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THE PROFESSIONAL STATUS OF ADULT EDUCATORS: A CASE STUDY FROM CYPRUS IN THE ERA OF PANDEMIC

ABSTRACT

The paper reports findings from a research study carried out with adult education professionals working in Adult Education Centres (AECs) in Cyprus. It aims to explore how they experience their professional status in the programme as well as identify barriers that hinder their professionalisation and particular barriers caused in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study harnesses qualitative methodology and adopts a bottom-up approach as it gives voice to adult educators and makes meaning out of their working experiences. It makes suggestions for the improvement of their professional status based on the idea of humanisation, a multifaceted process in which both the state and adult educators themselves should become communions.

Keywords: *adult educators, professional status, Adult Education Centres, COVID-19 pandemic, Cyprus*

PROFESIONALNI STATUS IZOBRAŽEVALCEV ODRASLIH: ŠTUDIJA PRIMERA S CIPRA V OBDOBJU EPIDEMIJE – POVZETEK

Članek poroča o rezultatih raziskovalne študije, ki je bila izvedena z izvajalci izobraževanja odraslih, zaposlenimi v centrih za izobraževanje odraslih na Cipru. Ukvarja se z vprašanji, kako doživljajo svoj profesionalni status, s kakšnimi ovirami se soočajo na poti k profesionalizaciji in še posebej kakšne so bile ovire v kontekstu epidemije covid-19. Študija na podlagi kvalitativne metodologije in pristopa od spodaj navzgor daje glas učiteljem odraslih in osmišlja njihove delovne izkušnje. Članek vključuje predloge za izboljšanje njihovega profesionalnega statusa na podlagi ideje humanizacije. V tem večplastnem procesu morata tesno sodelovati tako država kot izobraževalci sami.

Ključne besede: *izobraževalci odraslih, profesionalni status, centri za izobraževanje odraslih, epidemija covid-19, Ciper*

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INTRODUCTION

This paper aspires to explore the experiences and perceptions of adult educators working in the Adult Education Centres in Cyprus regarding their professional status in the programme as well as possible barriers and challenges they have faced influencing their status amidst the pandemic. Following on previous published research on the role of higher education in the professionalisation of adult educators (Gravani et al., 2020) and, in particular, of the distance learning university in Cyprus (Gravani & Karagiorgi, 2020), and an illustration of the early steps adopted for vocational education trainers' professionalisation (Zenios & Chatzipanagiotou, 2020) on the island, the present paper takes a step further. It harnesses adult educator professionals' insights to investigate how they have experienced their professional status in a precarious time, a time of crisis that emerged out of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to explore the impact that this has had on their professionalisation.

The discussion on the professionalisation of adult learning professionals is not a new one. According to Gravani & Karagiorgi (2020), it has been a contested issue with some researchers claiming the necessity for systematisation in the field and some others assuming a more critical perspective and associating professionalisation to the exercise of power and control from the state. Nonetheless, both the European Union (EU) directive and the urgent need to cope with the heterogeneity, diversity and plurality of those working in the adult education sector, have made the professionalisation of adult educators a requirement for Member States (Gravani & Karagiorgi, 2020; Jütte et al. 2011; Mikulec, 2019; Murphy, 2017; Sava, 2011) and a relatively new area of adult education research to be considered.

A number of studies have examined the profile and identity of adult educators (Jütte & Lattke, 2014), their qualifications and the need for certain competences (Research voor Beleid, 2010), the policy, discourse, and impact of professionalisation on the field (Egetenmeyer & Käpplinger, 2011; Mikulec, 2019; Murphy, 2017), the role of higher education in the professionalisation of adult educators (Gravani & Karagiorgi, 2020). However, the field remains relatively unexplored, fragmented and incoherent, and it is still considered a challenge to form a profession for the adult educator (Bierema, 2011; Gravani & Karagiorgi, 2020). This also depicts the situation in Cyprus, where actions towards the professionalisation of adult educators have been limited, despite attempts to reconstruct the adult education sector in the last two decades by introducing a system for assessing and certifying vocational education trainers and establishing two university master's programmes in adult education (Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning at the Open University of Cyprus and Adult Education at a private university; Gravani & Ioannidou, 2016; Gravani & Karagiorgi, 2020).

