

23 – 24 SEPTEMBER 2026, LJUBLJANA, SLOVENIA

ESREA ACTIVE DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP AND ADULT
LEARNING (ADCAL) RESEARCH NETWORK

LEARNING AND PRACTICING ACTIVE DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST GROWING AUTHORITARIANISM

Conference

Book of Abstracts



UNIVERSITY
OF LJUBLJANA

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Faculty
of Arts



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Layout: Nana Martinčič

Proofreading: Tina Brilej

Published by: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani (University of Ljubljana Press)

Issued by: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete Univerze v Ljubljani (University of
Ljubljana Press, Faculty of Arts)

For the publisher: Gregor Majdič, rector of the University of Ljubljana

For the issuer: Mojca Schlamberger Brezar, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, University of
Ljubljana

Ljubljana, 2026

First e-edition. Digital copy of the book is available on:

<https://ebooks.uni-lj.si/ZalozbaUL>

DOI: 10.4312/9789612978877

Kataložni zapis o publikaciji (CIP) pripravili v

Narodni in univerzitetni knjižnici v Ljubljani

COBISS.SI-ID 290250243

ISBN 978-961-297-887-7 (PDF)

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ABSTRACTS

Placemaking as a Commoning Practice: An Ethnographic Case Study of an Emerging Community Space in Lecco, Italy

In recent decades, urban space has been progressively reshaped according to neoliberal logics expressed in commodification, privatization and enclosure, which have profoundly altered its role as a site of public and collective life (Giroux, 2004; Lazzarini, 2020a, 2020b; Mayo, 2024). These transformations tend to produce increasingly segregated and depoliticized environments, restricting access and reproducing monologic narratives of spatial experience (Toolis, 2017). In this sense, the erosion of public space—and the public sphere—does not only concern its material dimension but also the conditions under which democratic encounters, civic participation and dialogic and relational learning can take place (Biesta, 2012). At the same time, urban social life exceeds the logics of planning and control. Within the interstices of the contemporary city, everyday practices—often situated, informal, “obstinate” (Finnegan & Fleming, 2023)—reveal alternative ways of inhabiting and re-signifying space, embedded in grassroots processes of social mobilization and collective action (Choudry, 2009; Melero & Gil-Jaurena, 2009; Gray & Manning, 2022). These practices bring attention to the forms of learning that emerge through living, making and re-making spaces: processes rooted in negotiation, collaboration, and also in contestation and generative conflict. In this perspective, they can illuminate and disrupt consolidated and hegemonic ways of thinking and organizing urban life, opening space for the emergence of new imaginaries (Castoriadis, 1975).

Within this landscape, *placemaking* has emerged as a key—yet deeply contested—concept in attempts to make sense of the relationship between people and space/place. Used primarily in urban studies and in the field of planning practice, the term does not refer to a single, clearly bounded definition but rather to a constellation of approaches through which spaces are physically and symbolically transformed (Ellery et al., 2021). While often mobilized within institutional and market-driven contexts, placemaking

also encompasses bottom-up and everyday practices through which people inhabit space, changing its former configuration and uses (Ellery et al., 2017; Akbar & Edelenbos, 2021). Critical approaches to placemaking suggest that it should be understood not merely as design-oriented but as a political *commoning* practice (Toolis, 2017; Zitcer, 2020) through which urban space is reclaimed, negotiated and sustained as a shared resource (Harvey, 2012). This perspective becomes particularly relevant when considering more structured and semi-institutionalized spaces, where local associations and collectives engage in the management with one another and with public and/or private institutions. Here, placemaking unfolds through the on-going negotiation of rules, roles and meanings (Bobadilla et al., 2024).

My empirical study aims to explore how these spaces come to be enacted as commons and the forms of learning that emerge through these processes. It is based on an ethnographic case study in Lecco, Italy, where a former freight station is undergoing regeneration and is envisioned as a future community space. Data collection combines multiple qualitative methods—observations, informal conversations with residents, walking interviews, and focus groups—involving local residents, members of associations and collectives, and institutional actors engaged in the project. The preliminary findings suggest a set of underlying tensions: between openness and real accessibility; between civic imaginaries of public space and forms of private management; and between participatory rhetoric and its concrete enactment, often producing feelings of limited agency and disengagement. These dynamics extend beyond the site itself, prompting further exploration of other collective spaces in the city and informing a broader understanding of how commons are enacted in practice.

Keywords: adult learning and education, commoning, critical placemaking, urban space, informal learning

Co-creating a Professional Activism Community of Practice: Adult Learning and Political Education through Collective Action in Inland Regions

In the context of growing authoritarian tendencies and neoliberal pressures that constrain democratic participation, adult education (AE) is increasingly called upon to foster collective, critical and solidaristic forms of political action. Within this framework, Professional Activism (PA)—understood as professionals’ political mobilisation on behalf of people in situations of vulnerability (PSV) with whom they work—emerges as a significant form of professional political engagement, particularly in inland regions where structural constraints tend to limit opportunities for PA (Costa et al., 2021a, 2021b).

This paper presents and critically analyses the process and results of the co-creation of a Professional Activism Community of Practice (PA CoP), developed as part of the *ProActCoP – Co-creating Knowledge about/and Action for Change in Inland Regions* project in Portugal. Grounded in critical theories of adult education, social movement learning and communities of practice (Freire, 1975; Foley, 1999; Choudry, 2015; Lave & Wenger, 1991), the study explores how participatory, practice-based learning environments can foster political subjectivities, collective agency and democratic engagement among professionals working in educational, social and community contexts.

Using qualitative and participatory methodologies, the PA CoP brings together approximately 20 professionals working with PSV in inland regions. The process unfolds through a series of online and face-to-face workshops combining reflective dialogue, experiential sharing and collective action. Activities include the co-construction of knowledge on PA, the identification of shared concerns and practices, and the planning and implementation of a collective activist initiative, incorporating artistic and digital forms of expression.

Data are generated through ethnographic observation and focus group discussion, focusing on relational dynamics, learning processes and forms of collective organisation. The preliminary findings suggest that the CoP constitutes a meaningful space for informal political education, enabling the development of activist identities, and fostering collective forms of agency. The artistic and collaborative dimensions appear particularly relevant in enhancing participation, visibility and political expression.

The paper argues that co-created communities of practice on PA can function as critical pedagogical spaces where adult learning and activism intersect, contributing to increase the visibility and dissemination of PA efforts and practices developed within these contexts. It contributes to debates on the role of AE in supporting grassroots forms of resistance and in re-politicising professional practice, especially in contexts marked by social and structural dynamics that limit or inhibit these professionals' engagement with PA, such as precarity, invisibility, and limited opportunities and infrastructures for political and civic engagement, as well as for political education.

Keywords: professional activism, inland regions, communities of practice, adult learning, political education and participation

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Mapping Professional Activism in Inland Regions: Experiences, Constraints and Opportunities for Political Action and Learning

This paper presents findings from the qualitative component of a broader mapping of Professional Activism (PA) in inland regions of Portugal, conducted as part of the *ProActCoP – Co-creating Knowledge about/and Action for Change in Inland Regions* project.

Professional Activism (PA)—understood as professionals’ political mobilisation on behalf of people in situations of vulnerability (PSV) with whom they work—remains a relatively underexplored field, particularly in inland regions where it tends to be less visible and less supported. Existing research suggests that professionals working in these contexts often face more precarious conditions, limited access to resources, and fewer opportunities and infrastructures for political and civic engagement, as well as for political education, which can constrain sustained and collective forms of political action. At the same time, much PA in inland regions remains invisible, making it harder to recognise, document and support.

The paper focuses on semi-structured interviews with thirteen professionals and organisational representatives working with PSV. Building on previous research on PA (Costa et al., 2021a, 2021b) and traditions of learning in and through activism (Foley, 1999; Choudry, 2015), the study aims to characterise forms of PA engagement and examine how inland contexts shape professionals’ (dis)engagement, as well as their perceived needs regarding political education and participation. The study is currently in the data analysis phase, with emerging indications pointing to the relevance of structural and contextual conditions in shaping opportunities for PA, and to the ways in which PA practices and learning processes are experienced and articulated by participants, as well as to key areas in which participants perceive a need for further education and training.

By making these situated forms of professional political engagement and learning visible, the study contributes to debates on the role of adult education in supporting more context-sensitive and politically engaged forms of practice.

Keywords: professional activism, inland regions, adult learning, political education, qualitative research

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Adult Education and Learning for Active Democracy: From Neoliberal to Diffractive Subjectivation

Nowadays, building active democracy is more difficult than ever before. In our view, this is closely linked to the transition from a disciplinary society, where power was located “outside” the individual, to the neoliberal “achievement society” (Han, 2015), where the individual is much less subject to external commands, e.g. norms or social rules. We are thus dealing with a self-referential subject who is “entirely incapable of stepping outward, of standing outside itself, of relying on the Other, on the world” (Han, 2015, p. 42). Han calls such an entity an “achievement subject,” oriented towards individual success, entangled in absolute competition (Han, 2015). In contrast, active democracy requires a subject who is aware of being part of a community, both creating it and being created by it. Such a subject can be a diffractive subject (Barad, 2007). This is a subject who understands not only their own agency in the world and the fact that their existence makes a difference in the world, but also the agency of the world itself (e.g., social structures). They are aware of their intra-active entanglement with the world and are ontologically sensitive to the kind of world they help create. They are open to others, including non-humans.

The aim of this presentation is to analyze the neoliberal subject of achievement and the diffractive subject as opposing concepts of constructing subjectivity in the contemporary world. We emphasize that the foundation of active democracy is the diffractive subject, which enables social change and the ability to go beyond the “inferno of the same” (Han, 2017, p. 41) also being an essential element of social resistance. We emphasize that the development of the diffractive subject takes place mainly in intra-actions with the world, within communities, including non-(only)human ones, and should be supported by world-centred education (Biesta, 2021). Our analyses are primarily based on Han’s poststructuralism. Meanwhile, Barad’s post-humanist agential realism serves as a framework for constructing the

diffractive subject. We also emphasize that the diffractive subject may be the appropriate response to the civilization of crises. Transcending humanism is a necessary condition not only for addressing polycrisis. In our presentation, we indicate not only what consequences the adoption of new, relational ontologies and understandings of the subject have for adult learning and education, but we also point out that one of the consequences is the abandonment of understanding active democracy as (neo)liberal democracy. When connected with ALA theories (namely Mezirow and Wenger), diffraction offers a way to rethink how learning happens through entanglements, materialities, and collective meaning-making. While Mezirow helps explain transformative shifts in meaning, Wenger explains learning through participation in practice. A diffractive subject's learning expands both by emphasizing entanglement, materiality, and relational becoming. Diffractive adult learning is therefore not simply reflective or participatory. It is deeply emergent, relational, embodied, and produced through entanglements with difference.

