OPINIONS, ATTITUDES AND EXPERIENCES AMONG EVALUATORS OF ADULT EDUCATORS

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Abstract

In recent years, there have been significant changes in the field of adult education which have brought new opportunities for adult educators, expanding the types of programs offered to adult learners. As a consequence, adult educators evaluation began a crucial issue. This paper focuses on EduEval (Evaluation for the Professional Development of Adult Education Staff) N 538743-LLP-1-2013-1-IT-GRUNDTVIG-GMP, an EU funded project which is grounded in an action-research based on the active involvement of practitioners engaged in adult educators' evaluation in some European countries (which are: Latvia, Italy, Poland, Spain and Greece).

EduEval project is started on January 2014, and this paper illustrates the approach that Personality Socialization Research Institute (PSRI) of Rezeknes Augstskola (RA) (Latvia) has designed to gather information about evaluators' of social adult educators in Latvia. It also presents the project objectives and sketches the theoretical background of the PSRI research activity.

Key words: *adult social educators, educators' evaluation, mixed methods*

1. Introduction

At the beginning of '70s, non-formal education seemed to be an emerging phenomenon around the world, and it was perceived to offer "second chance education" to those who had been "pushed out" from the formal system, and useful to reduce inequalities among adults, such as illiteracy, unemployment, work qualification, cultural integration, etc. (Ward et al., 1974; Grandstaff, 1974; Hall, 1975).

Today non-formal education has assumed a fundamental and undisputed role not only related to the above issues. It is an integral part of the lifelong learning's concept, and operates under a number of names, including *adult education*, *continuing education*, *on the job training*, *accelerated training* and *extension services*.

In recent years, the validation of non-formal education is taking on a crucial topicality, since it appears decisive that non only non-formal education programs, but also educators involved in them, should respect a given level of quality. From this, the necessity of developing effective assessment and evaluation practices. But this is not a simple issue to resolve. The rapid technological and social changes demand continuous trainings and re-trainings aimed at improving people's qualification or competence. Accordingly, education is more and more beginning to be a *learning continuum* of informal, self-directed, non-formal, and formal learning (Rogers, 1996; 2004), and this implies a fundamental changing in the way of validating/accrediting/verifying the educational practices. However, evaluation often continues to be more concentrated on the assessment of people's careers than on the performance and quality's improvement of their work.

There exists a wide literature on evaluation in education (Braskamp & Ory, 1994; Osborne et al., 2007; Mark, 2008; Penuel et al., 2011). Eurydice has also analyzed the existence of quality assurance and evaluation practices for education institutions in European countries (Eurydice, 2004; 2006), while the Association of Medical College has recently realized a testbox for evaluating educators (Gusic et al., 2013).

But what about the opinions, attitudes and subjective experiences of the individuals involved in the evaluation processes?

The above issue is the research scope of EduEval, a project grounded on the hypothesis that investigating on motivations, attitudes and expectations both of evaluators and of those who are evaluated could suggest effective refinements in evaluation practices in adult education.

For example, in Latvia non-formal education is accredited in a non-systematic way. All Latvian adult education centers provide participation certificates which can be validated, if the adult education center is an accredited one by the State Service of Education Quality.[1] But sharing with education providers the optimal accreditation criteria presents many difficulties. However, in the last years, thanks to the Quality Evaluation Department, some important progresses have been made to improve validation of non-formal education, and EduEval research can contribute to facilitate the Department's change management efforts.

About evaluation in education, we agree to those researchers who are convinced that evaluations programs must be designed and adapted situationally. One should take into account such factors as community variables, organizational characteristics, the nature of the evaluation, evaluator credibility, political considerations, and resource constraints (Willie et al., 1985; Peterson & Provo, 1998; Wiesenberg, 2000).

Moreover, it is well known that an adult educator is one who practices the profession of facilitating the learning of adults. So, adult education also includes the activities performed by social educators, who are persons involved in habilitation and rehabilitation services to individuals with physical, mental and/or social disabilities.[2] The evaluation of this specific class of educators assumes a particular relevance for the quality and effectiveness of social services.

PSRI's of RA research within EduEval project just focuses on social educators.

But, before illustrating this project and the scientific background which underlies the research approach adopted by PSRI to carry out an explorative survey on the evaluation of social adult educators, it is useful to briefly introduce the notion of adult education evaluation.