These attempts are considered insufficient, since adult educators, in the Cypriot context, are still facing several challenges related to their professional status and are perceived as a particularly vulnerable group, especially in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is more or less the situation in most European countries and especially in those where there is a low degree of professionalisation in the relevant field. In this context, while there have been many studies investigating the effects of the COVID-19 health crisis on adult

learners (Boeren et al., 2020; James & Thériault, 2020), little research has reported on its impact on adult educators' professional status and lives.

The research reported in this paper aspires, by giving voice to the experiences and perceptions of the participants, to illuminate some of the challenges that adult educators teaching in a non-formal adult education programme, the Adult Education Centres (AECs) in Cyprus, face, in general and in particular, amidst the pandemic. It endeavours to contribute to the research in the local and international context regarding adult educators' professional status. It also views the pandemic crisis as an opportunity to reflect on the challenges that adult educators encounter in Cyprus and perhaps also elsewhere. The study can also be considered as a challenge, at a wider level, to enhance the awareness of the stakeholders, policy makers, and educational planners, in creating a coherent policy framework for adult educators' professionalisation.

The main aims guiding the study are the following: to explore the ways in which the adult educators working in the AECs have experienced their professional status in the programme; to point out any possible barriers in the programme that might have hindered their professionalisation; to unveil the extent to which the pandemic COVID-19 crisis has influenced the professional status of the adult educators working in the AECs.

In what follows, the conceptual framework of the study is briefly presented. The methodology adopted in the study is then described, followed by an illustration of the research findings and their critical discussion in the light of the relevant literature.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study took place in the context of the Cypriot educational system, which is highly centralised and in which adult education is less systematised and coordinated. Consequently, the available adult education structures and programmes are still significantly limited (Gravani & Ioannidou, 2016). The study focuses on the AECs at a specific time, during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. AECs are the main provider of non-formal adult education in Cyprus, and operate under the Directorate of Primary Education of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Youth (MoECSY).

According to the MoECSY, AECs aim at the general development of each adult's personality as well as the social, financial and cultural development of citizens and society in general. The AECs operate in urban and rural areas in the premises of primary and secondary schools or other public buildings (Gravani & Ioannidou, 2016). The sessions take place between November 1st and May 30th. The MoECSY announces a call of interest every year for those involved in teaching in the AECs. The interested parties (educators or regional managers) apply via the ministry's platform and, after being selected, are allocated to the AECs for a certain period of time.

During the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown period, AECs had to close down for several months to restrict the spread of the virus. According to the European report on

the “Impact of the Pandemic on Adult Education in Cyprus” (European Association for the Education of Adults, 2020), the shift to distance and on-line learning modes in AECs was not feasible not only because of the general lockdown (March–April 2020), but also because AEC courses officially ended in May. Furthermore, AECs remained closed during the school year 2020–2021. The research presented explores how adult educators’ professional status was affected by this situation.

The research is based on four main concepts: “professionalisation”, “professional status”, “employment status”, and “adult educator”. There is no single definition for all the aforementioned concepts, since they can be interpreted with a range of different meanings, changing over time and according to the context in which they are used. However, as Evans (2002) commented, it is required in the early stage of a study to present some basic interpretations of the main concepts. In light of this, some specific characteristics of the above terms can lead to the adoption of broad working definitions.

The concept of “professionalisation” derives from the word “profession”, which has its roots in the Latin word *profiteri* that means “a public pronouncement of certain principles and intentions and devotion to a certain way of life” (du Toit, 1995, p. 165). As stated by Murphy (2020), “professionalisation includes the development of professions” (p. 130). Similarly, Hoyle (1982) commented much earlier that the notion includes the process whereby “an occupation increasingly meets the criteria attributed to a profession” (p. 161). Furthermore, according to Despotović (2010), who defines the term in greater detail, professionalisation can be understood as “a process of establishing credibility and legitimacy of certain types of work or activity in terms of public recognition, institutional structure and standardization in the management and operation of groups and individuals within” (p. 2). Therefore, professionalisation is a desirable outcome for every occupational group (Timmons, 2011).

The notion of “professional status” is linked to the concept of “professionalisation”, as it can be seen as its main component. In recent years, more and more occupations have acquired professional status and are thus recognised as professions (Morrell, 2020). It must be emphasised that the concept of professional status is identified with those characteristics that turn an occupation into a profession. An occupation without a professional status simply means a vocation or known employment (Bierema, 2011). However, it must be taken into consideration that professions are actually semantic social constructs as their meaning has never been static. Therefore, the standards that an occupational sector needs to fulfil in order to be developed as a full-fledged and dedicated profession change over time (Morrell, 2020). The most common prerequisites of a profession are the following: theory-based academic qualification pathways, specific norms and codes of ethics, professional autonomy, client-based and social interactions, self-control by professional associations, supporting public welfare (Perks, 1993, pp. 12–14).