Keywords: active democracy, diffractive subject, world-centred education

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Migrants as Organic Intellectual Educators in a Two-Way Integration Process

While in adult education, citizenship and citizenship education in relation to migrant integration are often conceived through their status as foreigners and a socialisation function, this does not mean that migrants are not embedded in their local community and do not participate in democratic processes within the receiving society. This paper thus moves away from the above mentioned conceptualisation and regards citizenship and citizenship education as a democratic practice that has a subjectification function (Mikulec, 2017), where all community members, regardless of their status, can actively participate in the public sphere, speak as its equal members and thus learn democratic practices from one another. It is particularly interested in migrants' agentic power and their active participation in the community and the public sphere in relation to migrant integration. Although much adult education scholarship in this area is sensitive to the diverse needs of migrants and critical towards generic migrant (re)settlement and integration programs, it still focuses mostly on the learning needs of migrants, rather than also on the learning needs of the receiving society to adopt to growing migration in a two-way integration process (Samaluk, 2020; Shan & Guo, 2023).

The paper addresses this gap by exploring how migrants publicly voice their concerns, enter into dialogue with the local community, raise public consciousness about their conditions, and strive towards changing oppressive social structures. It departs from a wider understanding of migrant integration and radical adult education theory grounded within Gramscian counter-hegemony struggles and Freirean critical pedagogy (Elias & Merriam, 2005; Freire, 2005; Samaluk & Kunz, 2022) to examine a case study of a migrant-led communal space and the advocacy organisation Ambasada ROG, which emerged in Slovenia as a response to the 2015 crisis of the European refugee policy. The analysis is based on participant observation at public events organised by Ambasada ROG and secondary sources of data featuring over 190 stories written by migrants in the newsletter *Tukaj smo*

[*We Are Here*], published on Ambasada ROG's social media, websites, and in six printed issues.

The findings show that by sharing their stories and actively engaging with the wider community, migrants act as organic intellectual educators who raise other migrants' political consciousness, public awareness about complex migrant conditions, and put pressure on the government to change its migration policies. In their role as organic educators, they defy the logic of invisibility and reveal that migrant integration starts from day one, yet the opportunities they get define what this integration will be like and whether they can gain economic and social security and become beings for themselves or remain exploited beings for others. Through their active participation in the community, they also build bridges with local populations and develop solidaristic communities of struggle that campaign against the inequalities faced by migrants and to a certain extent also transform oppressive laws and policies.

Keywords: radical adult education, migration, integration, migrants' agency, active citizenship

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Manès Sperber Revisited: The Courage of Doubt

This paper revisits Manès Sperber from the perspective of adult education practice, especially political education, and asks what his work can contribute to democratic citizenship under conditions of growing authoritarianism. It reconstructs Sperber as a thinker whose writings help us understand how adult learning can confront oppression, manipulation, and the erosion of spaces for critical thought without reproducing authoritarian patterns in the name of emancipation.

Sperber was a survivor of the catastrophe he later called the “Churban” and a witness to a century marked by violence and rupture. His biography is the history of a “faithful heretic” who continued to revise himself into old age (Sperber, 1980, p. 26). After breaking with religious orthodoxy and later with communist dogmatism, he became a radical critic of authoritarian systems and of the forms of thinking that sustain them. Based on reflection on his own errors, he turned toward the analysis of “false alternatives” and the ways ideology distorts perception, judgment, and responsibility (Sperber, 1963/1981, pp. 285–290). Even after catastrophe, his thinking remained marked by a productive tension between courage and doubt. He evokes the image of a bridge over an abyss toward an uncertain other shore as the figure of the unfinished human being who advances only as far as courage allows (Sperber, 1975, p. 12).

A central argument of this paper is that Sperber links the critique of authority to the level of the subject (Sperber, 1934/1981; 1937/1987). As an individual psychologist working in social-pedagogical practice, he asks not only how authority operates politically, but how it takes shape in acting, thinking, and feeling. The authoritarian temptation is therefore also a problem of subject formation, of needs, fears, and attachments through which domination becomes psychically effective. This makes Sperber especially relevant today. In the face of increasingly authoritarian shifts driven by the far right and by Islamist and other religious or political forms of authoritarianism, his work helps political education resist such developments without falling

into authoritarian responses of its own. For Sperber, the decisive question remained the same: What are the concrete contents of freedom, and how can authority be overcome rather than merely reversed?

I argue that one of Sperber's most important educational contributions—although he never formulated it explicitly as a pedagogical imperative—is the notion of productive doubt and, closely tied to his school and reframing of individual psychology (Sperber 1932; 1970), the courage to doubt (Sperber, 1956/1994, p. 202). Doubt, in his sense, is not weakness or relativism. It is resistance to authoritarian certainty, ideological simplification, and the socially organized lie. Political education, from this perspective, must create spaces in which distorted perception becomes accessible and open to criticism, whether in the form of pressure to conform, moral imperatives, antisemitism as a total explanation of the world, or collective identifications that demand submission. By reconstructing these insights across his pedagogical reflections, ideology critique, autobiographical writings, and novels, the paper proposes Sperber as an urgently relevant interlocutor for contemporary adult education theory and practice.

Keywords: Manès Sperber, doubt, individual psychology, critical educational theory, authoritarianism

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Evaluating the Impact of the Erasmus+ Programme on Adult Education in Slovenia: Evidence of Civic Engagement and Democratic Participation

This paper examines the impact of the Erasmus+ Adult Education (AE) programme on beneficiary organisations and adult learners regarding participation in democratic life (e.g. voting, joining community organisations, volunteering, peaceful protests), common values (i.e. human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, and respect for human rights), and civic engagement (i.e. participation in society) (European Commission, 2024). Previous studies have shown that European Union (EU) AE policy has primarily strengthened economic and vocational perspectives on AE (e.g., Field, 2018; Holford & Milana, 2023; Lima & Guimaraes, 2024), while studies examining the impact of the Erasmus+ programme in AE have found that although Erasmus+ supports social goals and counterbalances the dominant vocational orientation of European AE policy (Buiskol et al., 2024; Mikulec & Kristl, 2025), it has the least impact on participation in democratic life, common values, and civic engagement, and thus on the promotion of active citizenship. The main objective is thus to investigate how Erasmus+ does or does not contribute to the promotion of active citizenship in one EU Member State—Slovenia—by offering adults opportunities to participate in democratic life, social and civic engagement through non-formal learning activities.

Researchers conceptualise citizenship education differently because citizenship is a dynamic concept (changing over time), contextual (its meaning depends on different societies), contested (lacking consensus about the meaning of a “good citizen”), and multidimensional, comprising distinct but interrelated dimensions (Schugurensky, 2010; Joris et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2022). To analytically address the multidimensional nature of citizenship, we draw on Schugurensky’s framework (2010; cf. Joris et al., 2022), which distinguishes four dimensions of citizenship and citizenship education: citizenship as status (legal membership), citizenship as identity (belonging),

citizenship as civic virtues (values), and citizenship as agency (being in action). Additionally, as some AE researchers distinguish between socialising and transformative citizenship practices, or two modalities of civic learning—socialisation and subjectification (e.g., Biesta, 2011; Wildemeersch & Fejes, 2018)—we use this as an additional analytical lens.

The impact is analysed at the meso and micro levels. The study employs mixed-methods research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data, targeting AE beneficiaries participating in Erasmus+ projects during 2021–2025, are collected via an online survey. The qualitative data are collected through: (1) document analysis of existing sources (the Erasmus+ project results database and project reports); (2) focus group interviews with directors, Erasmus+ coordinators, and professional staff from selected participating AE organisations; and (3) interviews with adult learners participating in Erasmus+.

This work is in progress. However, we anticipate that it will contribute to knowledge creation by showing (1) whether the Erasmus+ programme supports active citizenship in practice as defined by the programme and if so, (2) which dimensions of citizenship the Erasmus+ programme supports most.

Keywords: adult education, citizenship education, Erasmus+, Slovenia

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Global Freedom of Movement and Its Impact on Adult Education: Imagining an Alternative Future

Ethno-nationalist and racist politics foster restrictive international border regimes, as recently became evident with the Pact on Migration and Asylum, which entered into force in June 2024 and is currently being implemented by national states. Secured and armed borders, paving the way to human rights violations and global injustices (e.g. Cuttitta & Last, 2020; Mau, 2021; International Organisation for Migration, 2023), are among the reasons why both activists and researchers are looking for anti-hegemonic alternatives. Meanwhile, the idea of global freedom of movement as a possible alternative is discussed broadly (e.g. Benhabib, 2004; Carens, 1987; Heller et al., 2019). However, the debate rather emphasizes the philosophical and ethical aspects (in the field of education e.g. Mecheril, 2020). The potential consequences of global freedom of movement across different sectors of society have received comparatively little attention (e.g. Pécoud & Guchteneire, 2007; Washington, 2023), and the topic is rarely considered within the field of adult education.

Following the call for papers, we would like to open a discussion on the topic of global freedom of movement against the backdrop of current political debates around migration, nationalism and restrictive border regimes. At the same time, together with the participants, we would like to *try out* and reflect on a workshop method (utopian thinking) that we consider promising for democratic learning processes.

In the proposed workshop, we address the participants as experts in the field of adult education and want to discuss the topic from two perspectives: what impact would global freedom of movement have on their personal lives, and how would it affect adult educators, participants of adult education and the system of adult education? We will guide the participants through this process of imagining a counter-hegemonic future with methods that generate utopian thinking, such as brainwalking, creating collages, etc. In a second step, we will reflect on this process by discussing the

learning impact of imagining the future, especially with regards to democracy and solidarity.

