

Problematising the policies' purposes of adult education: A semiological approach to the 'NEAAL' and its lifelong learning reductionist mindset

Carlos Francisco DE SOUSA REIS¹, Maria das Dores FORMOSINHO SANCHES SIMÕES²

¹Prof. Dr., University of Coimbra,
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9675-3810
Email: csreis@uc.pt

²Prof. Dr., Universidade Portucalense,
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-0697-3327
Email: msimoes@upt.pt

Abstract

The study seeks to redefine the purposes of Adult Education Policies (AEP) at the EU level, moving beyond traditional views focused on qualifications and economic adaptation, and instead advocating for a socio-ethical-political framework. This framework incorporates critical, creative, and existential dimensions. Drawing on Biesta's critique of the democratic deficit in lifelong learning, the study calls for re-evaluating AEP through three educational domains: qualification, socialisation, and subjectification. The analysis centres on the "Council Resolution on a new European Agenda for Adult Learning 2021-2030 (NEAAL 2030), using content analysis and a semiological approach, with MAXQDA for analysing predefined categories from the theoretical framework. The investigation reveals that crucial concepts such as "education", "learning", "training", and "skills" are reduced in meaning, aligning with Barthes's critique of mythologies. This reduction perpetuates a normalised discourse in AEP, resulting in a democratic deficit and a limited teleological approach. Despite its purported neutrality, NEAAL 2030 endorses a reductionist regime that overlooks pluralistic perspectives and fails to foster relationality within the EU's adult education. The research challenges this normalisation and reductionism, advocating for a comprehensive and democratic framework that empowers individuals and recognises diverse perspectives in EU adult education policies.

Key words: Adult education, lifelong education, policies, educational teleology.

Introduction

"What I claim is to live to the full the contradiction of my time, which may well make sarcasm the condition of truth."

(Barthes, 1972, p. 11)

In a seminal essay, Biesta (2006) analysed the policy discourses on lifelong learning produced by global organizations, showing that, over recent decades, shifts in global adult education policies, notably in the European Union, have transitioned lifelong learning from a personal commodity to a human capital investment. Such inflexion, guided by transnational organizations like OECD and the EU, emphasises economic value —while sidelining social and personal fulfilment—, and making a strong impact on policies and individual perspectives. This noticeable move towards a "learning economy" prioritises individualistic learning, transforming it from a right to a duty. Thus, raising concerns about democratic participation and motivation regarding the so-called learning, at the same time it lateralises collective engagement essential for social change and shared concerns. It has, for instance, been identified that the UNESCO "Learning to Be" report (Faure et al., 1972) advocated lifelong education for societal growth, while, in contrast, current lifelong learning policies prioritise economic growth and employability. Such a slippage – from education promoting multidimensional human development to prioritising productivity – serves to echo economic agendas in contemporary learning strategies, thus significantly altering or even betraying the original promise (Barros, 2012).

Now, the move towards a “learning economy” represents an educational distorting shift with two main consequences (Biesta, 2009): 1. It reduces education to the “learning approach”, representing a “learnification of education”, which serves to execute its bending to the “learning economy” agenda; 2. As a consequence of focusing on “learnification” as a process language, it fails to consider the axial question of educational purposes or functions of education, while overvaluing one of the functions to the detriment of the others.

The mid-1980s rise of “learner” and “learning” language (namely over “teaching”, see Annex 1) centred on the —supposedly positive— shift toward process-oriented education; hence emphasising the learner’s role over syllabus and teacher-centred approaches — as there was a generalised fatigue regarding the nefarious violence of the so-called “explanatory systems of foolishness” (Rancière, 1991). However, its crucial intrinsic problem, arises from the overlook of content, the social context of learning, and the educational domains of purposes, not to mention the undervaluation of teaching, in its own right an intrinsic component of the equation implied in education. Not surprisingly, then, we have watched the “rise in simplistic learner-centric discourses that limit or diminish the role of teaching” (Campbell, 2019). At this point, we must clarify that the “learnification of education” stands for the redefinition of the whole complex educational realm as reduced to learning, thus implying that educands are seen as learners, schools are understood as learning settings, and, consequently —which is more important to our focus— adult education becomes assumed as lifelong learning, rather than lifelong education.