2. Evaluating adult education

At the end of '70s, Michael Quinn Patton[3] argued that evaluation should be judged by its utility and its actual use, claiming that the main concern should be the results deriving from its practice (Patton et al., 1977). In this perspective, evaluation can include any evaluative purpose (formative, summative, developmental), any kind of data (quantitative, qualitative, mixed), any kind of design (naturalistic, experimental), and any kind of focus (processes, outcomes, impacts, costs, and cost/benefit).

What is changed since then?

The main change is that now evaluation practices are largely diffused, as a consequence of the spreading of the concept of quality assessment. Quality plays an increasingly important role in the objectives for social and economic development in our contemporary society. Private companies and governmental institutions, more and more, have established programmes that promote and support the diffusion of quality management techniques. Evaluation is a central issue in the educational field and

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[1] The State Service of Education Quality (founded in 2009) is an institution under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and Science which offers help for educational and scientific establishments, pedagogues, students and their parents.

[2] AIEJI [International Association of Social Educators] (2008). *The professional competences of social educators: a conceptual framework.*
<http://www.aieji2009.dk/Background/Professional%20competences%20of%20social%20educators.aspx>;
Retrieved: 2014.03.10

[3] Michael Queen Patton is an independent consultant, author of several books on the art and science of program evaluation. Very famous is *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* (4th ed., 2008), in which he emphasizes the importance of designing evaluations to ensure their usefulness, rather than simply creating long reports that may never get read.

in any educational system, and there is a consolidated consensus on the beneficial value of having a mature *evaluation culture* (Taut, 2007) or a *culture of quality* (Harvey& Green, 1993). Evaluation in higher education dates back to 1980s, although, due to its complexity, there are different methods, either proposed or opposed by scientists (Brence & Rivza, 2012).

In Latvia, education evaluation is a crucial governmental objective. For this purpose, in 2009 the State Service of Education Quality was founded, this is an institution under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and Science, which offers help for educational and scientific establishments, pedagogues, students and their parents. Some main functions of the State Service of Education Quality are:[4]

- License programmes of a general and vocational education;

- Ensure quality assessment of general and vocational (except higher professional education) educational programmes, educational establishments and exam centers;

- Keep the data bases and registers of institutions of education and science;

- Carry out state monitoring (supervision) in education and science;

- Realize the certification of pedagogues private practice;

- Analyze self-estimate reports of educational establishments and monitor development of accreditation commission recommendation;

- Provide and coordinate assessment of professional competence in non-formal education system, give an accredited educational institution or accredited examination center rights to assess professional competence in non-formal education system.

Moreover, adult education in Latvia is supported by the principle of lifelong education. The Education Law (1998) is specifically concerned with the development of adult formal and non-formal education programmes. Arrangements for the provision of adult formal education are set by the Education Law, Vocational Education Law, Higher Education institutions Law and other statutes and regulations.

3. EduEval project

EduEval (Evaluation for the Professional Development of Adult Education Staff) is a multilateral Grundtvig project funded by EU and inspired by the modern fundamental lifelong learning principles (Sharma, 2002; Dehmel, 2006; Aspin, 2012; Longworth, 2013). It started on January 2014, and its expiration date is December 2015.

The project's idea comes from the observation that the current global economic crisis has affected the public and private entities which are working in social and educational services. This is a serious problem, since these services, which look after people of all age groups and social classes (including immigrants, disadvantaged persons and people with special needs), are often, because of crisis, provided by private entities employing social educators who don't possess an adequate level of professional competences. One of EduEval ideas is to contribute to the supervising and the monitoring the education staff working in private and public social entities.

However, EduEval focuses on adult educators' evaluation, tackling this issue through a comparative analysis of models, programs and practices in monitoring, testing, counseling, supervising social workers and educators in the European countries which are participating in the project (Italy, Latvia, Poland, Greece, and Spain).

One of project's goals is to contribute in defining the professional role of the *evaluator of social adult educator*, which is a function usually carried out by other professional figures, such as supervisors or coordinators. Recently, PSRI developed a research on the professional needs of social educators, investigating the *situational* and *contextual learning* related to supervision (Karvinen-Niinikoski,

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[4] <http://izm.izm.gov.lv/links/6825.html>; Retrieved: 02.23.2014.

