

## Editorial: Intersectionality and adult education

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### Introduction

The concept of intersectionality emerged in the 1980s and has its origins in feminist theory and anti-racist theory and has since gained in popularity. The term was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). For black feminists such as Crenshaw feminism and feminist theory did not relate to the experiences of black women as it reflected only the lives of white women. Instead black feminists argued that black women's lives and identities are shaped by both gender and race. For Crenshaw intersectionality 'is a tool particularly adept at capturing and theorising the simultaneity of race and gender as social processes' (Crenshaw, 1992, p. 403). Since then the concept has been extended to include interaction between other forms of inequality such as class so that as Anthias states the intersectionality of inequalities means that 'classes are always gendered and racialised and gender is always classed and racialised and so on' (Anthias, 2005, p. 33). The focus has, therefore, moved away from just looking at one form of inequality to recognising that people experience multiple forms of inequality and domination in society.

Intersectionality addresses the inequalities, disadvantaged position and oppression of particular groups so this has relevance for adult education and adult students. Historically radical adult education has given voice to working class women and men and has focused on 'really useful knowledge' (Johnson, 1988) to highlight inequalities of class and challenge this. Feminist adult educators went further and looked at the interaction of class and gender in the lives of women adult education students (see the work of Skeggs, 1997; Thompson, 2000). More recently adult education research has looked at the intersectionality of class, gender and race and other forms of inequality such as age and disability (see e.g. Finnegan, Merrill & Thunborg, 2014) and how this has impacted upon the experiences of adult learners. But class, gender and ethnicity in particular can also privilege the positions of individuals in society over others.

Intersectionality also places the concepts of identity, changing identities and power as central to understanding people's lives. Identity is also something which has concerned adult education researchers in researching how working class women and men and

working class black women and men perceive their identity in middle class educational institutions such as universities (see e.g. Reay, 2003; West, 2014), or in more traditional adult education institutions (see e.g. Dahlstedt, Sandberg, Fejes & Olson, 2018). Although higher education institutions have become more diverse adult students often feel marginalised and ‘like fish out of water’ as a result of their age, class, gender, ethnicity or disability. While in adult education institutions, although the majority of students might be working class, other variables such as ethnicity and gender are key aspects in how students perceive others as well as themselves in terms of occupational choice or life chances (Dahlstedt, Fejes, Olson, Sandberg & Rahm, 2017).

However, while intersectionality as perspectives have been fruitfully developed and more and more common within social science research as well as in education research more generally, such perspectives are rather limited within adult education research. Thus, in this thematic issue we have several articles published that in different ways direct attention towards issues of intersectionality and adult students’ experiences and participation in adult education in both enabling and constraining ways.

### **Papers on adult education and intersectionality**

This thematic issue includes five thematic papers that draw on different aspects of intersectionality in analysing adult education. In the first paper, Seija Keskitalo-Foley and Päivi Naskali, provide an analysis of how common the use of intersectionality perspectives were in papers published in the Finnish Journal of Adult Education 2010-2016. During the period, 91 articles were published, and out of these, 20 articles were, based on a first analysis, selected for further scrutiny. Focus was not only directed at if papers explicitly drew on an intersectionality perspective, but also implicit ways of analysing difference. Their analysis resulted in the identification of only 4 articles that drew specifically on intersectionality perspectives. However, yet 16 others implicitly drew on intersectionality, which means that these articles ‘focus on identity in terms of already defined categories rather than defining categories as socially constructed by power relations’ (p. 23). In most of these 16 articles, recognised difference were seen as given. Among categories of difference, ethnicity and race were lacking, while categories of gender, age, social class, education, occupation, and learning difficulties were discussed in the sample.

In the second article, Maeve O’ Grady’s focus on a community education organisation for marginalised working class women in Ireland which because of more neoliberal tendencies in society is moving its purpose from ‘women’s community building’ to ‘individual capacity building’. O’Grady explains that ‘the purpose of the research is to support the need for the organisation to reconceptualise the meaning of the work of the organisation using institutional ethnography methodology to question the extent to which the work can be seen as political and feminist, and adhering to its original ideals’ (p. 29). Employing institutional ethnography and drawing on Bourdieu’s work O’Grady explores how the organisation conceptualises its work by listening to the voices of the working class women learners, staff and voluntary staff. Analysis was based on a four week period of participant observations. The author argues that the research enabled the organisation to reflect on and rethink its purpose and position in a climate of neoliberalism. What comes through is the focus on the subjectivity of the women learners and the need to provide a safe space away from a male dominated society and a place where they are valued, listened to and respected. For many of the working class women it is the first time they have been given voice. This requires the process of unlearning.

The aim is a changing of the self through personal development and this is seen as a necessary precursor before collective action can take place. The organisation recognises that that it has shifted away from its original radical roots but is reworking its original identity and ideals within the context of a changed society.