The term “employment status” is presented as an important element for the development of the professional status of an occupational group. Burchell et al. (1999) identify employment status as “the classification of workers according to whether they are employees,

who are employed under a contract of employment, or independent or self-employed workers who may work under a contract for services or one of a number of other arrangements” (p. 1). Individuals’ employment status affects their rights and obligations, which are based on legislation and related to labour protection, social security, and taxation. The study focuses on non-standard forms of employment and specifically on self-employment. Although self-employment entails the loss of employer-provided benefits and job security, in some extraordinary cases it might offer comparatively higher earning potential and greater autonomy (Budig, 2006).

With regard to the adult educator, Merriam and Brockett (2007) proposed that he/she is a practitioner involved in purposefully educative activities addressed to adults. The above definition is extremely broad due to the lack of information regarding various elements (e.g. socio-demographic characteristics, competences, roles, states of employment) of the profession of the adult educators (Gravani & Karagiorgi, 2020). In the light of the aforesaid, adult educators come from a variety of educational contexts and there is a diversity regarding their roles and states of employment (Chen et al., 2021). Hence, the complexity of the profile of adult educators does not allow a coherent investigation of their professional status. The professionalisation of the field is presented as a necessity since it could contribute to the development of a stronger sense of shared vision and enhancement of practices, teaching, and research (Bierema, 2011).

The research builds on Hoyle’s (2008) theoretical conceptions of professionalisation and professional status. Hoyle (2008) argues that the fluid concept of professionalisation can be distinguished into two components. The first concerns the institutional component, which includes the ambition of a profession to meet and to maintain certain criteria. These criteria include: strong limit, academic credentials, university affiliation, self-governing professional body, professional autonomy, code of ethics, etc. The second component, which is defined as the service element, is related to the process by which the knowledge, skills and commitment of professionals is continually strengthened in the interest of clients. The aspects of these components are not considered static but can vary independently since they are transformed according to the context within which they are examined. According to Hoyle (2008), the notion of professional status refers to the official recognition of an occupational group as a profession. Recognition can be achieved in a variety of ways depending on the needs of the occupational group and the context within which they are examined.

Based on the introduction and the conceptual framework presented above, the formulated research questions guiding the study are the following:

1. How have adult educators working in the adult education centres experienced their professional status in the programme?
2. What have been the possible barriers hindering the process of adult educators’ professionalisation in the programme?
3. To what extent has the professional status of the adult educators been affected by the pandemic COVID-19 crisis and at what levels?

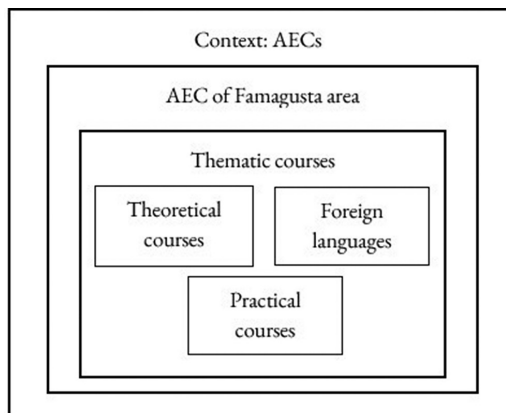
METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The present study adopted a qualitative bricolage research approach. Bricolage research, as conceptualised by Denzin and Lincoln (1999), suggests the combination of multiple methodological practices that add “rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth” (p. 6). In particular, the study used Hermeneutic Phenomenology (HP) in the research design phase, setting the research questions and developing the research tools, as well as Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) in the phase of data analysis. On the one hand, the application of HP aims to enrich the understanding of the phenomenon through the participants' experiences and perspectives (van Manen, 1990). On the other hand, CGT seems to be an ideal analytical procedure for an in-depth study of the phenomenon, since it allows the development of multiple theoretical categories and the investigation of the relationships between them (Charmaz, 2006).

