jaar Federatie Tweedekansonderwijs Vlaanderen* vzw [Impactful education that works: 40 years Federatie Tweedekansonderwijs Vlaanderen npo]. Federatie Tweedekans Onderwijs Vlaanderen vzw.
- Fenwick, T. (2006). The Audacity of Hope: Towards Poorer Pedagogies. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 38(1), 9-24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2006.11661521>
- Fenwick, T., & Edwards, R. (2013). Performative ontologies. Sociomaterial approaches to researching adult education and lifelong learning. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 4(1), p. 49-63. <https://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.rela0104>
- Fenwick, T., & Edwards R. (2014). Networks of knowledge, matters of learning, and criticality in higher education. *Higher Education*, 67(1), 35-50. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9639-3>
- Freidson E. (1986). *Professional Powers: A Study of the Institutionalization of Formal Knowledge*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Freidson, E. (2001). *Professionalism: the third logic*. Polity press.
- Hellemans, M. (2010). *Pleidooi voor een beetje idealiteit* [Plea for a little more ideality]. Plechtige promotie Pedagogische wetenschappen [Solemn ceremony Educational sciences]. University of Ghent.
- Ingold, T. (2020). On building a University for the Common Good. *Philosophy and Theory in Higher Education*, 2(1), 45-68. <https://doi.org/10.3726/ptihe.2020.01.03>
- Kelchtermans, G. (2009). Who I am in how I teach is the message: self-understanding, vulnerability and reflection. *Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice*, 15(2), 257-272. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540600902875332>
- Kemmis, S. (2019). *A Practice Sensibility: An Invitation to the Theory of Practice Architectures*. Springer.
- Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy*. Prentice Hall/Cambridge.
- Kreber, C. (2015). Transforming employment-oriented adult education to foster Arendtian action: rebuilding bridges between community and vocational education. *Adult education quarterly*, 65(2), 100-115. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713614566674>
- Manning, E. (2016). *The Minor Gesture*. Duke University Press.
- Mezirow, J. (1978). Perspective transformation. *Adult Education*, (28), 100-110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/074171367802800202>
- Mezirow, J. (2012). Learning to Think Like an Adult: Core Concepts of Transformation Theory. In E. W. Taylor & P. Cranton (Eds.), *Handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 3-20). Jossey-Bass.
- Monteyne, S. (2021). 40 jaar Tweedekansonderwijs onder de loep. Het profiel van de afgestudeerden, deelnamemotieven en de impact van een diploma in kaart gebracht: een mixed methods onderzoek [40 years of Second Chance Education under the microscope. The profile of its graduates, participation motives and the impact of a diploma mapped: a mixed methods study] [Master’s thesis, KU Leuven].

- Olesen, H.R. (2006). Beyond the abstractions! Adult education research from idealism to critical social science. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 25(3), 241-256.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370600697128>
- Raes, A. (2008). *Effecten op het gebied van sociale, professionele en educatieve redzaamheid na deelname aan het Tweedekansonderwijs in Vlaanderen: een kwantitatief onderzoek* [Effects on social, professional and educational competence after participation in Second-chance education in Flanders: a quantitative study] [Master's thesis, University of Ghent].
- Research voor Beleid. (2010). *Key competences for adult learning professionals: Contribution to the development of a reference framework of key competences for adult learning professionals*. (Project number: B3542). Research voor Beleid.
https://pascalobservatory.org/sites/default/files/keycomp_0.pdf
- Rider, S., Josephson, P., Östling, J., & Karlsohn, T. (2014). The Very Idea of Higher Education: Vocation of Man or Vocational Training? In P. Josephson, T. Karlsohn & J. Östling (Eds.), *The Humboldtian tradition: origins and legacies* (pp. 191-211). Brill.
- Römer, T. A. (2012). Imagination and Judgment in John Dewey's Philosophy: Intelligent transactions in a democratic context. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 44(2), 133-150.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2009.00623.x>
- Rubenson, K., & Elfert, M. (2019). Examining the "weak field" of adult education. In A. Fejes & E. Nylander (Eds.), *Mapping out the research field of adult education and learning* (pp. 15-31). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-10946-2_2
- Savransky, M. (2021). Problems All the Way Down. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 38(2), 3-23.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276420966389>
- Schatzki, T. R. (2019). *Social Change in a Material World*. Routledge.
- Schildermans, H., Simons, M., & Masschelein, J. (2019). The adventure of study: thinking with artifices in a Palestinian experimental university. *Ethics and Education*, 14(2), 184-197.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2019.1587680>
- Simons, M. (2022, March 25-27). *Don't take it personally: The scandal of school and democracy* [Conference presentation]. Annual Conference of Philosophy of Education, Oxford, Great Britain.
- Snedden, D., & Dewey, J. (1977). Two Communications. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 7(1), 33-39.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1179397>
- Stengers, I. (2021). Putting Problematization to the Test of Our Present. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 38(2), 71-92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276419848061>
- Wenger, E. (2008). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- West, L. (2020). Democratic and Intercultural Dialogue across Universities, Communities and Movements. In B. Grummell & F. Finnegan (Eds.), *Power and Possibility in Contemporary Adult Education*. Brill.