

Una Faccia, Una Razza: Similarities, Differences, and Parallels in Adult Education Policy Development in Greece and Italy

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Abstract

There is little evidence about the origin of the phrase *una faccia, una razza* (one face, one race). However, its use signifies numerous shared elements in the cultures of Italy and Greece. In both countries, adult education emerged within the critical paradigm whereas vocationalism is currently the leading force of adult education policy development. The purpose of this article is to discuss the paths of adult education policy evolution over the last 40 years in both countries. Acknowledging Europeanization, neoliberalism, and vocationalism as the forces of policy change, the article provides a detailed critical review, a synthesis, and a proposal about future steps in adult education policy.

Keywords: adult education, policy development, vocationalism, neoliberalism, collaborative interpretive inquiry

Introduction: A rationale for discussing adult education policy development in Greece and Italy

The Treaty on European Union (1992), known as the Maastricht Treaty, outlines that each member state has full responsibility for the organization of its educational system and complete authority over the orientation of its learning provisions. Although adult education is not part of the formal education system, a broad interpretation of

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the treaty may incorporate the systems that regulate adult learning opportunities. This interpretation seems sensible, since each member state has its own distinct context in relation to education, its own model of development, and its own cultural peculiarities. Thus, the role of the European Commission is mainly to develop and propose a framework for the development of adult education policies, allowing each member to proceed with its own legislative and policy initiatives. For example, on its website, the European Commission (n.d.) states that adult education is important because it gives adults the opportunity “to enhance their employment prospects, to develop personally or professionally and to obtain transferable skills, such as critical thinking” (para. 1) and that “adult learning also contributes to improving social cohesion and promotes active citizenship” (para. 2). These statements express a balanced view of adult education. They present a framework in which both education for personal development and training to meet the needs of the labour market are equally powerful developmental pillars. But is that the case? How free are EU member states to make decisions on the development of their adult education policies? To what extent is the rhetoric about equality between personal development education and vocational training promoted?

To shed some light on these questions, this article contrasts and interprets the development of adult education policies in the last four decades in two EU member states that have significant differences and similarities. This contrast is not between countries of the well-known north-south or west-east dipoles, which is a common pattern of comparison in adult education due to the perceived superiority of the integration of adult education in Northern and Western European countries (Dohmen, Yelubayeva, & Wrobel, 2019). On the contrary, this article discusses the development of adult education policies in two countries situated in Southern Europe: Greece and Italy. Both these EU countries have strong cultural frameworks that place a particular emphasis on the value of *paideia*, which translates as the idea that education is a key process for the development of effective citizens (Fotopoulos, 2003), and it is these frameworks that formed the basis of what is understood here as European culture (Daszkiewicz, 2017). In adult education, Greece and Italy share a similar position in the statistics for participation in lifelong learning activities; they are both diachronically below the EU average (see Table 1).

Table 1: Participation rate in adult education in Greece and Italy
(% of persons aged 25–64)

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
EU	8.1	8.2	9.9	10.1	10.1	10.3	10.4	10.6	10.8	9.2
Greece	2.8	3.3	3.2	3.2	3.3	4	4.5	4.5	3.9	4.1
Italy	5.7	6.6	6.2	8.1	7.3	8.3	7.9	8.1	8.1	7.2

Source: Participation rate in education and training (last four weeks) by sex and age (Eurostat, n.d.)

This statistic—which contradicts the aforementioned educational values—prompted this examination of the path of adult education policy development to

track whether development is responsive to the needs of the people or to externally imposed directives. Moreover, Italy and Greece differ in terms of population and economic size, and their societies developed along different social and economic paradigms. However, several researchers have argued that both countries fit into the category of semi-peripheral societies (see Prokou, 2003). This classification, though it is economically oriented, is key to understanding the influence of EU funding mechanisms in the development of national educational policies.

Education is not neutral and adult education policy decisions carry an ideological conviction (Jarvis, 2005). Europeanization, neoliberalism, and vocationalism are pivotal forces for development in the field of adult education. Europeanization in education is the political effort to establish a European educational policy with common goals, shared implementation tools, and purposefully directed financial resources (Mikulec, 2017; Panitsides, 2015). The mechanism for the implementation of Europeanization is a quiet form of top-down-funded governance that “is exercised in the form of ‘soft law’ (recommendations, guidelines, indicators, benchmarks, statistical data, etc.) and takes place via established networks at the European level” (Mikulec, 2017, p. 457). Neoliberalism as a political ideology suggests that progression in human societies may be best facilitated by “liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within the institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade” (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). This agenda promotes the development of adult education policies that are dictated by the economy and serve the globalized labour market, which needs “skills, flexible workforce and if possible (though contradictory) cheap labour” (Fleming, 2010, p. 4).