A case study research strategy was adopted, aiming at an in-depth investigation of the phenomenon “within its real-life context” (Yin, 2009, p. 18). The research focuses on a specific group of adult educators, teaching adults in the AECs (the most important non-formal adult education programme in Cyprus), and in particular in one AEC in a specific geographical area, the region of Famagusta. The AEC of the Famagusta area offers a variety of interdisciplinary courses, which are categorised as follows: 1) foreign languages (e.g. English, Arabic, Bulgarian, French, German), 2) theoretical subjects (e.g. A tour to Cyprus, Literature, Psychology), 3) practical subjects (e.g. Dance, Painting, Wood sculpture, Computers). Each thematic course is offered in 24 sessions of 90 minutes each or 48 sessions of 45 minutes each. An instrumental case study was adopted since the multiple mini cases – the thematic courses – are considered as the vehicle for providing an in-depth understanding and rich description of participants' experiences, views, and opinions of their professional status. Figure 1 depicts the choices made in the context of the case study research strategy.

Figure 1

Case study strategy



In-depth semi-structured interviews were the main tool for data collection. As a flexible tool, they are used to illuminate the different experiences, feelings, thoughts of the participants regarding the phenomenon under investigation (Kvale, 2006). Overall, six interviews were conducted with AECs' educators. They were carried out over a month (June 2021). Purposeful random sampling was applied to select the participants in the study (Patton, 2015). Two adult educators, who were available to participate in the research, were randomly selected from each thematic course of the AEC in Famagusta. Of the six adult educators chosen, four were women and two men, with their ages ranging from 32 to 65. The participants, like all the educators of the AECs, were hired by purchasing services and were self-employed. The participants were interviewed separately via telephone or teleconference (due to COVID-19 restrictions) at a time that was most convenient to them. Each of the interviews lasted between 1 to 1.5 hours. For the purposes of clarity and anonymity, the participants in this study are referred to as Adult educator 1, Adult educator 2, etc. Table 1 gives an account of the educators' profiles.

Table 1
Adult educators' profiles

Adult educator	Gender	Teaching subject	University degree	Specialised knowledge	Formal qualifications in AT&L*	Years of experience
1	Male	Theoretical subject "A tour in Cyprus"	Yes	-	No	3
2	Female	Foreign language "Italian language"	Yes	-	No	7
3	Male	Practical subject "Woodcarving"	No	Yes	No	21
4	Female	Practical subject "Handcrafts"	No	Yes	No	9
5	Female	Practical subject "Painting"	Yes	-	No	4
6	Female	Practical Subject "Gymnastics"	Yes	-	Yes	13

Note. AT&L = adult teaching and learning.

Data analysis was completed in the light of the CGT approach. The goal of CGT analysis is to approach the truth in an inductive way "through the eyes of the participant" (Clarke, 2019, p. 6). The process started by indexing participants' responses under the questions asked during the semi-structured interviews. The next formal stage of analysis included initial and focused coding. During initial coding, the transcribed

data were analysed line-by-line gerunds, which helped the researchers retain proximity with the participants' narratives (Charmaz, 2006). *In vivo* codes were used, where the exact words of informants were utilised as a code. While engaging in focused coding, through a process that is well known as the "constant comparative method", the initial codes were replaced with fewer but more focused codes (Charmaz, 2017). In this process analytical memos were used as a powerful reflection tool, writing about the codes, emerging categories, and connections between these categories (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). The categories that emerged are presented in the subsequent section along with the relevant quotes under two main headings: *professional status and barriers to professionalisation* and *the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on adult educators' professional status*.

FINDINGS

Professional status and barriers to professionalisation

The research revealed the low degree of professionalisation of the adult educators working in the AECs. Throughout their interviews, the educators commented on the various challenges they have faced influencing their professional status. In what follows their experiences and perceptions are presented under the sub-themes *professional qualifications, continuing professional development, working conditions, physical environment, facilities and resources, and lack of recognition and support*.

Professional qualifications

The analysis revealed that the adult educators in the sample came from a variety of educational backgrounds with diverse qualifications. In the study, the educators' professional qualifications were explored in terms of the relevance of their university degree and specialised knowledge on the subject they taught as well as in terms of the extent of their qualifications in adult teaching and learning.