Keywords: global freedom of movement, utopia, alternative future, adult education

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Beyond Competencies: A Framework for Civic Literacy in an Era of Democratic Disillusionment

In the current “polycrisis,” many adults feel overwhelmed by the demands of active citizenship, leading to a “thin” democracy (Barber, 1984), where participation is reduced to voting and the passive consumption of government services. The recognition of this “thin” democracy prompted a surge in academic literature aimed at defining the specific civic competences (knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values) required to sustain a “strong” and participatory democratic life (e.g. Council of Europe, 2018). However, the discourse around increasingly exhaustive lists of competences can produce a paradoxical effect: while aiming to empower citizens, it may also contribute to feelings of inadequacy, withdrawal, or disengagement when the threshold for “adequate” citizenship appears unattainably high. In the German context, for instance, this is theorized as *Demokratieverdrossenheit* (democracy weariness), a disenchantment where citizens feel that the democratic system is too complex and their individual agency is too diminished to matter (Arzheimer, 2013).

Against this background, we suggest a shift in perspective. Instead of treating civic literacy as a precondition that must be met before participation becomes possible, it can be understood as something that develops in and through participation. This makes it possible to frame civic literacy not as an overwhelming set of expectations but as a feasible and meaningful practice. From this starting point, we align with the perspective that democracy is not only a system of institutions but an overarching way of living together (Dewey, 1916), what Barber (1984) refers to as “strong democracy,” an ongoing process of co-creation of one’s shared social and political worlds (Boyte et al., 2014). Civic literacy, then, is the willingness and ability to engage as co-creators of shared social and political worlds, “involving creative agency and a form of loyalty—a commitment to a civic-minded co-creation” (Boyte et al., 2014, p. 206).

The baseline of civic literacy is an orientation to the values of democracy, and the willingness to enact those values in an effort to be a co-shaper of the world. For us, the most foundational value underlying democracy is human dignity, that every human being is born “free and equal in dignity and rights” (U.N. General Assembly, 1948). This orientation is enacted through the interaction of *principles* and *practices*. Principles—such as autonomy, solidarity, rationality, and pluralism—translate dignity into guidance for action. Practices—such as listening across difference, negotiating conflict, and organizing collective efforts—are the situated ways in which these principles are enacted. Their relationship is important: principles without practices remain abstract, while practices without principles risk becoming technocratic or anti-democratic. This opens a space for rethinking adult learning not in the sense of preparation for citizenship, but more as a site where democratic life is already being enacted and made.

Keywords: civic literacy, human dignity, co-creation, democratic principles, adult learning

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Educators' Professional Cultures in Socioculturally Complex Postdigital Environments: Decolonial Perspectives

The paper aims to discuss some theoretical aspects of an ongoing research project, which focuses on the role that postdigital environments can play within current diverse ALE and social work contexts. The research is of a theoretical-pedagogical nature and is aimed at supporting the training of educators and social workers in initial and in-service training courses. The research starts from a decolonial approach to educational research in postdigital and socioculturally complex environments. The main hypothesis is that decolonial perspectives can help educators and social workers to critically reflect on their own educational cultures in diverse postdigital environments. In fact, an educational approach inspired by post- and decolonial perspectives (Spivak, 2012; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) seeks to distance itself from the assumptions emerging from colonial-type relations, first from the tendency to distinguish “us” and “them”. Instead, a self-reflexive approach invites us to increase our awareness of the situated character of our educational cultures (Sleeter, 2012). Such a critical perspective is also relevant in today’s post-digital educational contexts (Jandrić et al., 2018). A “colonial” approach to the role that “post-digital” can play in diverse environments continues to maintain the attention only on learners’ practices; instead, a critical post- and decolonial approach should focus also on the sociomaterial features of educator’s cultures, i.e. on the emerging characteristics of “our” way of “educating” through/within postdigital environments. It is also on these “professional” cultures and on how “we” can try to become aware of them that a decolonial approach to postdigital environments should focus in order to further explore the role that more self-reflexive professionals can play in fostering critical democratic citizenship within socioculturally complex environments.

Keywords: decolonial perspectives, critical democratic citizenship, ALE, social work, postdigital environments

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Undoing Privilege for Democracy: How Can We Teach Hope and Empathy to Increasingly Disillusioned Young Adults?

Emancipatory Freirean pedagogy is as relevant today as it has ever been, as the conference call for papers illustrates. At the same time, there is a need to radically extend the insights of classic scholars such as Freire and hooks in light of new contemporary forms of domination that keep arising (Grušovnik, 2022; Nichols, 2011). Sexism, consumerism and authoritarian ideas are growing among young adults, who have become jaded, isolated and whose very futures are threatened by war, climate change, and AI's pervasive integration into every facet of our lives. In the Swedish context, the nationwide survey *Ungdomsbarometern* (2025), which has been conducted annually for the past 40 years, reveals a growing "value gap" and polarization regarding gender issues, with a significant decline in the desire to be perceived as "open and tolerant", dropping from 43% in 2014 to 29% in 2024. This trend is coupled with a "return of materialism" and a surge in consumerist values that prioritize individual economic success over social idealism (ibid). Such data suggests a strong correlation between rising consumerism and a decline in social qualities related to empathy, such as trust, which is significantly lower among Swedish youth (38%) than the general population (57%).

As we grapple with societal fragmentation and a decline in democracy, I want in this paper to explore the practical pedagogical practices that are possible and necessary in higher education to counter dehumanizing trends and "decolonize" students' minds of oppressor mentalities. Drawing on the emancipatory Adult Learning and Education (ALE) theories of Paulo Freire (1970) and bell hooks (2000), alongside scholarship on "undoing privilege" (Nichols, 2011; Pease, 2022), I will explore the following pedagogical questions: How can we teach consciousness, collective democratic citizenship, and empathy working with materially affluent young adults in a neoliberal university? Furthermore, how can university teachers resist the pervasive

entry of AI into classrooms to carve out spaces that invite students to practice “being human together” and shed roles of dominance?

In relation to the conference theme, I argue that learning empathy and the ability to collaborate on questions of worth and values are crucial competencies required to navigate the Anthropocene and resist authoritarian attacks on democracy, which should be encouraged and taught not just in adult education but also in higher education settings.

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Highly Qualified Immigrants and Refugees (Europe and Türkiye)

In recent decades, armed conflicts, authoritarian regimes and political instability have displaced millions of migrants and refugees. Drawing on insights from exile, elite migration and refugee studies, this panel will examine how migration regimes in Europe and Türkiye simultaneously attract highly qualified individuals from Syria, Georgia and the North Caucasus, while also reproducing structural inequalities and injustices. Despite their education, skills, and professional experience, many of these individuals face significant challenges, including complex bureaucratic processes, restrictive legal frameworks, institutional barriers, and broader societal constraints. Consequently, they are often directed towards employment that does not reflect their qualifications. Language barriers and the limited recognition of foreign qualifications often lead to a loss of skills and discrimination in the labour market. At the same time, the panel will highlight the opportunities available to these individuals and the forms of solidarity and support they can access through transnational diaspora, ethnic and political networks. Adult learning and education (ALE) plays a crucial role in this context by fostering inclusion and enabling migrants and refugees to participate actively in society and strengthen democratic life. The panel also explores how highly qualified migrants and refugees respond to these challenges, for example, by pursuing further education, obtaining new certifications, and engaging in political and civic life in their host countries in order to rebuild their professional trajectories.

In this book panel, Ergün Özgür presents “Highly Qualified Immigrants and Refugees: Challenges and Opportunities Across Europe”, offering an overview of the conceptual framework. She analyses the professional

trajectories, transnational networks and resilience practices of different groups of highly qualified immigrants and refugees, including those who have pursued further education. Mustafa Şener's chapter, "Political Exile from Türkiye to Germany: Intergenerational Observations on Political Practices and Diaspora Activism", compares two waves of political migrants. The first wave (1960–1990) included activist students, trade unionists and socialist members who fled repression following the 1971 and 1980 military coups. The second wave comprises post-2015 exiles: former parliamentarians, mayors, trade unionists and journalists linked to the Kurdish political movement, who left Türkiye due to increasing authoritarianism and continued their political activism in Germany. Bahar Ayça Okçuoğlu's paper, "Fostering Diasporic Connections: The Role of Circassian Civil Society Organisations in Türkiye for Highly Qualified Syrian Circassians", examines how these organisations promote transnational solidarity and support for displaced Syrian Circassians in Türkiye. Positioned at the intersection of diaspora studies and transnational solidarity, the paper explores how these organisations address the economic, legal, cultural and social needs of individuals, and how these individuals develop their capabilities through continued education and networks. Finally, in "Navigating Multi-Actor Dynamics: Housing Trajectories of Highly Qualified Syrian Refugees in Istanbul", Fatma Gül Eryıldız Şenvardar takes an actor-centred approach to demonstrate how refugees navigate and reshape urban housing systems. They employ individual and collective strategies, such as leveraging professional qualifications, building solidarity networks, and collaborating with NGOs.

Keywords: highly qualified immigrants and refugees, forced displacement, ethno-political networks, diasporas, transnational solidarity, Europe–Türkiye–Caucasus

Fascism in Critical Theory in the Past and Critical Pedagogy in the Present

Over the past decade we've seen a remarkable rise in far-right-wing parties and movements globally (Mudde, 2016). This has spawned a very large body of academic research and journalism. One of the most interesting strands of this work draws on scholarship on fascism and makes the case for tracing links but treating the far-right today as distinct from historical fascism (Toscano, 2023; Traverso, 2019). This writing on "post" and "late" fascism, amongst other things, draws on critical theory to make sense of fascism. This paper builds on this work and will explore the strengths and limitations of early critical theory and what this might mean for critical adult educators.

Fascism was a major topic of inquiry for the Institute of Social Research between the 1930s and 1960s (Jay, 1973). The paper will briefly review the varied ways this was approached and argue that it is best thought of as a constellation of ideas and research projects. Often the extent of this diversity is flattened out in re-presentations of the history of critical theory and the paper will illustrate the diversity of approaches to fascism taken by Adorno et al. (1950), Horkheimer (1943), Benjamin (1990), and Fromm (1993), as well as the less cited work by Bloch (1990) and Neumann (1983).

Drawing on these sources, the paper will argue that this remains a rich body of work which points towards the need for an interdisciplinary, politically engaged, anti-dogmatic approach to understanding and responding to the far right. There are three things that are especially important in these writings. First, the argument that fascism is not comprehensible without a clear analysis of the dynamics, logic and phases of capitalism. Second, and this is a key area of debate and creative insight in this literature, that fascism has economic, social, political and cultural characteristics. What is required is a multidimensional theory of fascism which takes account of elite strategies and capitalist logic but also the dispositions and the imaginative and affective needs the far-right organises around but never fully answers (Bloch's

“the swindle of fulfilment”). Third, a critical theory of fascism needs to be able to trace both continuities and discontinuities in the repertoires of action, ideas and modes of mobilisation of fascists. Fascism is dynamic, plastic and only weakly ideological and therefore does not simply “repeat” itself.