It turns out as evident that overemphasising “learning” obstructs the vital questionings on content, purpose, and relationships while obfuscating teaching’s importance. Moreover, it raises legitimate concerns about potential losses in educational discourse, namely, regarding “learnification” hindering essential teleological aspects pertaining to the “what”, “why”, and “from whom” students learn. If one inquires about the functions of education, it is possible to devise three intersecting circles of correspondent interdependent domains of purpose: qualification (competences and knowledge), socialization (cultural integration), and subjectivation (personal existential fulfilment) (Biesta, 2015). Such a holistic approach envisages education as a teleological practice that claims a balanced educational approach regarding multidimensional purposes, as grounded in sensitiveness towards empowering existentially rooted educands. If we look through a metaphor of a three-dimensional chess game it can illustrate the complexity and interconnectedness of the teleological domains, cautioning against prioritising one over the others (Biesta, 2018). As, for instance, overemphasizing qualification neglects subjectivation in a way that negatively impacts the holistic development of educands. The tripartite board model highlights the need for equitable advancement across these domains, avoiding undue privilege to ensure comprehensive educational growth. In this regard, subjectivation emerges as crucial in stimulating personal agency, and promoting autonomy by, for instance, challenging rigid bureaucracies’ constraints. On the other hand, embracing the interplay among qualification, socialisation, and subjectivation appears as crucial for a holistic education that values educands’ diverse perspectives and aspirations. A comprehensive perspective that advocates for an inclusive education of empowering educands beyond mere learning effectiveness, and fostering their growth as responsible individuals, so spotlighting why “it is only when subjectification enters the scene that we are in the domain of education” (Biesta, 2020, p. 102). Can this realm ever be forgotten, marginalised or even lateralised?

Before delving into the analytic process, a clarification is needed of what can be understood by “education” and “learning”, extending it to the concepts of “lifelong education” and “lifelong learning”, as well as some other terms that are given agency by the what will be the “corpus” of our analysis, namely the “Council Resolution on a New European Agenda for Adult Learning 2021-2030” (Council of the European Union - CEU, 2021) – (NEAAL 2030).

Now, it is a widespread cliché –often slipping to platitudes–, pointing out to education pillars –by following Delors et al. (1996) famous Report– such as “learning to know”, “learning to do”, “learning to live together”, and “learning to be”. Such pillars emphasise the holistic development of individuals, including –not only their cognitive, scholarly and professional development– as also their physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being, implying the promotion of personal growth, self-awareness, self-expression, affectivity expansion, which involve enlivening creativity, curiosity, resilience, and a sense of purpose in life in non-egocentric ways. While a multidimensional holistic conception of education is suggested, the very title of the Report states “Learning: The treasure within”. It was well understood that the “treasure within” was that “education” implies “learning”, many processes and forms of learning, but it consists of something ampler than learning, it goes beyond learning. As a process, learning can serve the dimensions encompassed by education: working transversally to qualification, socialisation and subjectification. Nevertheless, we have to consider it while paralleling other processes, namely the immersive living experiences and personal interrelations in the modes of I-You (Buber, 2023; McHenry, 1997), which pertain to the whole of the person

while undergoing her/his emergency and/or affirmation as such. Furthermore, we view learning as a process intricately intertwined with the unfolding of competences, which in turn transcend it.

After an intense and prolific debate that made competences a popular issue in the business world, the concept was transferred to the educational domain under the influence of the so-called “managerialistic” trend. According to the ground-breaking study of Durand (1998), the use of the concept was initially founded on a “resource-based view” and led to a “knowledge-based approach”, which, in turn, motivated a theory of “competence-based strategy”.

Durand defined the three generic dimensions or constitutive axes of competences as knowledge, know-how, and attitudes, which he understands as integrative, interdependent, and multidimensional, namely assuming that: Knowledge integrates to “know what” and to “know why”; Know-how involves “skills, “techniques” and “technologies”; and Attitudes imply “will”, “identity” and “behavior” (Durand, 1998). Now, while skills refer to know-how, understood as a composed dimension, competences are the result of a confluence of knowledge, know-how, and attitudes. Therefore, it is essential to bear in mind that all three dimensions of competences should be considered as interdependent: there is no learning (knowledge construction) without action; all know-how is vulnerable without knowledge; know-how cannot be built without a social context where attitudes play a significant role; knowledge is sterile unless it’s incorporated into attitudes; just as attitudes are meaningless without know-how about action. Expertise emerges by combining these three generic dimensions at an integrated level of higher competence: experts understand, can explain why they do something in a specific way, and know how to execute according to the state of the art, going beyond mere assimilation and digestion.