As we have already seen in Table 1 above, four out of the six adult educators interviewed (n=4) have a diploma relevant to the course they taught. In particular, all the theoretical courses, foreign language courses and some practical subjects (Gymnastics, Painting) are taught by secondary school teachers who have a higher education degree. However, in the case of other practical courses (Handcrafts, Wood sculpture), individuals with specialised knowledge in the relevant field and no higher education degree were employed to teach. The research highlights the lack of academic or other formal qualifications in adult teaching and learning. All except one (n=5) adult educators interviewed have no specialised knowledge in adult education. Therefore, adult educators are hired in the AECs on the basis of the assessment of their first degree or of their specialised subject knowledge, while most of them have no specialisation in adult education.

Given the above, five (n=5) out of the six adult educators interviewed complained about not having professional qualifications in the principles and practices of adult education.

They expressed the opinion that these qualifications are necessary for the development of the profession of the adult educator. A female educator teaching Italian, who has seven years of experience, presented the problem clearly:

Unfortunately, we don't have official qualifications for teaching adults. [...] This poses a series of problems for us. We were trained to teach children and not adults. Our practice is based on the experience gained over the years in the AECs and not on formal qualifications. (Adult educator 2)

In a similar vein, a male educator with three years of experience argued: "We need formal qualifications to be able to work efficiently with adult students" (Adult educator 1). The adult educators acknowledged that obtaining formal skills in andragogy is essential for the development of their professional identity and the improvement of their practice. A female educator, the only one with a master's degree in Continuing and Lifelong Learning, argued that formal qualifications in adult education have a major impact on her practice: "Attending the master's programme in Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning helped me improve my teaching practices" (Adult educator 6).

In the following statement a female educator explained why educators are not interested in obtaining formal qualifications in andragogy. She commented:

The state must help us to acquire formal qualifications in adult education [...]. I'd like to attend a master's programme in adult education. However, I feel that this may not help me to improve my professional status in this particular context. I feel very tired now. Nothing will change in my life. Also, I don't have the money to pay for a master's degree. (Adult educator 2)

The educators in the study believe that the provision of formal education in adult education is the state's responsibility. However, it is left to the individuals to ensure they have the time and money for supplementary education in adult education. The above interviewee gave two reasons as to why adult educators are not involved in formal education: first, tiredness and frustration due to problems that adult educators face, and second, lack of financial means to invest in further education.

Continuing professional development (CPD)

Regarding CPD, all the participants in the study (n=6) mentioned an annual training seminar designed for all the educators working in the AECs and offered by the MoESY at the beginning of the academic year. This optional seminar focuses on the general principles of adult education, teaching and learning. A female educator commented on this: "At the beginning of each academic year, the ministry organises a seminar on the general principles and practices of adult education, the skills and attitudes of the adult educator, the management of adult learners" (Adult educator 4).

Almost all, five (n=5) out of the six (n=6), adult educators interviewed had participated in this seminar. Only one educator, with twenty years of experience, did not attend it, since he felt that it “was a waste of time”. He stated:

I wouldn't call it a seminar. It was an informative report and they read to us. I've heard the same things twenty times. What do you do in the classroom, what is allowed, what is forbidden! To be honest, these are boring things for me. (Adult educator 3)

Almost all the adult educators, with one exception (n=5), argued that one seminar organised annually by the state was insufficient and they expressed the opinion that continuing education and training is a key precondition of their professional development. A female educator teaching a practical course gave a response typical of the group: “With only one seminar, you don't do anything great. You can't achieve anything. More systematic training is needed” (Adult educator 4).

In a similar way, two participants stated that the updating of adult educator's skills and competencies is essential because it is interconnected with the improvement of their teaching practices. A male educator commented on the above: “I think more seminars are needed. We need to get to know about the adult teaching methods. We don't know them” (Adult educator 3). Similarly, a female educator argued: “Certainly, the more you are trained, the better your teaching practices are. I have gained some techniques but they are for children and they can't meet the needs of adult learners. We definitely need seminars” (Adult educator 6).

The adult educators quoted above, talking in light of their experience in the adult education context, underlined the need to learn how to improve the quality of their work. Other interviewees in the study also reported that during their employment in the AECs, they had to attend a limited number of seminars not related to adult education, which were organised by the MoECSY. They commented on the highly centralised adult education system and the top-down approach adopted, according to which the state decides on the type of continuing education that the educators should attend, regardless of their needs. Therefore, they identify a gap between adult educators' educational needs and the training that the state provides.