2003).[5] The issue of social educators evaluation and supervision is resulted really topical in Latvia, since there is a rising demand for social educators' supervision, but regulations lack (Apine, 2004; Āboltiņa, 2012. Truskovska, 2013).

In this perspective, EdueEval project offers a good opportunity for comparing various approaches and experiences from some European countries in the wide scope of adult education evaluation, which includes the evaluation of adult social educators.

The cornerstone of the project is a collaborative approach between holders of practical knowledge (social and adult educational workers) and holders of theoretical knowledge (academic researchers).

The project's objectives should be achieved through:

- an explorative research in the participating countries about adult education and evaluation programs and practices;

- a mobility workshop aimed to share theories and practices about the evaluation of the adult education staff between practitioners and researchers, in order to build a collaborative knowledge;

- a handbook that will summarize theoretical background and practical implications in providing evaluation methods for adult education staff;

- the implementation of a wiki (online collaboration environment) for the purposes of giving information and facilitating its access;

- the development of guidance and counseling tools and methods for the evaluation of adult education staff;

- the implementation of a curriculum for the initial training of the professionals involved in the evaluation of adult education staff, in order to promote the wellbeing, the quality and productivity of those who work in the adult education field; in this way preventing their risk of burn-out and occupational diseases.

4. PSRI's research approach

EduEval project provides a preparatory desk research by each participating countries on the following topics: What is Adult Education; Adult education services (norms, regulations, and articulations); The evaluator's profile (related to the evaluation of adult education staff).

Moreover, the project also provides the realization of a handbook which "consists in a survey and in a comparison of the evaluation models that are present in the consortium partners countries".[6] As it is well-known, a survey is a descriptive research used to gather information about population groups or specific target groups to "learn about their characteristic, opinions, attitudes, or previous experiences" (Leedy & Ormorod, 2005, p. 183). Survey research is prevalent among many professional fields and there are many survey research methods which can be effectively adopted for data gathering, such as written questionnaire, cover letter, mail survey, electronic survey, telephone survey, personal interviews, (Brewer, 2009).

Face-to-face interviews will be the method for data gathering which EduEval will employ in order to bring out attitudes, strategies, processes and practices adopted by adult educators' evaluators. All project partners have been required to interview two types of subjects: 5 representative/directors of adult education services, and 10 evaluators involved in the evaluation of adult education staff (both officially recognized or not officially recognized).

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[5] Ženija Truskovska (2013). Sociālā pedagoga profesionālās kompetences veidošanās supervīzijā, PHD Thesis at Rezeknes Higher Education Institution – Personality Socialization Research Institute.
[6] EduEval (Evaluation for the Professional Development of Adult Education Staff) Lifelong Learning Programme Application Form, Detailed description of the project (2013).

Many scholars agree that a survey research based on the technique of personal interviews gives the best quality of data (Polit & Beck, 2013), but they also underline its evident disadvantages, since it is the most costly and time consuming technique in data collection, and doesn't allow anonymity (Berends, 2006; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Gay et al., 2009).

In order to adapt the survey to our local needs, and selecting topics that are of any interest to available respondents (Gay et al., 2009), we introduced some changes. We broke the general research objective into specific sub-objectives, e. g. reducing the survey's scope and focusing it on adult social-educators. This target group is well represented in our research geographical area and the evaluation of social-educators (or social pedagogues) is a challenging and topical issue in our country. So, one of our sub-objectives became to gather the educators' opinions about the evaluation/validation programs, their confidence in self evaluation tests, and their availability to be trained on quality and competences assessment.

Moreover, we decided to adopt a two steps mixed method, based on the integration between elite semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire which will be submitted to all Latvian institutions employing social educators. Interview respondents have been selected taking into account the EduEval aims and their representativeness in the specific context of social pedagogues' activities, their age, their educational competence and their CV.

More in detail, our survey has been designed following a mixed research approach (Smith & Kleine, 1986; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003), which integrates qualitative and quantitative data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002, 2011; Denzin, 2010; Grbich, 2013). In recent years, the integrated use of qualitative and quantitative methods in studying the same phenomenon has received significant attention among scholars and researchers. There is a growing consensus on *triangulation* as "a validity procedure where researchers look for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study" (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In this perspective, we will principally use the interviews to define a list of thematic topics and use the interview contents to refine the questionnaire results.