In the field of adult education, this agenda is implemented through a set of policies that are defined as vocationalism. Geoff Hayward’s (2007) definition suggests that vocationalism is “the over-promotion of the work-related learning aims of secondary and tertiary education at the expense of the civic, aesthetic and moral purposes of education” (p. 3), which is also the predominant direction of adult education policy development in Europe. Within the framework created by these forces of change impacting adult education development, this article will present and discuss adult education policy in Greece and Italy. The initial analysis for each country is followed by a discussion of the similarities and differences in adult education policy to establish a common framework that justifies their parallel development trajectories.

This study uses a comparative case analysis approach, whereby historical and policy information and data were gathered through documentation analysis (Cardno, 2018). The data were derived from national legislation documents, European Union policy documents, reports from international organizations (e.g., Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]), independent reports on the state of adult education in each country, and articles from scientific journals addressing different aspects of adult education in each country. The variety of sources used in the analysis contributed to reducing the phenomenon of biased selectivity that appears to be a frequent limitation of document analysis (Bowen, 2009). The authors were involved in a form of collaborative interpretive inquiry (Muganga, 2015) for almost a year, through a continuous process of exchanging documents, commenting, reviewing, discussing, and summarizing common observations.

Adult education policy development in Greece

The development of adult education policy provisions appeared in the foreground of public policy in Greece during the early 1980s. After many years of conservative governments and a seven-year dictatorship (1967–1974), a social-democratic party triumphed in the national elections. This change in governance brought a series of reforms in the social life of the country. Among them was an attempt to organize the field of adult education in the context of a balanced strategy with two approaches. The first approach was twofold and concerned training unemployed adults while concurrently establishing a series of training projects oriented toward the modernization of the public sector and the harmonization of the agricultural sector with EU agricultural policy (Karalis, 2010; Koutsouris, 1999). The second approach was aimed at offering general education courses to underprivileged adults (Kokkos, 2008).

At this time, the implementation of EU-funded adult education programs was the sole prerogative of training institutions and organizations that belonged to the public or the broader public sector (Karalis, 2010). In these areas of adult education, general adult education displayed the characteristics of a social movement, and the associated activities are known as the popular education movement (Karalis & Vergidis, 2004). Within the first five years of the 1980s, an average of 200,000 adults from socially vulnerable groups participated annually in a variety of programs developed with resources from the European Social Fund (ESF) (Kokkos, 2008; Prokou, 2008). These programs were successful because they were perceived as a second chance for social advancement (Papaioannou & Palios, 1994). The popular education movement, which was based on the philosophical convictions of Paulo Freire (1970), led to the creation of a secretariat for the coordination of those initiatives. This new institution was named the General Secretariat of Popular Education, and it was responsible for the strategic planning of almost all the general adult education programs. This period of empowering popular education was maintained for nearly five years.

After 1986, however, the ESF funding was orientated toward continuing vocational training, and funding was also directed to the private sector. Consequently, hundreds of private organizations started to offer and implement adult continuing training programs with dubious effectiveness due to the lack of mechanisms for evaluating the quality of the educational activities (Prokou, 2014). In an attempt to absorb EU funding, the government focused mainly on the provision of continuing vocational training programs during the second half of the 1980s and the first years of 1990s.

Throughout this first period of vocationalism, the network of popular education continued to operate marginally due to a lack of funding and the absence of an institutional framework (Karalis & Pavlis-Korres, 2010). Nevertheless, some interesting initiatives emerged in this period. In 1997, the government passed a law for the establishment of Second Chance Schools, which are still the main pillar of general adult education in Greece. The Hellenic Open University (HOU), which was also founded in 1997, became the only university in Greece that has an open admissions process and addresses its programs to adults who missed the opportunity to enter tertiary education for social or economic reasons (Kokkos, 2008). These two institutions were

a breakthrough that gave a new emancipatory breadth to the field (Karalis, 2010). In 2001, in this new climate of adult education development, the name of the relevant secretariat was changed to General Secretariat of Adult Education.