Critical theory offers keen insights into the far right today, but it is hardly sufficient in itself. There is the interconnected issue of style and approach, especially in the “dominant” tradition of critical theory, which is at a distance from questions of political organising and from political struggle. It is often marred by another type of chosen distance—a relative lack of historical and empirical detail. The limitations of this became abundantly clear when one explores sociological and historical work on fascism and the far right alongside the Frankfurt school (e.g. Sternhall, Paxton, Griffin, Kershaw, Mann, and Mosse).

The last portion of the paper will draw the strands together and explore their relevance to contemporary critical pedagogy. There is relatively little literature which explicitly addresses fascism in relation to critical pedagogy (e.g. Giroux & DiMaggio, 2024; Kumar, 2017; McLaren, 2020). The paper will review this and argue that the scholastic distance from political organising remains an issue in much of what is available on this topic and that linking critical pedagogy more tightly to a theory of social movements is crucial (Novelli et al., 2024; Tarlau, 2019; Von Kotze & Walters, 2018). It will also make the case that the available literature does not focus enough on changes in social learning processes, most notably through social media (Berardi, 2018; Fuchs, 2018). The paper will conclude with comments on the importance and limitations of critical education for anti-fascist movements.

Keywords: fascism, post-fascism, critical theory, critical pedagogy

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Teacher Professional Development and Active Democratic Citizenship in Times of Polycrisis: The Italian Case between Performativity and Professional Recognition

In the context of contemporary polycrisis—characterised by the intertwining of ecological challenges, technological transformations, social inequalities, and democratic fragilities—adult learning, and in particular in-service teacher education, assumes a significance that exceeds its technical-professional dimension, emerging as a crucial space for the construction of active democratic citizenship.

From this perspective, the paper offers a critical reinterpretation of teacher professional development in the Italian context, framing it as a situated form of adult learning and as a pedagogical-political device capable of shaping democratic life. The Italian case is marked by a significant expansion of continuous professional development opportunities that, however, fails to translate into structured career pathways or meaningful forms of professional differentiation. This disconnection represents not merely an organisational limitation but a broader pedagogical and political issue with direct implications for the public dimension of teacher professionalism.

The paper argues that when in-service training is reduced to an individualised and performative obligation lacking professional recognition, it loses its generative potential and contributes to the depoliticisation of educational work. Within this configuration, teachers risk being progressively detached from their role as public actors and subjects of active citizenship, leading to a weakening of the collective dimension of the profession and of possibilities for democratic agency.

Adopting a critical pedagogical perspective, this condition is interpreted as an expression of neoliberal logics shaping contemporary educational systems, fostering individualisation, performativity, and the reduction of

professional work to technical competence. In contrast, the paper proposes a reconceptualisation of professional development as a collective and public practice of adult learning, capable of sustaining reflexivity, responsibility, and professional recognition, while contributing to the construction of educational spaces oriented towards the common good.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, theoretical-interpretative approach, integrating a review of international literature on teacher professionalism with a critical analysis of key Italian policy and regulatory frameworks. The aim is to make visible the implicit representations of learning, professionalism, and citizenship embedded in educational policies.

The findings highlight that the absence of structural connections between professional development, recognition, and career progression affects not only individual trajectories but also teachers' capacity to act as collective subjects within the public sphere. This is particularly evident in early career phases, where such conditions weaken processes of professional identity construction and limit opportunities for democratic participation.

The paper concludes by emphasising the need to rethink in-service teacher education as a space of adult learning oriented towards active democratic citizenship, capable of countering individualising and performative trends and of reactivating the role of teachers as key actors in the construction of more just, participatory, and democratic societies.

Keywords: teacher professional development, adult learning, active democratic citizenship, polycrisis, neoliberalism

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Teaching Migration in the Age of Securitization

This paper examines the pedagogical challenges of teaching migration within the broader context of securitization. Securitization is understood as a set of social processes and power relations through which marginalized groups are framed as security concerns in relation to public order, welfare, public health, or employment (Huysmans, 2006). Such frameworks shape dominant discourses, practices, and policies concerning migrants and refugees, resulting in restrictive measures conceptualized as “violent borders” (Jones, 2016).

Securitization also shapes emotions and permeates migration teaching. A key component of teaching migration involves disrupting normative assumptions, requiring students to critically reflect on their positionality, power, and belonging. This process often produces discomfort and resistance, as it challenges dominant narratives (Piacentini, 2025). Such reactions are expected, particularly within increasingly depoliticized university settings.

An important pedagogical dimension concerns epistemology, specifically how knowledge about migration is produced and legitimized. Critical scholarship raises questions about whose knowledge is recognized as authoritative and whose is reduced to “experience” (Arkawi, 2024; Hodžić, 2024; Khosravi, 2024).

Methodologically, our presentation adopts an autoethnographic approach, reflecting on the authors’ pedagogical practices and their involvement in activism. Data are drawn from three sources: (1) a mutual interview offering a longitudinal perspective on 25 years of teaching; (2) student focus groups; and (3) anonymous student evaluations collected over a ten-year period. The data are analyzed using thematic analysis with a strong reflexive component, situating the findings within the broader context of securitization and conceptualizing learning as both intellectual and emotional labor. The selected cases illustrate key themes and ethical dilemmas.

The analysis is guided by four questions: (a) how power relations operate in the classroom and in migration related fieldwork; (b) which pedagogical

methods reduce social distance toward people with migration or refugee experience; (c) how to critique learning based on the consumption of others' suffering and extractivist practices, and move beyond feelings of guilt and helplessness; and (d) how teaching relates to activism.

The broader aim of teaching, research, and activism is to contribute to social justice by respecting the autonomy and dignity of migrants and refugees, bearing witness to their experiences, and supporting struggles for belonging and rights. This approach emphasizes critical reflection on knowledge production, awareness of positionality, and stronger connections between academia and migrant activism.

Keywords: migration, teaching, autoethnography, decolonial epistemology, university

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Emancipation or Precarity? Adult Education and Migrant Professional Integration in Question

The labour market integration process is a critical factor in migrants' integration into host societies and in their civic and political participation (Ager & Strang, 2008; Mozetič, 2022; Oliveira, 2023; De Haas et al., 2020). Social organisations that mediate and support this process can play a key role, functioning as educational and transformative spaces for full integration (Mozetič, 2022; Dahlberg et al., 2022; Carde et al., 2017; Lucio-Villegas & Martínez, 2007).

However, migrants face significant inequalities, job insecurity, and over-qualification (Brobeerg et al., 2024; De Haas, 2023; Oliveira, 2023). At the same time, these adult education initiatives reveal several weaknesses and tensions (Nekby, 2008; Dahlberg et al., 2022; Gubrium & Leirvik, 2022), particularly in addressing the challenges of social and cultural diversity. Such challenges demand not only skills and training that technical teams have not yet fully developed, but also forms of action that are consistently aligned with the principles of transformation, participation, and social justice (Lucio-Villegas & Martínez, 2007).

This study analyses adult education initiatives supporting migrants' professional inclusion, examining the extent to which they reinforce or counteract precariousness—that is, whether they humanise or reproduce the capitalist context (Finger & Asún, 2003). Drawing on literature on the role of work in shaping professional identities and enabling participation (Dubar, 1997; Gonçalves & Coimbra, 2007), as well as on adult education as a space for emancipatory learning (Freire, 2000; Biesta, 2011; Lima & Guimarães, 2011), a qualitative study was conducted based on semi-structured interviews with migrants and technical teams from five Portuguese initiatives.

The findings show that despite a discourse aligned with holistic and humanistic principles that value cultural and professional capital, practices are

often intermittent, oriented toward rapid labour market insertion into the secondary sector, and shaped by an instrumental logic that ultimately reproduces precariousness. Participants are primarily approached through their productive role, with limited attention to their citizenship and participation, reinforcing dynamics of social reproduction and power inequalities. Moreover, these actions appear to do little to promote processes of empowerment and self-organisation, with various forms of dependence on the support provided also being identified.

These initiatives reflect neoliberal orientations, which privilege utilitarian and measurable perspectives and outcomes while overlooking emancipatory dimensions—thus “valuing more what is measured, instead of measuring what we value” (Biesta, 2010).

By critically examining these dynamics, this study contributes insights into ways out of the industrial and neoliberal instrumentalisation to which adult education appears to be subject (Finger & Asún, 2003). Through a more critical examination of contemporary forms of integration through work and the challenges and implications of intervention in this domain, it brings important contributions to the qualification of practice: i) providing technicians with analytical tools on the symbolic impacts of their interventions; ii) proposing methodologies that counteract instrumental logic; and iii) identifying more integrated and sustainable evaluation methods and criteria.

Keywords: adult education, migrant professional integration, precarity, emancipatory learning

Follow Up: Emerging Questions and Further Research in the Project *Firewalls in Education*

The growing influence of right-wing actors presents educational institutions with institutional, pedagogical and organisational challenges. The project *Brandmauern im Bildungswesen / Firewalls in Education* was launched as a citizen science initiative to document the right-wing influence in adult education institutions around Germany. Practical experiences in the field were gathered through an online survey. A questionnaire was developed together with the researcher team of lifelong learning from the University of Hamburg, students as well as experts and institutions in the field of adult education, enabling the practitioners themselves to become researchers in their own field of work. The term “firewall” is conceptualised as a metaphor for the protection of a resilient democracy (Schroeder et al., 2024). In the empirical analysis, the term “firewall” was operationalised as a strategy against far-right influence on adult education. Radvan and Dhyr (2023) define the far right as actors who legitimise the ideology of inequality and the associated discriminatory practices. In the survey and its findings, the term is used to categorise the far-right influences on the micro, meso, and macro levels of communal adult education in Germany.

Summarised, the exploratory study shows that democratic majorities and ministerial support emerge as key factors at the macro level, for example, when responding to political proposals (Grotlüschen et al., 2025a). In addition, strategies for safeguarding organisational independence, fostering strategic alliances and implementing continuous monitoring are identified as central strategies. At the meso level, essential counter-strategies include building knowledge about far-right extremist content, strengthening staff resources in the field, and adopting clear institutional positions. Awareness raising, dialogical engagement, and conscious distancing are described as responses at the micro level (Grotlüschen et al. 2025b). The cancellation of events emerges as an implementation of firewall strategies in urgent cases.