The idea of deriving thematic topics from the interviews is shared by many researchers in various social investigations (Lawrence & Thomas, 1999; Ohl, 2013; Flick, 2014). In some cases, elite interviews are a good method for a preliminary investigation phase. Recently, Denis Royer proposes interviews in his three steps approach. The first step is exactly a qualitative expert interview study, to better understand the context (which in his research is the nature of the Enterprise Identity Management Systems); the second step is dedicated to the design of theoretical explanations; and the third is the step in which previous results are reviewed and confirmed (Royer, 2013). The validity of a preliminary investigation based on elite interviews has also been confirmed in a socio-anthropological research, where the interviews have led to the identification of some relevant aspects otherwise difficult to detect (Marzano & Vicedomine, 2013).

In our case, the use of a mixed methods approach aims at establishing a comparison between qualitative data representing the perspectives of a specific target group of social pedagogues, geographically located, and the more general context of adult social educators in Latvia.

Interviews will be also used to obtain quantitative data that might result useful to integrate (and/or interpret) the questionnaire data. To this purpose, interviews will be transcribed and undergone a preliminary data analysis, noting ideas, listing topics, grouping them, and remarking exceptions (Anzul et. al, 1997; Dey, 2003). The transcriptions will be analyzed by extracting, categorizing and comparing their contents. Interviews will be integrated adding information gathered from other data sources (official statistical reports, local literature, local associations' web sites, and social network blogs) – with the aims of better understanding the social context. The interviews are organized in a common framework with 4 main sections containing open questions. Since some questions seemed to be very general (such as: "according to your personal experience, what do you mean with the *adult education* ?"; "according to your personal experience, what do you mean with the *evaluation of adult education staff* ?"; "according to you, what are the aims of adult education staff's evaluation?"), the

interviews' schema has been implemented introducing supplementary questions about the subjective awareness/feeling towards evaluation processes, such as:

- Check from the list the better definition of "education evaluation".

- Have you a positive, hopeful feeling in evaluation processes or a negative one? (check from the list).

- Do you think that evaluation can improve the quality of your work? (check from the list).

The same questions will be present in the questionnaire, and this will facilitate the process of data analysis.

In the questionnaire construction we are posing particular attention to the Michael Quinn Patton works on evaluation, in which he emphasizes the pragmatic value inherent in a *diagnostic focus*. His diagnostic evaluation is more often qualitative or a mixture of qualitative and quantitative. Coining the expression *utilization-focused evaluation*, the author, analyzing evaluation programs, suggested that:

> Unless one knows that a program is operating according to design, there may be little reason to expect it to produce the desired outcomes. (Patton, 1985)

For this reason, interviews and questionnaire have been designed also at exploring the following main dimensions:

- Sensitivity
  - about evaluation strategies
  - about evaluation processes.

- Awareness
  - about the utility of evaluation.
  - about effectiveness of evaluation.

- Information
  - Sources
  - Level of information received (about the general evaluation programs and about the specific internal process).

- Motivation/expectation
  - Availability to participate in evaluation processes.
  - Difficulties to participate in evaluation processes.

Finally, PSRI in carrying out its survey, will also keep in mind the experiences of another EU funded project, VINEPAC (http://www.vinepac.eu/),[7] - which produced an instrument, Validpack, for evaluating adult educators' competences acquired in non-formal and informal learning settings. At the moment, there is a network of over 20 European countries collaborating in nationally contextualizes training for Validipack assessors (Duvekot & Geerts, 2012).

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[7] See Validipack documentation at <http://www.capival.eu/home>; retrieved: 02.22.2014.

5. Conclusion

EduEval is an ambitious project at its initial stage. It bases its motivation in the growing concern about quality of educational and social services. The project represents an opportunity to compare the different approaches to adult education evaluation pursued by five European countries. Indeed, evaluation of trainers'/adult educators' competences, no matter whether they have been acquired in formal, non-formal or informal learning contexts, is a crucial issue at European level. And in this perspective, it will be useful a comparison between the EduEval project results and those achieved through VINEPAC (Rutka et al., 2012; Shah, 2012).

In this paper we presented the research methods that PSRI will apply in the EduEval project implementation and we sketched some aspects of the adult education evaluation in Latvia.

At last, we hope the variation that PSRI introduced in the research survey will contribute to testing effectiveness of qualitative and the quantitative mixed approaches.

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