During the first years of the 2000s, the bulk of EU financing continued to be directed to vocational training. However, general adult education programs were still implemented. In 2003, a project aimed at decentralized adult education centres was initiated. These centres were created at the prefectural level and provided short-term general adult education programs. In many municipalities, programs for the education of parents and the development of voluntary civil protection groups were also implemented (Papastamatis & Panitsidou, 2009). It is worth noting, however, that the centres were not established institutions but only initiatives within a project. When their funding expired after eight years, they closed.

In the field of continuing vocational training there was continuous pressure from the EU to create a comprehensive policy context to ensure the effective use of funds and the quality of funded programs. In 2003 a major development occurred in adult education: a national training program was implemented for adult educators. In this program, more than 10,000 professional adult educators were certified, and this development contributed significantly to ensuring the quality of continuing vocational training (Kokkos, Koulaouzides, & Karalis, 2014).

Developments in Greece, however, remained influenced by the general trends in the EU, which remained deeply immersed in the rhetoric of lifelong learning and the implicit promotion of individual responsibility (Prokou, 2014). Adult education was clearly oriented toward the one-dimensional lifelong learning culture that could ensure employability. This trend was expressed in public policy in 2008 when the secretariat's name changed to the General Secretariat of Lifelong Learning. In this new period, the political aim was to formulate a legal framework for adult education that would clarify the various concepts, set strategic goals, and define the quality criteria for the implementation of the respective actions. This framework was formed in 2010 with the adoption of the first comprehensive law on adult education. Law 3879/2010 (Government Gazette A-163/21-9-2010) created the required institutional framework for adult education and training. As Eleni Prokou (2014) states, the law is characterized by:

high levels of regulation and management through a legal framework, more democratic decision making with greater involvement of social partners in decision-making processes, further decentralization in the implementation of adult education and lifelong learning programs (by strengthening the involvement of local government), involvement of multiple agencies, and a greater diversity of lifelong learning providers, as well as more incentives for training (through widespread use of training levies, although training in the workplace is not much developed). Given the EU influence, associated mainly with the introduction of the NQF, special emphasis is placed on accreditation policies. (p. 44)

With the conditions established for the structured and balanced development of the field, Greece entered in 2010 a prolonged period of fiscal debt crisis that es-

entially paralyzed the social life of the country. A report detailing the impact of the crisis on adult education states that Greece's long period of economic recession combined with a continuous change of governments affected the implementation of this framework. Lifelong learning was not seen as a priority or as a solution to the steep problems faced by the majority of the Greek population (Koulaouzides, 2018). Moreover, to comply with the general idea of reducing the public sector, an aim of the austerity programs imposed by the well-known Troika, the General Secretariat was merged with the Secretariat of Youth, thus creating an organization with an overly broad spectrum of responsibilities (Presidential Decree 114, Governmental Gazette 181 29/8/2014). This created obstacles to prompt implementation of the existing policies and the operation of established institutions.

During this period, the structures that made a difference to general adult education were the municipal lifelong learning centres that were founded based on the aforementioned law. In each municipality of the country, official lifelong learning units were established as part of a centrally controlled funding program that lasted until 2016. Through these programs, a significant number of adults were mobilization, even in the most remote communities, and their participation has resulted in an increase in the Eurostat (n.d.) statistics (see Table 1).

However, as the country plunged into a political crisis, adult education went from the foreground to the background (Kokkos, Vaikousi, Vergidis, Koulaouzides, Kostara, Pavlakis, & Sakkoulis, 2021). Governmental instability during this period left no room for growth in a system that, as Prokou (2014) notes, is centrally controlled and displays many characteristics of the “*statist*” (p. 50) policy model. In 2015, amid political and social upheavals, a political party with ideological references to the radical left and democratic socialism was elected. From 2015–2019, the country's exit from the economic crisis was the focus of public policy, and thus minimal importance was given to the implementation of existing institutional frameworks in the field of adult education.

