

Thematic issue of RELA:

The role of adult educators in older adults' learning: Theory, research, policy and practice

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The education of older adults is being put forward as one of the most crucial challenges facing current adult European education (Schmidt-Hertha, Formosa & Fragoso, 2019, p. 207). Researchers focus on the interface between older adults learning and the impact on their wellbeing and active ageing in society. The current proposed special issue concentrates on the important yet less discussed topic of the experiences of learning of older adults in relation to the teaching by adult educators as well as the role of adult educators in the teaching and learning of older adults. The theme was also introduced in the joint conference of the ESREA Network on Education and Learning of Older Adults (ELOA) and the Research Network on Adult Educators, Trainers and their Professional Development (ReNAdeT) in Tallinn 2023.

According to Hachem (2023), the discussion about the teacher's role in older adults learning has been currently reactivated by scholars, as one strand of the principles of educational gerontology addresses facilitation (Hachem, 2020). In the debate that has started almost thirty years ago, conflicting principles were advocated. Percy (1990) believes that there is no distinctive role for teachers in empowering and emancipating their students. On the contrary, Glendenning and Battersby (1990) support Freire's standpoints suggesting that the educator should always maintain a directive role (Freire, 1987 in Mayo, 1995). Formosa (2011) adds a transformative rationale by which the educator in the field of older people's learning should be more informed in terms of knowledge and in terms of the horizon that he or she wants to reach.

It is evident from the above that older adults' learning and teaching cannot be seen in isolation from the adult educator. The roles of the educator and the older learner are interrelated. There is a relational interdependence between educators' identity, training and professionalism and the benefits resulting to older learners, from participating in adult education, as well as the success of the programme that meets older adults' needs (Piliri & Gravani, 2023).

Older and younger people's equal access to learning declared in paper, it does not ensure equal access to learning in practice (Wulff & Lassen, 2024). It is known that inadequate teaching of older adults has a negative effect on their well-being (Dickinson & Gregor, 2006) and further learning (Duay & Bryan, 2008). Various authors have formulated teaching principles to meet the needs resulting from age-related cognitive and social change in individual ageing (Tambaum, 2015) and therefore the preparation of educators for supporting older people learning is recommended (Tambaum, 2021; 2023).

The aforementioned paves the way for raising a number of questions worth exploring, such as: the extent to which adult educators' training and knowledge in educating special groups, such as older adults, influence the process of teaching and learning and in what ways? How educators of older adults are prepared to perform according to high standards and be professionals? Is there any need for them to have been qualified appropriately? What is the role of the State (macro-level), organizations (meso-level) and individuals (micro-level) in achieving professionalism, in the case of adult educators? Does the society see educators of older adults as a qualified job?

It is also worth unveiling the multifaceted process of intergenerational learning that takes place as a result of the interaction between the adult educator and the older learners. What sort of internal and external obstacles, fears and stereotypes, if there any, interfere and prohibit this learning process? In what ways these barriers to older adults' learning can be eliminated? What kind of role could the adult educator play in this? What sort of methods, techniques and pedagogical teaching practices could the educators of older adults employ in their everyday practice to facilitate the process of learning? What is the role of critical pedagogy and dialogical learning, which is characterized by Formosa (2012) as a key pillar of critical educational gerontology principles, in maximizing the benefits of learning for older adults?

Critical pedagogy and in particular dialogical learning are based on the belief that learning in advanced age is not a neutral practice (Formosa, 2012). It can lead older learners to have control of their thoughts and fears that inhibit their action to change their life circumstances. Through dialogical learning, human beings reflect on their reality as they construct and reconstruct it (Freire, 1999; 2005). Therefore, dialogical learning can be considered as a key pedagogical strategy to encourage participants to act critically (Freire, 2005).

Although the concept it is deeply rooted in adult education, particularly in the radical tradition associated with Freire (1999; 2005) and has been studied in contexts involving specific adult populations, such as migrants (Brown et al., 2021), relatively little attention has been paid to its effect on learning in later life (Hachem, 2023). Also, little attention has been paid to the adult educators, the actual practices and exercises implemented by them in the process of encouraging dialogic and reflective learning, when teaching older learners.

The above are some of the points and questions or comparable ones with theoretical reflections, historical analysis, and/or empirical research and practices that the papers received for this special issue, concentrating on the important role of adult educators in supporting older adults' learning, are expected to investigate.

The current call is open to all researchers in relevant fields.

Contributions are expected to be submitted by September the 30th 2024 via RELA online system.

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