Working conditions

All of the participants interviewed (n=6) argued that their working conditions are precarious and have a negative impact on their professional status. Three main crucial issues emerged in the interviews regarding their employment status. The first theme that emerged from the interviews is the financial disadvantages of self-employment. Adult educators working in AECs are hired as services by the state. Every year on the basis of an open call, the MoECSY purchases services from those interested in teaching at the AECs. As a result, adult educators are considered self-employed and they have to pay for their

social security, medical care taxes and other contributions towards state funds themselves. The following quote from an interview with a male adult educator underlined the above:

A big issue is that we pay for social insurance by ourselves. The institute doesn't even cover our travel expenses. We have to cover it, be self-employed, pay for our travel expenses. What is left for us? Only the effort. (Adult educator 2)

The issue becomes palpable that since adult educators are considered to be self-employed, the state does not cover their travel expenses, which in some cases cost more than their actual teaching salary. This makes them think that their work "is not appreciated" (Adult educator 3). All the participants proposed a change in their employment status and recognition as public servants.

The second theme raised in most of the interviews (n=5), with one exception, is their low wages. The participants vividly expressed their negative feelings about their payment using the words "frustration", "despair", "anger". The following statement from a female educator with nine years of experience is indicative:

The salary is poor. If they gave us something more, it would be better. We do much more than what we are paid for. We have responsibilities that aren't ours. It's our responsibility to put together a group of students. Only when all of them pay us, the group is formed, we can continue the programme and get our regular salary [...]. I feel very frustrated! (Adult educator 4)

The adult educator complained about her payment, which seems rather poor in relation to her effort and responsibilities assigned. An adult educator's fee for a 45 minute lesson for a full group of students is set by the MoECSY at €18.63, while most of the time, courses are cancelled due to a small number or because of no learners.

It is worth pointing out that only one participant in the research, a female educator with thirteen years of experience, appeared to be satisfied with her payment. She said: "The salary is very good. For me it is a good extra income" (Adult educator 4). However, she was an exception as she was the only adult educator in the sample whose teaching role in the AECs was supplementary to her main job.

The third theme that emerged from the interviews is the financial uncertainty that adult educators face from June to September, when there are no classes to teach, so they are not paid. Four (n=4) out of the six participants commented on their unemployment status during the summer months when they do not receive any unemployment allowance from the state since they are considered self-employed. Some, like the adult educator quoted below, admitted that this poses a challenge to their livelihood: "We don't receive unemployment allowance. Some of my colleagues with families cannot survive during the summer months and they are forced to find another job as soon as classes are over" (Adult educator 4).

Physical environment, facilities and resources

AECs operate in the premises of public primary or secondary schools that are designed to meet the needs of school students, not adults. All the participants in the study (n=5), with one exception, argued that the inadequacy of the infrastructure constitutes a major challenge to their teaching practice. The above is indicative not only of the lack of organisation of the AECs on behalf of the state, but also of the lack of recognition of the adult educators as professionals. A male educator argued:

The courses take place in an elementary school. How can an old woman sit in a child's chair? [...] We are supposed to be professionals. But how can we ensure the provision of quality education under these circumstances? Learners come to the AECs and trust to us their training. They expect us to support them in achieving their goals, their dreams. (Adult educator 1)

The educator above expressed his concerns about the quality of the teaching provision. He identified a strong relationship between the professional status of the adult educators in the AECs and the quality of the education provided. This reflects his belief that teaching is a profession, shared among the rest of the educators in the sample. They see themselves as having a moral obligation towards learners to ensure the delivery of a high standards service.

Furthermore, all of the participants (n=6) identified the absence of appropriate resources and infrastructure in the programme as an additional factor hindering learning. They underlined the limited access to basic technological learning tools such as a cassette player, a photocopier, a projector. A male educator stated:

We have no computers or interactive whiteboards. There are no photocopier machines. We make photocopies at our own expenses. This underestimates us as professionals. I have written a letter to our supervisors complaining about the shortages we experience. However, I haven't heard back from them. (Adult educator 3)

It is palpable from the above that educators have limited autonomy to secure supportive learning resources, which is as a result of the central control exercised over the AECs by the state.