In the context of social policy, however, some emphasis was placed on linking social benefits with participation in learning processes, and scarce attempts were made to implement unemployment programs linked to compulsory vocational training activities. Thus, during this period, there was a small increase in the participation rate of adults in lifelong learning activities (see Table 1). Nevertheless, the official area of general adult education remained completely inactive, and the operation of municipal lifelong learning centres was paused in early 2017 due to lack of funding. This was perhaps the bleakest period for the general education aspect of adult education in Greece since 1985 (Kokkos et al., 2021). The marginalization of general adult education was reflected in the renaming of the secretariat to the General Secretariat of Youth & Lifelong Learning. For the first time, the main goal of the secretariat was not the education of adults, but mainly educational actions geared toward youth and their vocational education and training. The political decision to demote general adult education and promote vocational training laid the foundations for the decisions made by the country's next government, which was elected in 2019.

The new conservative government decided to focus exclusively on vocational training, which was in full compliance with the EU directives reflected in the Country

Specific Recommendations (CSRs) (European Council, 2019). One of the first steps was to change the name of the secretariat to the General Secretariat of Vocational Education, Training, Lifelong Learning & Youth (see Table 2). Hellenic Parliament passed Law 4763/2020 (Government Gazette A-254/21-12-2020), which restructured the area of vocational education according to the directions prescribed in the CSRs of the European Commission for Greece. Specifically, the 2019 CSR for Greece dictated that the educational system was facing several problems—including an underachievement in basic skills and persisting skill mismatches—and called for the urgent establishment of links between education and labour market needs as well as measures to increase participation in continuing vocational education (European Council, 2019). This was also supported by a survey conducted as part of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) for Greece (OECD, 2015), which had been completely overlooked by the previous government (i.e., 2015–2019).

Table 2: The political evolution of the name of the general secretariat for adult education and learning in Greece

Year	Political framework of the government	Name of the secretariat
1983	Social democracy	General Secretariat of Popular Education
2001	Social democracy	General Secretariat of Adult Education
2008	Liberal conservatism	General Secretariat of Lifelong Learning
2018	Democratic socialism/ populist conservatism	General Secretariat of Youth & Lifelong Learning
2019	Liberal conservatism	General Secretariat of Vocational Education, Training & Lifelong Learning
2020	Liberal conservatism	General Secretariat of Vocational Education, Training, Lifelong Learning & Youth

The subsequent 2020 CSR (European Council, 2020) was even more precise and contained a clear recommendation for improving basic skills for all, upgrading vocational education and training, and scaling up adult learning by improving the quality and labour market relevance of education and training. Furthermore, the CSRs advised digital upskilling to allow everyone equal access to e-services and fully participate in distance learning. It was notable that neither the 2019 CSR nor the 2020 CSR commented on liberal adult education, thus neglecting the importance of this sector. The undisputed compliance of the Greek government with the directives of the EU and OECD led to the complete reorientation of adult education in Greece toward vocational education. As of 2021, most of the municipal lifelong learning centres have been inactive for five years, and the only institution of general adult education that continues to operate marginally are the Second Chance Schools, which face significant problems (e.g., underfinancing, lack of provisions, inadequate infrastructure) since the conservative government does not seem to consider them an educational priority.

Adult education policy development in Italy

Adult education in Italy is intertwined with political developments and subsequent

socio-economic policies. As in most EU countries, it is important to discuss adult education policy in Italy by exploring the impact of certain ideologies and their consequent political initiatives within educational systems (Marescotti, 2014). Therefore, it is crucial to mention that the foundations of adult education policy development in Italy is not the result of a comprehensive political agenda for adult education but the demand of a popular education movement aiming to provide learning opportunities to vulnerable social groups. This is similar to other popular education movements, such as the one in Greece in the 1980s, although the Italian movement developed differently due to its unique political context.

Political life in Italy from 1981 to 2021 was characterized by instability due to governments alternating frequently between centre-left (social democratic) and centre-right (populist-neoliberal) parties. In certain periods, Italy had technocratic governments. In the last 40 years, there have been 24 different governments from eight different political parties (i.e., a new government every 1.7 years) and 20 different prime ministers with various political ideologies (e.g., liberal conservatism, centrism, social democracy, and social liberalism). This volatility undermined the development of coherent educational projects in all areas of education, including the rather unregulated area of adult learning. Moreover, the evolution of Italian adult education policy was impacted by the global financial crisis, which resulted in a reduction of resources assigned to public education, and unprecedented increases in taxation, inflation, and unemployment.

In Italy, adult education is centrally governed by the Ministry of Education, Universities, and Research. However, a series of other national agencies is involved in the design and implementation of specific policies (e.g., the Institute for Workers' Professional Training and Development, the Italian Adult Education Union, the National Institute for Assessing the Educational System of Instruction and Training, and the National Anti-Illiteracy Union).