This paper presents the follow-up of the project, focusing on practice transfer. The initial findings have already been shared and discussed within the network. Building on this first phase, the follow-up addresses questions that emerged after the initial project cycle and responds to an ongoing demand for exchange. The new material consists of reports from transfer events, such as input sessions, workshops, and lectures, at which the study's findings were discussed. It integrates new empirical data and reflects on extended networks. In addition to the initial findings, the follow-up analysis shows how the practitioners reflect on the results in light of their own experiences and what additional insights they offer regarding the complex interplay between micro, meso, and macro levels in adult education.

By expanding the qualitative analysis of practical experiences and counter-strategies, the follow-up phase contributes to a deeper understanding of how adult education institutions and practitioners respond to far-right tendencies. The sustained interest in expert input, cooperation, and dialogue highlights the relevance of continued research and exchange. The project thus supports adult educators and participants in strengthening democratic practices and active citizenship within educational settings.

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The Public Stance of Education Providers in Response to War Crimes and Genocide: A Case Study from Slovenia

To meaningfully incorporate antiauthoritarianism into adult education, education providers—namely educational institutions and teachers—must take clear antiauthoritarian actions and public positions to ensure coherence and consistency between the theory taught and practice.

This thesis is supported by several thinkers in the critical pedagogy tradition. Paulo Freire argues that educators must embody the values they teach (Freire, 1970). Public condemnation of war crimes and genocide by an educational institution would exemplify transformative praxis. Michel Foucault argues that the courageous telling of truth (Gr. *parrhesia*) is crucial in ethical self-care (Foucault, 2009). A university publicly declaring a boycott of Israeli universities complicit in genocide (Wind, 2024) would constitute a parrhesiastic action. For Ivan Illich, role models are among the main sources of learning in convivial learning webs (Illich, 1979). Similarly, classical social learning theory heavily emphasises observational learning (Bandura, 1971). If teachers teach the wrongness of genocide but do nothing to publicly condemn it, learners will follow what teachers do (i.e. nothing) rather than what they say. Moreover, John Dewey would argue that institutional culture is part of the curriculum, meaning that the public stance must not contradict the content of the curriculum (Dewey, 2001).

We do not question the findings of theorists who have sufficiently demonstrated that learning occurs not only through curricula but also through the behaviours of educators. The purpose of our research is to provide a case study to answer the question whether educational institutions in Slovenia have taken a public stand, problematised war crimes and genocide, and

taken on themselves a role model responsibility in raising awareness and teaching in the face of growing authoritarianism.

The case study, covering the period from February 2022 (the official start of the aggression against Ukraine) to October 2025 (the so-called cease-fire in the Israeli genocide in Gaza), will analyse the public positions taken by adult education providers, including public and private universities (8), independent higher education institutions (37), the Association of Folk Universities (22 folk universities), and public libraries. We will examine their public responses to war crimes and genocide widely reported in the media. Their social media profiles (Facebook and Instagram) and websites will be reviewed to determine whether and how they responded; whether they joined in with any public declarations, shared information, participated in actions, or organised events. In addition, we will conduct a standardised survey among the heads of these institutions, and finally, carry out structured, in-depth interviews with employees who have taken publicly clear positions on the topic. All collected materials will be processed using a digital tool for qualitative text analysis.

We anticipate our research will reveal a discrepancy between the lack of an unequivocal public stance by education providers regarding war crimes and genocide, and the active democratic citizenship that is assumed to be present in curricula. Therefore, we expect to identify a lack of educational role-modelling in opposing growing authoritarianism. While serving as a warning, we also expect to identify and highlight rare but valuable examples of good practice, including individuals who would likely agree with Howard Zinn's saying "You can't be neutral on a moving train" (Zinn, 2002).

Keywords: war crimes, genocide, public stance of educators, role-model-teaching, ethics

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How Radical Adult Education Helps Shape the Principles and Identity of Urban Grassroots Communities

Hegemonic neoliberal urban policies deepen marginalization, precarization, poverty, and social exclusion (Gregorčič, 2005), reinforce social inequalities (Samaluk & Kunz, 2022), and foster “stubborn individualism” (Evans & Sewell, 2013, p. 35). Additionally, while modern cities have increasingly become commodified, with cultural urbanism and re-urbanization policies implemented through public-private partnerships expanding (Evans & Sewell, 2013, p. 8), grassroots communities remain “oases of abnormality” (Lebarič, 2013, p. 22) but also resistance, responding to the mechanisms of neoliberal hegemony through conflict and the creation of alternatives (Gregorčič, 2013) focused on social changes.

In conflict with dominant neoliberal and authoritarian structures, grassroots communities are established bottom-up (Rakopoulos, 2014; Abram, 2023) and are characterized by spontaneity, independence, and autonomous formation by dissatisfied individuals who reject top-down influence, particularly from institutions or hierarchical organizations (Muršič, 2011, 2012). These communities emerge as spaces for collective learning, mutual support, and experimentation with alternative social relations (Holst, 2018; Lihtenvalner, 2022), developing an identity and guiding principles through participatory practices and radical adult educational methods. However, these processes are not without tensions: long-standing members often hold more informal power, gender and class imbalances can influence participation, and principles agreed upon collectively are not always consistently enacted (Pistotnik, 2013). Such dynamics highlight the ongoing negotiation and contestation inherent in grassroots community life.

Building on this, the present paper explores how radical adult educational methods and practices help to shape the principles and identity of urban grassroots communities. Radical adult educational methods, particularly dialogical learning as conceptualised by Paulo Freire (2019), are enacted

through various forms such as assemblies, workshops, and discussions, which in turn sustain collective practices of knowledge exchange, community-building, and self-organization. Drawing on this perspective, learning is understood as a relational and participatory process grounded in mutual trust, openness, and active listening (Giroux, 2022). Within this framework, dialogue becomes a key mechanism through which community members come together and engage in collective sense-making in contemporary urban environments, thereby shaping the principles and identity of grassroots communities.

In this research, we conducted a qualitative case study of the grassroots community Participatory Ljubljana Autonomous Zone (Plac), applying research methods such as semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and the analysis of secondary data sources, including photographs and written Facebook posts.

The paper shows how radical adult educational methods are embedded in everyday community life and play a central role in shaping its principles and identity. The findings demonstrate that dialogical methods are enacted through various forms, including assemblies, workshops, discussions, and film screenings, which create spaces for horizontal knowledge exchange and collective reflection. These forms sustain practices of mutual learning, solidarity, and self-organization through which members of a community negotiate shared values, develop trust, and construct a sense of collective identity.

The study further shows that learning in this context is not confined to structured activities but unfolds in everyday interactions where informal dialogue reinforces relationships and nurtures a shared understanding of social and political conditions, thereby sustaining the community's guiding principles of solidarity, self-organization, and resistance to hierarchical control.

In this way, radical adult education theory serves as a theoretical framework for understanding how the methods and practices of grassroots communities help members shape the community's principles and identity while simultaneously enabling resistance to hegemonic neoliberal urban policies.

Keywords: radical adult education theory, urban grassroots communities, dialogical learning, community principles and identity, neoliberal urban policies

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Tradition of Resistance: Learning from and Reactivating the Collective Memory of Student Engagement

The project *Tradition of Resistance: Community Theatre as a Living Archive of Political Memory* has been developed within the current political climate in Serbia, which is strongly shaped by ongoing student protests that began in November 2024, as well as increasing repression by the current regime, once described as a hybrid system but now rapidly transforming from an autocracy into a dictatorship. Serbian history in both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been marked by various forms of repression, which have often provoked strong responses from the academic community. These reactions have at times been specific to the national context, while in other cases, such as the protests of 1968, they formed part of broader international movements.

Conceptualised as an artistic research, the project explores the history of civic protests in Belgrade over the past hundred years. Through an interdisciplinary approach that connects social research, oral history methodology, and participatory artistic practices, the project gathers personal testimonies from participants in different waves of civic resistance. Particular focus is placed on student protests, the anti-war activism of the 1990s, the October 5th changes, and contemporary protests, all examined within a broader historical context. The research, educational activities, and public discussions involve young artists, students, researchers, and civic activists, who collaboratively shape the collected material into a documentary theatre text. The project concludes with public staged readings and the publication of a book, aiming to strengthen the collective memory of the tradition of civic resistance and to encourage transgenerational dialogue on democratic values. It also functions as an educational platform where young people can reflect on the current student movement and compare it with previous

ones. Through various educational activities and, most importantly, by acting as researchers themselves, they explore the interconnectedness of student engagement and the contexts in which such movements emerge.

One of the central focuses of the artistic research is to examine how resistance movements are shaped by past struggles and how they inherit, reinterpret, and mobilize these historical experiences in the present. The project is particularly concerned with the ways in which collective memory is preserved, transmitted, and transformed across generations, informing both the strategies and the imaginaries of contemporary activism. In this sense, it explores how movements not only draw upon the legacy of earlier forms of resistance but also actively rearticulate that memory while engaging with current political realities and envisioning possible futures.

Keywords: student movement, oral history, adult education, resistance, collective memory

Regional Universities as Spaces of Democratic Learning? Seminar-Based Learning and Democratic Practice under Neoliberal Conditions

In the context of democratic erosion, growing authoritarian tendencies and the neoliberal transformation of European societies, the question arises under which conditions democratic learning can still take place within higher education. While democratic education is often understood primarily as the transmission of civic knowledge, this paper shifts attention toward the everyday social experience of democratic practice within universities. It starts from a central contradiction: programmes such as social work strongly promote participation, community orientation and democratic engagement as professional ideals, while many students simultaneously show limited interest in institutional forms of participation and collective self-governance within higher education itself.

The paper argues that this tension should not primarily be interpreted as individual political disinterest but rather as an effect of neoliberal social and institutional conditions. Competition, self-optimisation, employability pressures and the growing experience that social problems must be managed individually weaken solidaristic orientations and make collective democratic engagement more difficult. Under these conditions, democracy increasingly appears as an abstract institutional principle rather than a lived social practice.

Against this background, the paper develops a higher education didactic perspective on democratic learning. It advances the thesis that face-to-face seminar spaces can function as central sites of democratic experience and participation. Drawing on John Dewey, Paulo Freire, bell hooks and recent approaches in deliberative pedagogy, democracy is conceptualised less as institutional knowledge than as a social practice learned through speaking, listening, disagreement and collective negotiation.