In the third thematic paper, Chris McAllister's focus is on an under-researched area within the field of adult education and intersectionality. The paper addresses the learning experiences of older (50+) years lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) adults in Scotland. In his analysis intersectionality is viewed and applied as an analytical tool for critical educational gerontology. Learning in later life has the potential to be empowering and inclusive. Such learning allows LGBT adults to reflect upon their painful discriminatory experiences and the processes of coming out in their youth as critical educational gerontology has the power to challenge and counter discrimination and enable them to examine their identity formation and lived experiences. The voices of the participants offer a colourful and varied insight into how they are dealing with the transition and change from work to retirement as an older LGBT person. As the author states 'Participants attached varying levels of significance to being LGBT, mediated by becoming older and the heterogeneous contexts and multiple realities of their later lives' (p. 52). Some feel they have become more resilient about coping with hostility and discrimination while others focused more on the issues related to ageing such as care and the need to build a new identity after leaving work. What is common in all their ageing experiences is the importance of critical educational gerontology and intersectional interrogation as mediated by the LGBT community groups they belonged to in enabling them to 'construct meaningful and inclusive later life learning environments with older LGBT adults'.

In the fourth thematic paper, Malin Wieslander focus on inclusive recruitment within the police in Sweden. Inclusive recruitment is a proactive strategy aimed at overcoming occupational stereotyping and the exclusion of women and minority groups. The aim of the article is to 'analyse how aspects of inclusive recruitment and intersecting categories are constructed and negotiated in conversations between police students (p. 66)'. For this, the author draws on an intersectional approach in which individuals are construed as having multiple belongings and where social belonging (identities) intersect with each other and within social structures. The data comes from a research study on diversity discourses within the police training settings, and analytical wise, a critical discursive approach is mobilised. The analysis illustrates, on the one hand, how the discourse on inclusive recruitment 'reproduces the social order by affirming social categories which are assumed to be inherent in the representatives of diversity' (p. 75), and on the other hand how students contest such an idea. Students from minority groups, are through discourse, positioned as not as qualified as police officers who adhere to the norm (male, white, heterosexual). The former due to them being construed as students who are there only to fulfil politic goals of diversity, while the latter students being there due to their competence. All in all, inclusive recruitment is, a tricky dilemma that can support liberation of groups as well as it might limit individuals in their occupational choices and access.

In the fifth and final thematic paper, Anthy Chatzipetrou direct attention to issues of disability, adults and adult learning. As a new social movement, the Greek Disability movement is in a transitional social context moving from a medical based model of disability to a social model. Based on empirical research the aim of this study was to interrogate whether or not adult educators can make a difference and facilitate the empowerment of disabled people in Greece. Disability and disabled learners is a topic which is under-researched in adult education. The disabled learners in this study were

engaged in non-formal learning and all belonged to the Greek Disability Movement (GDM). Drawing on critical pedagogy, conscientization and transformative learning semi-structured interviews and observation were analysed in order to capture the depth of experience. Both disabled learners and educators were interviewed. Using the voices of the participants Chatzipetrou explores the extent to which this educational programme can result in empowerment for the disabled learners through the processes of the curriculum, educators and teaching approaches. While she concludes that individuals did gain positively from participation in the education programme it did not lead to the level of empowerment expected of a critical education approach. However, optimism is not lost and a plea is made for the future linking of adult education, disability studies and the disability movement to look for ways of transformative learning.

### Open papers

Two open papers are included in this issue of RELA. In the first of these, Annika Pastuhov from Finland and Fredrik Rusk from Norway, direct attention towards the ways democratic ideals of Nordic popular education is played out in an English study circle group (a study circle where participants were to learn the English language) taking place in Sweden. Based on an ethnographic study of such a study circle, drawing on an understanding of citizenship as both acting and being, the authors focus on understanding the participants perspectives of the everyday life of a study circle. The analysis illustrates how the study circle does not very well adapt to the democratic ideals of study circles in which participants are encouraged to be active and engage together in order to develop themselves. Rather, the focus becomes very much on learning correct English, and adapting to the frames of the circle laid down by the circle leader. Or rather the focus becomes highly individualistic, and as argued by the authors ‘the circle is regarded as necessary for tackling the lack of knowledge in English rather than as a motive for participating’ (p. 106).

The second open paper also focus on issues of democracy. Here, Anke Grotlüschen from Germany, draws on large scale data set in order to discuss issues of political and social participation among low and high educated adults. Two questions are posed: ‘Do adults with low literacy skills agree less often on feelings of political efficacy and social trust than adults with high literacy skills? Do they engage less often in volunteering than adults with high literacy skills?’ (p. 113) The analysis, based on PIAAC data, concludes that the three indicators, efficacy, social trust and volunteering all show lower results among adults with low literacy skills. Based on the analysis, the author suggests that there is a need to offer, not only workforce literacy, but political literacy as well. And that didactical settings in civic education attracting adults with low levels of literacy is needed.

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