Presenting a clarified framework for the development of adult education policy in Italy requires looking into the trajectory of adult education policies. Adult educational policy in Italy during the 1950s and 1960s focused on fighting illiteracy, especially in the southern regions (Schettini, 2010), and adult education consisted mainly of evening courses implemented in public schools. These programs were designed to provide basic literacy and numeracy knowledge to adult learners who had no prior formal education. Then a breakthrough occurred: the Workers Collective National Agreement of 1973 included a provision that granted employed and unemployed people the right to participate annually (for 150 hours) in subsidized adult education courses. This provision, which helped minimize the discrepancy between manual and intellectual workers and gave significant opportunities to both employed and unemployed adults, was a turning point for Italian society. Additionally, it had a strong impact on the feminist movement; the legal framework allowed the implementation of monothematic courses, and a series of special courses was developed that contributed significantly to the spread of feminism in Italy (Guimaraes, Villegas, & Mayo, 2017).

Another important initiative was the community programs developed by Danilo Dolci in Sicily (1950–1990). Dolci developed integrated action plans that aimed to empower individuals through education and transform communities. Dolci (1968)

introduced the Reciprocal Maieutic Approach, a dialectic method of inquiry that can be defined as a process of collective inquiry. This didactic method was based on the individual experience and culture of the participants and aimed at the development of active citizenship skills. Dolci's programs pointed to individual and community empowerment through education and action in a criminally controlled territory, where a traditional "patron-client" relationship was deeply rooted in the collective frame of reference (see Guimaraes et al., 2017). Despite many years of implementing programs to fight illiteracy, adult education policy in Italy maintained a focus in this area because a significant part of the population was characterized by educational deprivation. The literacy programs implemented all over the country, however, were not organized systematically or structured to generate social transformations (Torlone, 2021).

In the 1990s, following EU funding and directives, courses for unemployed workers were promoted. At that time, the need to provide qualifications to unemployed people oriented adult education toward vocational training. This shift to vocationalism was accompanied by changes to increase participation. These changes included a switch from traditional long morning classes to shorter evening classes to make the timetable compatible with family or work; a much more flexible organization of academic classes; and the integration of general education courses with the professional development courses managed by regional authorities. Moreover, a more decentralized management system was established that fostered the autonomy of local centres for adult education (Cornacchia, 2013).

These developments were made official by a Ministerial Decree (n. 455, 29-07-1997), which founded the *Centri Territoriali Permanenti* (CTP). These centres were designed as places for needs assessment, planning, advising, and the implementation of initiatives about education and training in adulthood. The aim was both to equip adults with general knowledge and to professionalize them with vocational qualifications. The target groups were adults without compulsory school qualifications and adults with qualifications who desired to return to education for personal improvement (Marescotti, 2014). The main role of the CTPs was to fight unemployment. They were originally funded centrally by the government but also received regional funding. By the early 2000s, they started to receive EU funding. At the beginning, their practice was influenced by the pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1970), Antonio Gramsci (1971), and Celestin Freinet (1965): significant focus was placed on the development of the whole person to support a societal transformation. After EU funding became the main source of financial support, however, general knowledge was gradually replaced by the acquisition of skills for the labour market. Eventually, the unstable political orientations of different government coalitions led to a body of incoherent laws that deteriorated the emancipatory philosophy of these innovative centres (Cornacchia, 2013; Marescotti, 2014).

Studies from the Italian Association for Lifelong Learning and the National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research (INDIRE) conducted in 2007, ten years after the foundation of the CTPs, presented interesting data. In 2007, a little over 2.5 percent of the 12 million low-skilled adults in Italy were involved in CTP activities. Participation in vocational courses was dominated by Italian nationals (almost 90% of the participants), while migrants and other fore-

igners were mainly the participants in literacy classes (Marescotti, 2014; TREELE Report, 2010). Matteo Cornacchia (2013) pointed out that the CTPs were not successful in achieving their mission due to the lack of a national framework for adult education and the changing priorities of new governments. The CTPs were quite successful in a few regions because they managed to meet local education and training needs. Nevertheless, the limited success of the CTPs led to the cessation of their operation in favour of the *Centri Provinciali per l'Istruzione degli Adulti* (CPIAs)—institutions devoted to offering vocational training courses to increase employability, signifying a shift in the rhetoric of lifelong learning (Crowther, 2004).