International research on democratic and deliberative pedagogy in higher education increasingly supports this perspective. Research on deliberative

pedagogy suggests that dialogic teaching formats can strengthen student participation, perspective-taking and democratic capacities (Shaffer, 2017). Studies on oral participation in higher education seminars further demonstrate that open discussion cultures, supportive learning environments and interactive teaching formats significantly influence students' willingness to participate (Mundt & Hänze, 2023). Research on deliberative discussion quality also explores how democratic discourse cultures can be empirically analysed through indicators such as argumentative reciprocity, equality of participation, respectful disagreement and collective problem-solving (Teglbjærg, 2024).

The conceptual paper connects debates on democratic education, neo-liberal higher education and student participation with a higher education didactic perspective on seminars as democratic learning spaces. It asks how regional universities can function as sites of democratic learning under contemporary social conditions and how teaching and learning settings might be designed so that solidarity, participation and collective democratic agency become practically experienceable.

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Democracy Education in Higher Education in Authoritarian Times: Students as “Change Agents”

The call for papers addresses a twofold challenge: on the one hand, international indices show a long-term trend toward autocratization and the erosion of democracy (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Nord et al., 2025), and on the other hand, the neoliberal transformation of politics and education has led to an increasing individualization and economization of the understanding of citizenship (Barros, 2012; Brown, 2019). In this context, the question of how democratic citizenship can be learned, practiced, and sustained becomes a central concern of adult education. Democratic citizenship, as John Dewey (2011) emphasizes, is to be understood not merely as an institutional order but as a lived social practice. Accordingly, current debates in adult education increasingly emphasize learning processes that enable collective agency, critical judgment, and democratic participation (Biesta, 2012; Holst, 2018).

At the same time, higher education institutions as places of adult education are increasingly expected to actively contribute to strengthening democratic resilience and social cohesion. European policy frameworks and current research point to growing challenges such as political polarization, disinformation, and declining trust in institutions, which impair the capacity for democratic participation. Higher education institutions bear a particular responsibility in this context: they are places of democratic socialization and can specifically empower students to act as “change agents” for social cohesion.

Against this backdrop, this paper draws on a needs analysis conducted as part of an Erasmus+ cooperation partnerships project to examine the extent to which current higher education practices address the development of democratic competencies among students as adult learners. The needs analysis is based on:

a systematic examination of socio-political discourse, comprising 1) analysis and engagement with relevant EU and Erasmus+ policy documents (e.g.

Unlock the Power of Priorities), as well as 2) an evaluation of current socio-political developments at the European level, such as European Commission communications on the promotion of democracy (e.g. press release on the 2026 call dated 28 November 2025, Ref. IP/25/2660),

the synthesis of research outcomes through 1) secondary analysis of findings on the role of higher education institutions in democracy education (e.g. *Building Democracy – How to Prepare Citizens for Effective Participation*) and student democracy learning and 2) our own qualitative research at the participating higher education institutions (interviews and focus groups with students (also student council) and relevant university stakeholders).

The results of the needs analysis highlight key challenges at multiple levels. Students often lack structured learning opportunities to develop democratic competencies as well as opportunities for active social participation within the university. Faculty members report a lack of didactic concepts and methodological approaches for fostering democratic dialogue skills and participation. At the institutional level, there is often a lack of sustainable structural anchoring of democracy education, with the result that relevant activities are frequently implemented on a project basis rather than systematically.

Based on analyses of de-democratization through neoliberal rationality (Brown, 2019) and concepts of the “authoritarian development model” (Arsel et al., 2021), the paper argues that authoritarian dynamics not only influence education from the outside but are also co-produced through forms of governance, subjectivation, and responsabilization within educational institutions. In view of this, a conceptual heuristic is developed that systematizes the relationship between neoliberal modes of subjectivation and authoritarian dynamics in the context of higher education.

On this basis, a three-dimensional model of “relational-solidarity citizenship” is developed, consisting of (1) public democratic practice, (2) conflict competence, and (3) organized nonviolence. The heuristic combines individual competence approaches with collective learning processes such as social movement learning and transformative learning (Holst, 2018; Mezirow, 1991).

From this perspective, universities can be understood not only as sites of knowledge production but also as infrastructures of democratic learning where democratic practices can be experienced and shaped. Participatory and transdisciplinary learning environments, collaborations with civil

society actors, and community-based learning formats enable students to act as “change agents” and transfer democratic competencies into societal contexts.

This paper makes a conceptually grounded and empirically framed contribution to the further development of democracy education in the higher education context by (1) highlighting key needs and structural challenges, (2) translating these into a theoretically informed heuristic, and (3) repositioning universities as central sites of democratic learning and social transformation.

Keywords: democracy education, “change agents”, higher education, social cohesion, democratic citizenship

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Deliberative Spaces in Times of Moral Injury: Communities of Practice as Antidote

Educators are often caught in the confluence of colliding social movements and political manipulations, but their current positioning in the whirlpool of shadowing neoliberalism, rising neofascism, entrenching artificial intelligence, and contested definitions of core societal principles has resulted in moral injury, particularly for educators committed to democratic citizenship. Recently added as a dimension of mental health in American Psychiatric Association's DSM-5, moral injury refers to incongruence between deeply held moral ideals and lived realities and is increasingly used to describe experiences of working in education (American Psychiatric Association, 2025; Sugrue, 2020). Moral injury is linked to an exodus of experienced and committed educators from the profession (Hanna et al., 2023; Sugrue, 2020). For these "principled leavers," a renewed sense of moral agency can provide a path forward (Glazer, 2022; Lang & Schott, 2023; Santoro & Morehouse, 2011).

In interpreting Habermas's conceptualization of boundary crises arising from lifeworlds in collision with social systems, Stephen Kemmis (2008) recommends creating deliberative spaces for shared and unforced consensus and reflection upon contested concepts such as democracy and citizenship that anchor educators morally in their work. These deliberative spaces can be created by and emerge from nurtured communities of practice that allow for a "living experience of negotiating meaning" (Wenger, 2002). These can be enclaved safe spaces of solidarity and healing for educators experiencing moral injury. They can also be effective at restructuring conditions for reimagined social systems if these communities of practice engage in pragmatic, de-hierarchized deliberation across contextual spheres and hierarchical frameworks (Albright et al., 2023; Bellamy & Goodlad, 2008; Levinson, 2025; Miller, 2013; Schneiderhan, 2011). Deformalized, egalitarian

communities of practice are both antidotal to moral injury and fertilizing to democratic activity (Derrick, 2020; Fielding, 2022; Woodin & Gristy, 2022). As both the women living at Hull-House settlement in the early 1900s and the participants in the Highlander Folk School in the mid-1900s demonstrated, these communities of practice can be knitted by pragmatic boundary spanners working from the periphery to build deliberative dialogue across formal and informal systems (Addams, 1910; Burnier, 2023; Lake & Whipps, 2023; Slate, 2022).

This short film presents the trajectories into boundary-spanning adult education pursued by four principled leavers of a university laboratory school closed by neoliberal forces in 2025 after 135 years of educating for stewardship of democratic citizenry. For these educators, a renewed sense of moral agency was secured by seeding de-institutionalized communities of practice built around shared inquiries, commitments, and beliefs about active democracy. Four different avenues for building democratic communities of practice are presented: a participatory action research model, a citizenship education state-wide professional development model, a collaborative cross-cultural and arts-infused curriculum initiative, and a mentorship program for educational leaders.

Keywords: community of practice, moral injury, citizenship education, teacher education, feminist pragmatism

The UK Nurses' Strikes between 2022 and 2023 as a Space of Transformative and Emancipatory Learning

The public sector strikes in the UK between 2022 and 2023 presented critical spaces for public pedagogy and democratic learning through mobilisation against austerity, neoliberal restructuring and social fragmentation. In particular, nurses represented by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) in England and Wales took strike actions for the first time and embarked on collective learning about strike organisation as neither the trade union nor many nurses had prior experiences. Alongside other public sector workers, nurses were celebrated for their resilience and vocational sacrifice in providing essential services at a time of crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such recognition remained symbolic without material improvement in the chronic underfunding of the UK healthcare infrastructures, which were found to be on the brink of collapse during the pandemic and contingent upon the efforts of healthcare workers (Hallett, 2025). The historic strike of nurses not only raised the visibility of the profession but also evoked democratic citizenship in defending the national healthcare system (NHS) as public goods under neoliberal policy regimes that subject public services to privatisation, outsourcing and managerialism.

This paper examines how the RCN picket lines became spaces of transformative and emancipatory learning (Dewey, 1916; Mezirow, 1990). The disorienting dilemmas between professional integrity and degradation of patient care associated with infrastructural deficits fundamentally shaped the ways that the nurses make sense of their identities as both care providers and democratic actors with civic responsibility in upholding the standard of public healthcare. The experiences of collective actions further propelled the nurses to recognise the broader structures of power, shifting from personal frustration about individual working conditions to political

consciousness in the process of learning-in-struggle (Choudry, 2015; Foley, 1999) through articulating motives for strikes, mobilising and organising, and negotiating media representation. The co-production of knowledge in this process and the self-organisation of migrant nurses also illustrate the role of strikes as radical adult learning (Hall et al., 2012; Novelli et al., 2024; Walker & Butterwick, 2023) in developing resistance to unequal mobility regimes (Samaluk & Kunz, 2022).

Deploying a narrative method that engages research participants in the practice of storytelling (Riessman, 2008), we conducted 32 interviews in total with 16 nurses to elicit detailed and extended accounts about their embodied experiences of the RCN strikes. Each of the first interviews began with an individual history of work and invited the participants to take as much time as they wish to recall the strikes. The second interviews probed key and reoccurring themes derived from the first interviews, encouraging the nurses to expand their narratives, provide further contexts and reflect upon their responses to events. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with three RCN officials to interrogate the union narrative and a focus group with nurses. We analysed the data with a combination of three approaches, including a thematic approach to identify how the nurses constructed meanings and understood their strike action, a structural approach to examine how the nurses developed their narratives, and a dialogic approach to explore the potential audience and objectives that these narratives may serve.

Keywords: public sector strikes, nurses' strikes, learning activism, emancipatory learning

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Bodies Like Bark: Civil Disobedience in Forest Activism

In Sweden's green transition, forests are positioned as key to climate mitigation, as sites of biodiversity protection, "renewable" resource extraction, and carbon storage (e.g., Waring et al., 2020; Ali & Russell, 2025; Nirhamo et al., 2025). At the same time, forestry, alongside wind power, hydropower, and mining, continues to be framed as a climate solution (Normann, 2021; Össbo, 2023). These "green" solutions have been widely critiqued for reproducing extractive colonial dynamics, particularly on lands within Sápmi (Knoblock, 2022; Ojala & Nordin, 2019). I approach the green transition through the concept of climate coloniality (Sultana, 2022a, 2022b), understanding climate change as produced through modernity/coloniality and its extractive, racialised, cisheteropatriarchal capitalist structures. Forest activism, in this setting, becomes a site where such dynamics are materially contested.