Lack of recognition and support

All the participants in the study (n=6) agreed that they did not feel supported while working at the AECs and did not get the recognition they deserved. Thus, they expressed feelings of disappointment and tiredness. The following female adult educator talked of having felt marginalised, neglected, under-recognised and largely unsupported by the managerial and administrative staff:

They underestimate us. When you underestimate the educators, you also underestimate the institution. There is a frustration from all colleagues. We feel that our employment status won't change and we cannot do anything to change it. We don't have the power. They tell us: 'This is it, even if you like it or not! If you don't like it, just leave'. (Adult educator 2)

Similarly, another educator in the research articulated clearly that adult educators working in the AECs did not have support from their administrators, something that hindered their professional practice.

The administrators sit inside the office and give us instructions. They never come to the classroom to see our problems. They never approach us. Even if they know about our difficulties, they do nothing. We were told that we had to solve these problems on our own. (Adult educator 1)

Additionally, the analysis revealed that adult educators working in AECs are a group of professionals who have no voice and remain silent. As a result, they do not fight for their rights and their professional status is degraded. A male participant commented that:

The majority of the educators are afraid of complaining about the challenges they face. They don't want to lose their job. Most of them have families. If they lose their job, how could they survive? So they keep making concessions, while the administration is absent. (Adult educator 2)

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON ADULT EDUCATORS' PROFESSIONAL STATUS

All the adult educators in the sample (n=6) agreed that the period of the COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging for them. First, they raised the issue of the absence of official information regarding the closure of the AECs, circulated by the state. As indicated in the findings, the educators were informed about the temporary closure of the AECs from the press. Hence, they strongly expressed their frustration and advocated for the necessity to have been informed beforehand by the MoECSY. The following statement is indicative of the above:

The AECs should have contacted us. We learned about the interruption of the courses from the television. The authority in charge, as an organised group that employs people, should have contacted us and informed us about the interruption of the courses. (Adult educator 1)

Another educator shared similar views:

They hadn't told us anything. At some point retrospectively the MoESY informed the AECs that classes were postponed. We weren't informed immediately. They didn't notify us about the reopening of the AECs. But this is the situation in Cyprus in general and in the AECs in particular. They don't care about us; we are always the last to learn. (Adult educator 2)

Second, adult educators pointed out the challenges they had faced regarding their employability due to COVID-19. Specifically, five (n=5) out of the six educators commented on the financial instability they had experienced. Since they are self-employed, they faced unemployment with the closure of the AECs during the pandemic. One of the educators stated:

The truth is that we were waiting, whether we would be paid or not. We couldn't apply for unemployment allowance from the government. We had no information about what would happen. Just at some point, after many months of waiting, we received a support allowance from the government. They gave us 60% of our salary. (Adult educator 3)

In the above statement, the participant explained that educators had been included in the government's financial support plan. This aimed to subsidise people who were working in the private sector or were self-employed and who faced unemployment due to the general lockdown. Therefore, the educators received an allowance. However, the interviewee complained about the lack of information regarding their inclusion in the support plan and the payment of their allowance. This posed a challenge to their livelihoods, especially amongst those who were solely working as educators in AECs. One of the interviewees commented:

Educators working in the AEC were financially and psychologically affected by the situation. Most of them could not survive. Some were forced to work elsewhere temporarily in order to financially support their families. They dumped us; they forgot us. That's the way I feel. (Adult educator 1)

As can be concluded from the above, the financial instability experienced during the pandemic was linked to feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. The above educator gives a picture of some of his colleagues whose well-being was negatively affected. Some of them, in order to survive and support their families, had to find another job, which was not related to their educational background. Consequently, adult educators once again felt marginalised. Overall, the pandemic crisis has exposed the vulnerability of adult educators, who, due to their self-employment status, were deprived of any employment rights.

Finally, some of the participants expressed feelings of sadness when they had realised that learners could not have access to the AECs for more than 12 months. They argued that courses should have been delivered online and expressed their need to have been trained in e-learning.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The research revealed that there is a limited degree of professionalisation amongst educators in the AECs and the process of developing professional status appears to be complex and problematic. Furthermore, a relational interdependence appears to exist between the concept of professionalisation in the context of adult education, professional status, and employment status. In light of this, five main themes can be underlined when looking at the adult educators' narratives.

The first and common theme identified among all the participants is their discontent regarding their professional qualifications. According to Jakimiuk (2020), professional qualifications include certificates, diplomas, credentials, which confirm individuals' theoretical knowledge and practical skills. For educators who work in the AECs, an educational background in andragogy is not required by the state and even continuing training in adult education is not mandatory. Therefore, they are hired on the basis of their first degree or specialist knowledge of the subject they teach. This is a common practice in small countries such as Cyprus, where the institutional structure of adult education is less developed (Mayo et al., 2008).