In 2007, a specific ministerial decree (i.e., Law 296/12-2006 known as the “Financial Bill”) launched the reform of the adult education system, which started in 2012 and ended in 2016. The procedure for setting up the CPIAs was exceptionally long and exemplifies how political instability can impact developing education policy. A single article of the law, which contained 1,364 articles, declared that these new institutions were designed to increase the educational level of both the Italian adult population and the immigrant population, and that they were going to have organizational and pedagogical autonomy. In 2008, a series of two legislative initiatives redefined the CPIAs organization scheme (Marescotti, 2014).

An interesting change that accompanied the introduction of the CPIAs is that the relevant legislation referred to the process as “*istruzione per gli adulti*” (training for adults) instead of the traditional “*educazione degli adulti*” (adult education), signifying a shift toward vocationalism in the Italian adult education field. This late turn to vocationalism—in comparison to what happened in Greece—may be partially justified by the emancipatory roots of adult education in Italy. The main reason for the comparative delay in vocationalism, however, was the complex and bureaucratic communication between central government, regional authorities, peripheral institutions, and local centres (INDIRE, 2018). This administrative complexity led to a delay of absorbing EU funds and made the shift from locally rooted emancipatory experiences to government-directed and European-funded vocational policies more difficult (Boffo, Federighi, & Torlone, 2015).

Today, the CPIAs are independent educational institutions, organized at a regional level, that offer a broad spectrum of programs, including general education courses to acquire a compulsory education leaving certificate and courses aimed at attaining vocational qualifications. In addition, they offer basic Italian language courses addressed to foreigners and immigrants. Their activities are informed by the European Qualification Framework. An INDIRE (2018) study on the operation of 126 CPIAs from 2015 to 2017 showed a 14 percent increase in the number of foreign adults enrolled in basic-level courses and a 17 percent increase in adults enrolled in higher level courses (secondary). However, the introduction of the CPIAs was not accompanied by an increase in public investment in adult education (Cornacchia, 2013). Furthermore, there is still no national adult education strategy that could support adult learning in all its dimensions and thus have a positive impact on the whole field. As a result, although the participation of learners in adult education courses increased by two percent (see Table 1) in 2014, the percentage is still below the EU average.

In Italy, the evolution of adult education and learning echoes the European and international development of the field, which is dominated by the debatable concept of lifelong learning (Daniele, Franzosi, & Nobili, 2017). Adult education started as an emancipatory project for social transformation (e.g., Dolci's efforts) and became an educational process with a primary goal of arming adults with vocational skills to serve the existing economic paradigm. This was revealed through the elimination of the CPTs and the introduction of the CPIAs. The discourses and practices of neoliberalism have found their way into the field of adult education in Italy. Public policies are now directed toward supporting adults to remain active workers in a neoliberal-driven economy rather than encouraging them to engage critically with societal problems. In that spirit, many educational institutes in Italy were reoriented to become significant providers of vocational training services (Milana, 2012a).

The notion of lifelong employability is emerging as the main adult education goal, since short-term employment (also known as the "gig economy") is rapidly substituting lifetime employment within a variety of organizations and sectors (Van der Heijden, Boon, Van der Klink, & Meijs, 2009). Intensified contingency and the mobility of work in neoliberal capitalism is eroding links between people and demanding worker adaptation (Fenwick, 2013). Paulo Federighi (2018) argues that this is being promoted through the concept of lifelong learning, which has become a link between the rules of the economy and adult education, deteriorating the emancipatory intent of adult education to a set of policies that serve the political and economic interests of a globalized economy.

Comparative and future reflections

The development of adult education policy in Greece and Italy over the past 40 years exemplifies how educational policy has evolved due to externally imposed directives rather than the aspirations, needs, and rights of the people.

For both Greece and Italy, the development of adult education as a field of practice and as an area of educational policy development was originally grounded in similar initiatives. Initiatives such as Dolci's educational schemes in Italy and the Popular Education Movement in Greece were, in essence, political projects advocating for social equality and equal opportunities for the less privileged. In both countries, adult education was initially understood as a political mechanism that could foster social justice through the establishment of alternative learning opportunities and by engaging communities of learners (Brookfield & Holst, 2011; Freire, 1970).