Drawing on multisited and multimodal collaborative ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2025, this paper explores the embodied, organisational, and temporal work that makes civil disobedience possible within a forest activist group. On the Swedish side of Sápmi, this grassroots movement works together with Sámi villages negatively affected by forestry industries to protect oldgrowth forests from being logged through direct action. The group identifies as anticapitalist and decolonial and organises through a consensusbased structure.

Methodologically, I use Nicolini's (2013) practicetheoretical strategy of "zooming in" and "zooming out." I begin with embodied and affective accounts of stopping a forest harvester, using these moments as entry points for analysis. From there, I zoom out to map the interconnected practices involved in stopping a forest harvester, including organising meetings, using digital tools to analyse forest data, and scouting for machines. I then situate these practices within broader temporal rhythms of activism—cycles of preparation, monitoring, and rapid escalation—as well as in relation to the ongoing operations of the forestry industry.

Taken together, this analysis conceptualises civil disobedience as a constellation of ongoing embodied, organisational, and temporal practices. I argue that these practices constitute a form of collective learning through which the activists create situated knowledge, coordinate action, and build solidaristic ways of working together. In this way, my paper contributes to discussions of active democratic citizenship by showing how democratic participation can be enacted, learned, and sustained through collective practices of resistance within the context of climate coloniality.

Keywords: climate coloniality, forest activism, civil disobedience, social movements

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In the Vortex of Change: The Transformation of the Teacher's Role Due to Student Protests

A series of social events culminated in the collapse of a canopy in Novi Sad, which marked the beginning of student protests in December 2024. The student uprising, aimed at democratizing society and fighting for justice and freedom, quickly spread throughout the entire community, developing into a broader civic protest that is still ongoing. This context presents a critical opportunity for broader societal transformation, particularly in relation to the role of the university as both an agent of change and a trusted public institution. Within this framework, the university—as a community of students and teachers—encourages critical reflection on the roles, responsibilities, and capacities of educators in both academic and non-academic settings. This research was based on the idea of distinction between traditional and organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 2005). Moreover, the position of transformative intellectuals—teachers who engage in emancipatory practice—was taken into account (Giroux, 2024). Following Tickle (2001), we understand teaching and research as a critically reflective process in which teachers explore their own identity, creativity, and professional autonomy in order to resist bureaucratic controls. Drawing on McClain's (2024) framework, which positions autoethnography as a gateway to transformative learning, this approach enables a deeper understanding of the dynamic and transformative nature of the process in which teachers navigate the tension between old and new professional identities.

Motivated by the need for continuous learning, four faculty teachers from the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Belgrade engaged in an autoethnographic inquiry into the evolving role of teachers across four distinct phases: pre-protest, during the protest, the period of compensatory teaching, and the return to the regular educational process. Methodologically, the study adopts Chang's (2008) systematic autoethnographic method, which offers a structured approach to gathering self-observational and self-reflective data through reflective journals.

The preliminary findings indicate that the broader social struggle functioned as a powerful catalyst for the transformation of the teaching role. However, this transformation presents significant challenges when it is not supported by the wider social and institutional framework. The participants highlight a persistent gap between the teaching role they aspire to embody and the one that is realistically attainable. These findings further underscore that teaching is not an isolated practice but one deeply influenced by its broader socio-political context, which defines both its possibilities and its limitations.

Keywords: university teachers, transformative learning, teachers' roles, autoethnography, democratic changes

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Outreach Political Adult Education – How Much Political Action Fits into Political Education?

Outreach political adult education has emerged as a debated educational practice in Germany over the past fifteen years. Actors in outreach political education analyse structural mechanisms of exclusion from political education and participation in order to address these through andragogical approaches. The most defining strategy of outreach political education is the “go-to” approach (Siebert, 2010), which contrasts with the traditional “come-to” structure. Instead of waiting for addressees to come to established institutions of political adult education, outreach political educators actively seek out people in everyday settings, such as neighbourhood cafés or outside supermarkets. By collaborating with local actors, outreach political educators can build on existing networks and relationships.

My findings are based on qualitative research conducted in Berlin between 2021 and 2025 as part of my PhD. The research comprises two central components. First, the academic monitoring of the pilot project *Equal Political Participation – Testing Approaches to Outreach Political Education* (2021–2024), initiated by the Berlin State Agency for Civic Education. I collected the following data: four group discussions and six expert interviews with outreach political educators as well as representatives of the implementing institutions; a document analysis of strategy papers, budgets, and project evaluations; and participant observations of professional conferences, workshops, and educational processes. During the academic monitoring, it became clear that the perspectives of the participants and my own experience as an outreach political educator were missing. Therefore, I decided to conduct action research in line with theoretical sampling. I worked as both an outreach political educator and researcher with a group of five participants, who met every three weeks over a period of two years. After each session of the educational process, I documented my observations and reflections ethnographically.

For data analysis, I used Situational Analysis (Clarke et al., 2022), a post-modern extension of Grounded Theory Methodology with cartographic elements. Additionally, I used MAXQDA software to code, categorize, and interpret the data. Situational Analysis, drawing on theories such as Anselm Strauss' Social Worlds and Arenas (1978) and Michel Foucault's discourse analysis (1973), enables a strong focus on power-critical analysis. In this way, I examined outreach political adult education as a social phenomenon from a political science perspective.

My research demonstrates that the core strength of outreach political adult education lies in connecting participants' everyday experiences to broader structural power relations. A central and controversial debate in the research situation revolves around the relationship between political action and political education: to what extent should educators actively engage in political action alongside participants? At the conference, I aim to present my empirical findings, focusing specifically on the tensions and intersections between political action and education.

Keywords: outreach political adult education, unequal political participation, situational analysis, action research, political action

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Language Provision under Pressure: Professional Responses in German Adult Education

The rise of far-right parties and movements is evident around the world. Far-right actors are increasingly attempting to influence integration policies as well as state and civil society institutions, including adult education providers (Giudici et al., 2025; Hussain & Yunus, 2021). While education has not (yet) been a core issue for the political right (Berg et al., 2023), right-wing populism, particularly in Europe, tends to focus on issues of migration and integration (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). The politicization of language courses and language tests by the far right within the context of integration policy is not a new phenomenon (Akkerman, 2012). A scoping review of right-wing influence on language provision shows that most of the findings are at the macro level, that is the integration system, legal and financial rules and regulations (Mayr & Grotlueschen, under review). Integration policy is under more pressure from the right than migration policy (Akkerman, 2012; Lutz, 2019), and the role of integration and language courses is being redefined (Duncan, 2010). Moreover, mainstream parties increasingly adopt right-wing positions in the area of integration (Akkerman, 2012; Declan, 2025; Gruber & Rosenberger, 2023).

Distinguishing between the macro, meso, and micro levels of adult education (Boeren, 2019; Hippel, 2017), this analysis focuses on the mesodidactical level—that is, the structure of the educational offers available in the institution, the ways in which learning and pedagogical practices are organized, and the qualification levels of staff members (Boeren, 2019, p. 283). This analytical framework sets a focus on structural and professional key aspects, particularly the conflicts and dilemmas that arise from the polarities inherent in educational practice (Hippel, 2011). Providers of adult education operate within a field of tension. On the one hand, their work is rooted in the classical characteristics of a profession, such as the application of systematic knowledge and adherence to a professional ethos oriented toward the common good (Combe & Helsper, 1996, p. 9). On the other, these largely state-funded and regulated providers at the same time operate under

public governance, which is tasked with fulfilling integration mandates in the context of migration. This places them in a politicized environment where restrictive policies and far-right discourses increasingly challenge professional ethics.

Through the lens of profession theory, the aim of this paper is to analyze with an explorative study what (counter-)strategies, approaches, self-concepts, and professional attitudes are being developed or adapted in the field of language provision under pressure from the far right. In Hamburg and Thuringia, two federal states that differ greatly in terms of their political situation, qualitative interviews are being conducted with professionals working in the field of language provision. The expected findings concern strategies for addressing these challenges and dilemmas, as well as insights into how adult education can respond to the rise of right-wing extremism. Across the contrasting contexts of Hamburg and Thuringia, the findings will likely highlight how differing political climates shape professionals' room for maneuver.

Keywords: far-right pressure, adult education, language provision, profession theory

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Active Citizenship in Youth Organisations through Education for Sustainable Development

Education for sustainable development (ESD) has become increasingly prominent in education policy and practice over the past three decades, primarily under the influence of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), as well as more economically oriented intergovernmental organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank. These organisations emphasise that sustainable development (and education for it) should contribute to—or rather balance—the social, environmental, and economic dimensions of sustainable development, thereby simultaneously addressing the needs of sustainable living, social justice, and economic growth. Sustainable development is therefore not a radical alternative to the social systems that have led to the current social and environmental situation, but rather an attempt to adapt them in ways that may enable (or even accelerate) economic development while simultaneously fostering a more just society and minimising its negative environmental impacts. Consequently, diverse interpretations of ESD emerge in policy and practice, with different emphases placed on particular dimensions of sustainable development. This results in ESD not necessarily fulfilling its transformative aim of encouraging “changes in knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes to enable a more sustainable and just society for all” (Leicht et al., 2018). Dominant neoliberal and liberal discursive policy orientations (Andreotti et al., 2016; Pashby & Andreotti, 2016) shape sustainable development into a broadly supported, consensual policy concept that is neither truly transformative nor genuinely challenging to the status quo. On the contrary, it may paradoxically contribute to reinforcing the existing dominant power relations and social systems.

As part of a larger research project examining all Slovenian organisations providing non-formal adult education for sustainable development (Košmerl, 2026), youth organisations providing ESD for young adults emerged as those most actively engaged in challenging dominant policy discursive

orientations related to sustainable development and ESD. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative data from questionnaires with qualitative data from semi-structured interviews, we examined youth organisations' bottom-up policy efforts at the organisational level through which they seek to challenge dominant top-down policy influences from the global, EU, and national levels. The results indicate that youth organisations are among the most active providers of education for sustainable development in terms of the political engagement of both educators and participants. Compared to other adult ESD providers, youth organisations are generally less aligned with dominant liberal and neoliberal policy discourses and demonstrate a stronger orientation towards critical policy discourse.