The participants talked of feeling incompetent as far as their didactical practices are concerned and attributed this to the lack of formal preparations in teaching adults. However, they argued that the experience gained through the teaching in the AECs plays an important role in ensuring the quality of their practice. According to Jōgi and Gross (2009), adult educators develop their skills, knowledge, and identity through the experience and reflection on their practice. From a constructivist perspective, this means that educators, through an action of knowing, attribute meaning to their experiences and act on a set of assumptions shaped by similar previous experiences (Palmieri et al., 2020).

The above is related to the second theme that emerged in the interviews. The adult educators pointed out that professional development opportunities presented to them were limited and insufficient. At the same time, guided by a centralised bureaucratic logic, they expressed the view that it is the state's responsibility to provide the appropriate opportunities for their professional development and not their own. This finding indicates that the participants do not view the advancement of their occupational group to a professional level as a relational and multifaceted process. According to Egetenmeyer et al. (2019), besides the state (macro-level) and organisations (meso-level), individuals (micro-level) are also relevant actors in achieving professionalisation. Furthermore, the participants proposed their continuing professional training in andragogy in order to improve the quality of adult education provision. Considering the first two themes, within a professional field, as suggested by Jakimiuk (2020), educational standards and legal solutions for professional qualifications should be defined and implemented.

As for the third theme, the participants perceived their working conditions as being critical due to their employment status. Adult educators in AECs are hired as services by the

state and they are self-employed. Their self-employment status seems to play an important role in their degraded professional status and therefore hinders the professionalisation process. This status, which makes them vulnerable, entails poor earnings, the lack of social security, and the risk of unemployment. It is important to note that the educators face unemployment from June to September when the AECs are closed. As Egetenmeyer and K  pplinger (2011) have noted, professionalisation includes rights for professionals. Therefore, for the educators working in the AECs, the process of professionalisation presupposes the change of their employment status, which is the main obstacle that affects them as professionals and as human beings.

In parallel, in relation to the fourth theme, they felt that the problematic environment and the absence of appropriate resources did not allow them to act as professionals in various pedagogical situations. Indeed, the concept of a professional educator is linked to professional teaching and learning infrastructures (Simons & Kelchtermans, 2008). Moreover, the absence of recognition and support made them feel socially and institutionally marginalised. According to Knowles (1980), recognition of adult education staff is presented as a necessity because of their important role in society of providing knowledge, skills, attitudes or values to adults.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis on the professional status of the educators in AECs has also been highlighted in the study and has revealed the weakness of the Cypriot educational system to cope with the crisis. The AECs were paralysed for several months, as they were closed. During this period, adult educators working in AECs, due to their state of employment, faced unemployment, which posed a challenge to their livelihood and well-being. The educators complained of being marginalised by society and the socio-political system and felt that they had no value as human beings as well as professionals. In particular, they justified the above by criticising the absence of official information articulated by the government regarding their future as professionals in the AECs. Additionally, they did not receive any information about whether they could receive any unemployment benefits and experienced insecurity.

Taking all of the above into account, the participants reflected on their professional status and the obstacles that hinder this process. Through a process of critical consciousness, they struggle against the objectification of all the adult educators in the AECs as things to be known and acted upon (Freire, 1970, 2005). To use Freire's ideas (1970, 2005), the adult educators seem to be in a state of dehumanisation, which needs to be reversed. In this case, the path to their professionalisation can be identified with becoming more human, more professional. The humanisation of the participants will be achieved through the reduction of the restrictive conditions and the oppressive practices employed by the state. Accordingly, it is important that the educators escape from the precariousness that arises from their employment status and see themselves as potential professionals in order to form a common professional identity and articulate a shared professional vision amongst all adult educators in the AECs.

The process of their humanisation is multifaceted and both the state and the individuals must become “agents of curiosity, become investigators, become subjects in an ongoing process of quest for the revelation of the ‘why’ of things and facts” (Freire, 1999, p. 105). For this reason, policy makers need to create and implement policies aimed towards the professionalisation of all adult educators in the non-formal sector. At the same time, the educators must not link adult education with the standards of classical professions but instead perceive it as an occupation with a deeply social purpose.

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