In both Greece and Italy, especially during social democratic governments, efforts were made to create adult education institutions that could maintain a balance between general adult learning aimed at personal growth and social transformation, and vocational training aimed at employability. The effort in Greece to offer quality vocational training through regional adult education centres shared a lot of characteristics with the permanent local centres (CTPs) for adult education in Italy, although the CTPs had the advantage of institutional recognition. In Greece, decentralized adult education institutions were established only after 2010, and their autonomy is still a significant concern due to their financial dependency on the central govern-

ment. Italian governments are keener to create institutions, while governments in Greece rely mainly on the implementation of projects.

In both countries, conservative governments—especially during periods of financial crises—completely incorporated the vocationalism project promoted and funded by the EU, with its neoliberal rhetoric of lifelong learning (Griffin, 2006, Fleming, 2010; Panitsides, 2015, Milana, 2012b). The transition from CTPs to CPIAs in Italy and the recent restructuring of the adult education field in Greece to prioritize vocational training for adults offer evidence of this fundamental reorientation. Despite the roots of emancipatory education and development in both Greek and Italian adult education practice, the continuous redirection of public financial resources toward vocationally oriented educational provisions is evident. This trend, which is demoting adult learning to the acquisition of vocational and work-related skills, is an imposed policy by the EU that coincides with the state's gradual withdrawal from its obligation to offer learning opportunities that may foster active citizenship and promote social equity.

This tendency toward lifelong vocationalism jeopardizes adult education in both Greece and Italy with its critical and transformative pedagogy roots. Additionally, the increased political attention in both countries on competence development for economic growth silenced the failure and the instability of the capitalist labour market by moving policy attention away from creating secure employment opportunities and promoting active citizenship toward a discussion of how citizens may secure marketable skills and certifications (see Jarvis, 2007).

Countries such as Greece and Italy—which depend on absorbing EU funds to support their social and educational policies and try to attract foreign investments by offering a skilled and eventually cheap workforce—were critically infected by the vocationalization “virus” that accompanies the political malady of neoliberalism, despite a cultural humanistic and emancipatory frame of reference that perceives education as the development of the whole person (i.e., Davidson, 2015; Lodge, 2014). This inquiry complements the work of other researchers who have argued for the domination of the neoliberal project over national adult education policies and the consequent promotion of a “narrowly functionalist vocationalism” (Rule, 2004, p. 325) in the adult education field (Bagnall & Hodge, 2018).

In both countries, the early politicized progressive welfare model of adult education (Griffin, 1983, 1987)—which aimed at empowering and liberating people from oppressive cultural and political frames of reference—was gradually but consistently transformed to a unidimensional model of lifelong learning that exclusively serves the needs of the market. These findings support the argument that Europe failed to become an exception to the political domination of neoliberalism and its consequent market-driven perspectives of social and educational policy (Hermann, 2007).

It might seem that emancipatory adult education is currently fighting a final rear-guard battle in a unique ideological war against neoliberalism and vocationalism. While this is the setting endorsed by the EU leadership through recent initiatives to promote micro-credentials (European Commission, 2021a) and individual learning accounts (European Commission, 2021b), there are still areas of transformative and

emancipatory vision, particularly among professionals of the field. Networks (e.g., Italian Transformative Learning Network, Hellenic Adult Education Association) continue to promote research agendas that foster an adult learning perspective that could enable people to become critical co-shapers of society, capable of navigating a complex world that is facing unprecedented social, economic, and ecological crises.

In this framework, two interesting areas of research may shed additional light on the policy processes presented above. First, there is a need to investigate more deeply the cultural conditions within which EU member states attempt to apply adult education directives that do not consider local needs, particularly the deep-rooted convictions of the people of the different member states. This kind of research may also explain why, after 40 years of policy interventions and changes, adult learning participation statistics in most EU countries do not satisfy the goals set by EU leadership. Second, given the back-to-back economic crises that have struck Europe (the European sovereign debt crisis and the COVID-19 crisis), research must examine the nature of adult education policy initiatives that could support people to redefine life within these uncertain frameworks.

In the two national contexts examined here, unemployment is increasing, and the provision of vocational training might help. However, and more significantly, social solidarity and social cohesion have been dismantled, a situation that threatens and weakens the sense of human belonging, reflexivity, and cultural humility, which sustains people in unforeseen external conditions. Research should direct adult education policy toward the reintroduction of the emancipatory, transformative dimension of human learning.

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