Keywords: active citizenship, youth organisations, young adults, education for sustainable development, education policy and practice

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“At Some Point We Must Move beyond Superficial Awareness”: Examining Anti-racism and Intersectionality in Irish Social Work Education

This study critically examines how Irish social work education responds to race, racism, and intersectionality in a context shaped by colonial legacies, neoliberal governance, migration, and increasing racial diversity. It explores the gap between the profession’s stated commitment to social justice and the extent to which anti-racist and intersectional feminist perspectives are meaningfully embedded in curriculum, pedagogy, and practice preparation (Crenshaw, 1991; Dominelli, 2018; Nayak, 2022). Generic anti-oppressive and cultural competency frameworks often fail to name structural racism, whiteness, patriarchy, and coloniality directly, limiting students’ and practitioners’ capacity to respond to inequality in practice (Ladhani & Sitter, 2020; Lorde, 2018).

The study asks to what extent social work programmes in Ireland equip students and practitioners to implement anti-racist and radical practice, how intersectionality is taught and experienced, and whether Irish social work education aligns with the global definition of social work as a human rights profession (Healy, 2008; Flynn & Sweeney, 2020). It also examines how students, practitioners, and educators understand identity, positionality, privilege, and oppression within educational and professional settings. These questions are especially urgent in the Irish context, where far-right mobilisation, anti-immigration sentiment, and racialised violence increasingly challenge claims of inclusion and multiculturalism (Khoo, 2024; O’Malley, 2021).

The project uses a qualitative tripartite methodology combining semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and discourse analysis of social work curricula, professional standards, and relevant policy documents (Dawadi et al., 2021; Younas & Sundus, 2022). This approach brings together lived experience and institutional analysis to examine both what is taught and what is left unsaid. Participants will include social work students, recent graduates,

practitioners, and educators, with particular attention to the experiences of Black, mixed-race, and other racially minoritised voices that are often marginalised or tokenised in higher education and professional discourse (Opara & Brown, 2021; Washington Marovatsanga & Garrett, 2022).

The theoretical framing is informed by intersectionality, critical race theory, anti-racist theory, feminist theory, and cultural humility (Almeida et al., 2019; Bell, 2003; Davis, 1981; Mattsson, 2014). Drawing on scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, and Suryia Nayak, the research understands education as a political and transformative space that can either reproduce domination or support emancipatory practice (hooks, 1994; Lorde, 2018; Nayak, 2022). The study seeks to move beyond symbolic diversity and toward a more explicit, accountable, and radical anti-racist social work education in Ireland.

Keywords: Irish social work education, anti-racism, intersectionality, critical race theory, feminist pedagogy

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Adult Education, Inequality and the Democratic Deficit: Lessons from Hungarian Employment-Oriented Adult Learning Policy, 2001–2020

This paper examines how employment-oriented adult education policy in Hungary between 2001 and 2020 addressed social inequality, participation, and democratic inclusion, and how these functions were progressively narrowed by centralisation and labour-market instrumentalism. The analysis builds on two parts of a broader doctoral research project: first, a historical and policy-oriented review of employment-stimulating adult education programmes; second, a synthesis of research findings and conclusions concerning the structural transformation of Hungarian adult education.

The paper argues that Hungarian adult education policy increasingly shifted from a broader social-developmental and community-oriented logic toward a managerial, centralised and administratively driven model. Earlier programmes often combined labour-market integration with mentoring, community support, local partnership-building, and the strengthening of participants' agency. In several initiatives targeting disadvantaged groups, adult learning was embedded in wider support structures, including counselling, life-management assistance, competence development, and local institutional cooperation.

At the same time, the study shows that the post-2010 period was marked by increasing centralisation, weakening professional dialogue, fragmented strategic thinking, and the formal rather than substantive adoption of concepts such as lifelong learning, validation, and micro-credentials. As a result, the system's capacity to support democratic participation and reduce structural disadvantage diminished.

The contribution connects these Hungarian findings to wider debates on adult education, neoliberalism, and democratic citizenship. It suggests that adult learning can support active democratic citizenship only when it is organised as a relational, participatory, and socially grounded practice

rather than a narrow instrument of workforce activation. The Hungarian case demonstrates how adult education may reproduce inequality when detached from solidarity-based local structures, but it also points to the enduring relevance of community-based andragogical approaches.

Keywords: adult education, democratic citizenship, inequality, employability, Hungary

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Youth Active Citizenship in Slovenia: Implications for Adult Civic Education in Contexts of Democratic Erosion and Institutional Distrust

In the context of neoliberal restructuring and rising authoritarian tendencies, questions of how active democratic citizenship is learned and practised have become increasingly salient within education scholarship (e.g. Biesta, 2012; Giroux, 2020; Sant et al., 2020). Across Europe, including Slovenia, research points to weakening trust in institutions, uneven political self-efficacy, and a shift toward non-institutionalised forms of participation among youth (e.g. Krause & Merkel, 2018; Pickard & Bessant, 2018). However, in Slovenia, these trends remain insufficiently synthesised across age cohorts, particularly regarding how key dimensions of citizenship competences develop during the transition to adulthood. At the same time, civic adult education has been noted to rely predominantly on individualised, competency-based approaches that may inadequately address broader structural transformations of democratic participation (e.g. Finnegan & Fleming, 2023). This raises questions about the alignment between the lived realities of youth citizenship and existing adult education frameworks.

This paper analyses the current state and cohort differences in youth citizenship competences in Slovenia and examines their implications for civic adult education. It addresses two research questions: 1) What differences exist in internal and external political self-efficacy, institutional trust, and individual and collective forms of political participation across three youth age cohorts (15–19, 20–24, 25–29)? 2) What implications do these differences have for the aims and practices of civic adult education? The objectives are to: 1) map and compare political self-efficacy, institutional trust, and participation across cohorts using harmonised datasets; 2) interpret these patterns in relation to broader socio-political transformations; 3) examine their implications for civic adult education; and 4) propose directions for more critical and participatory approaches to democratic learning.

The paper is situated within the targeted research programme *Integrated Approach for the Positive Development of Trust in Institutions and Political Participation of Youth in Policy Making Processes in Slovenia*. It draws on multiple international and national datasets (ICCS, PISA, ICILS, ESS, SJM, OECD Trust Survey, Eurobarometer Youth Survey, Youth Study Southeast Europe, Mladina 2020, TRUEDEM, U-Report). Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted for each age cohort (15–19, 20–24, 25–29) based on harmonised and restructured secondary data.

The preliminary findings indicate that Slovenian youth perform below both the international average and older populations in Slovenia across most indicators. At the same time, a differentiated pattern emerges. The youngest cohort (15–19) shows relatively higher institutional trust and engagement in digital participation, but limited political self-efficacy. The middle cohort (20–24) is more active in non-institutionalised participation, alongside declining trust and perceived institutional responsiveness. The oldest cohort (25–29) demonstrates somewhat higher conventional participation, yet is marked by ambivalence and disillusionment. Notably, external political self-efficacy declines with age, while internal efficacy remains uneven across cohorts.

These patterns, characterised by fragile external efficacy, declining trust, and a shift toward non-institutionalised participation, are best understood as embedded in wider socio-political transformations rather than as purely attitudinal phenomena. They point to structural limitations of existing civic education and have important implications for adult education, suggesting a need to reorient pedagogical approaches toward strengthening democratic agency, critical reflection, and collective forms of engagement.

Keywords: active democratic citizenship, youth, political self-efficacy, institutional trust, adult education, Slovenia

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Spaces of Collective Learning: Roma Communities and Active Citizenship in a Neoliberal Context

In the context of neoliberal hegemony, welfare state retrenchment, and rising authoritarianism, the question arises of how to conceptualize and practice education for active citizenship that addresses the increasing shift of responsibility for social welfare onto individuals, the market-oriented disciplining of the unemployed and precarious, and growing gender, racial, ethnic, and class inequalities (Greer, 2016; Samaluk & Kunz, 2022). Dominant approaches to civic education often emphasize liberal, individualized notions of rights and responsibilities (Finnegan & Fleming, 2023). This paper departs from such perspectives, framing citizenship as a collective democratic practice in which marginalized groups act as active agents of social change (Finnegan & Fleming, 2023). Theoretically, it draws on radical adult education theory, informed by Freirean critical pedagogy and Gramscian counter-hegemony theory (Freire, 2019; Kump, 2004).

Based on these theoretical foundations, the paper presents a case study of three events (the Infokafana series) addressing structural violence against Roma communities, exploring the spaces in which such education can occur and the role of oppressed groups within them. Held in November and December 2025 at A-Infoshop in Ljubljana, the events were organized in response to public and political reactions following the killing of a member of the majority population, allegedly by a member of one of the Roma communities. The incident led to the adoption of the Emergency Measures to Ensure Public Security Act (ZNUZJV), criticized for further entrenching discrimination against Roma communities. The measures implemented illustrate the retrenchment of the welfare state and the reduction of social rights for poor populations under the guise of ensuring public security (Zorn, 2021).

The events aimed to provide a historical and socio-political analysis through personal testimonies of Roma participants, highlighting exploitation under

the neoliberal capitalist system and the criminalization of marginalized populations, often framed in dominant economic discourses as “undesirable” or “problematic”. Each event began with excerpts from the film *Opre Roma* (1983), serving as a basis for discussion on racism and oppression and for collectively seeking solutions. Approximately 30 Roma community members and a larger number of interested participants from the majority population, including the authors, attended.

The analysis, based on participant observation and reflections on the discussions, shows that such community spaces function as sites of collective learning in which participants, through reflection on multigenerational experiences of structural violence—including forced displacement, police repression, and institutional discrimination—developed a critical, historically grounded analysis and translated it into concrete steps for action. They formulated shared demands and outlined plans for continued organizing and protest. The findings show that, in line with radical adult education theory, oppressed groups such as the Roma can actively participate in the production of knowledge and in initiating social change from below. Such spaces thus demonstrate how collective reflection grounded in lived experience enables grassroots initiatives and fosters cohesion within communities. Building on these findings, the paper also reflects on organizing similar future events that amplify marginalized voices and foster dialogue with (potential) oppressors (Grušovnik, 2022).

Keywords: active democratic citizenship, collective learning, radical adult education, Roma communities, structural violence

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