Durand further enriches these three dimensions by, for instance, incorporating motivation into the category of attitudes and referring to identity derived from shared values, rituals, taboos, and beliefs, which acts as a binding agent that holds organizational pieces together at least as efficiently as any other coordination and integration mechanism (Durand, 1998, p.29). Regarding the dynamics of competence construction, the author explains that “competence is an accumulated asset resulting from a continuous flow of learning, reinforcing and expanding the organization’s competence base” (Durand, 1998, p.30). When referring to forms of competence, he proposes that “information is recognized, sifted, transformed, and adapted to data to fit into pre-existing knowledge structures” (Durand, 1998, p.16). Hence, it’s concluded that knowledge is constructed through the integration and assimilation of information into structures responsible for ensuring coherence and structure in the accumulated knowledge base. On the other hand, know-how is built through action, imitation, observation, and camaraderie, taking root in the tacit domain but evolving to the point of forming skills, techniques and technologies. As for attitudes, Durand tells us they are developed through interaction that leads to the adoption of established cultural values and shared basic commitments, implying a sense of identity and willingness. Finally, expertise represents more than a difference in degree in the continuum of competence development; it is seen as a qualitative leap that unites the three generic dimensions.

Having reported what the Academy has already clarified about competences, we would now inquire what the Agenda presents on this subject. From the outset —in its as much precious as terribly imprecise first paragraph—, we can read the following:

“It is crucial to address the future positively by working on the basis of adult learning needs and having in place formal, nonformal and informal learning opportunities capable of providing all the necessary knowledge, skills and competences to create an inclusive, sustainable, socially just and more resilient Europe.” (p.11)

On this subject –somehow paradoxically– an encompassing organization, to taken into account in these matters, the Council of Europe (2016), in its project titled “Competences for Democratic Culture: Living Together as Equals in Culturally Diverse Democratic Societies”, presents a model providing a dual definition of competence as “the capacity to meet complex demands within a particular context” (Council of Europe, 2016, pp.23-24), which we find very insightful and inspiring.

“Competence is the ability to mobilise and deploy relevant psychological resources (i.e. values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and/or understanding) in order to respond appropriately and effectively to the demands, challenges and opportunities [...] The present model treats competence as a dynamic process. This is because competence involves the selection, activation, organization and co-ordination of relevant psychological resources which are then applied through behavior in such a way that the individual adapts appropriately and effectively to a given situation. [...] In addition to this global and holistic use of the term “competence” (in the singular), the term “competences” (in the plural) is used in the current account to refer to the specific individual resources (i.e. the specific values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and understanding) that are mobilised and deployed in the production of competent behavior. Hence, on the present account, competence consists of the selection, activation and organization of competences and the application of

these competences in a co-ordinated, adaptive and dynamic manner to concrete situations.” (Council of Europe, 2016, pp. 23-24)

The previous approach is, at the very least, embroiling, “competence” is understood as incorporating “competences”, referring to components as diverse as knowledge, know-how, skills, attitudes, values. Everything is competences... So, when we talk about skills and competences at the same time, what do we talk about? Now, as we will see, such conceptualisations are not duly considered by the Agenda (NEAAL, 2023).

Whatever the case, it is learning and the developing of competences that we have to consider regarding, for instance, work supported by a professional qualification. For this purpose, training could be expected to occur as a learning constructive experiential process implying different kinds of complexity, namely those involving know-how development –skills, techniques, and technologies–, which reclaim knowledge and adequate attitudes. However, training could also be proposed in the realm of socialisation, and even regarding the formation of character –something more related to subjectification–, as Aristoteles pointed out (see Hall, 2019). Nevertheless, we would not make dissociable the domain of qualification (let alone the processes it may imply) from those of socialisation and subjectification, as being intertwined realms that complement each other, giving way to education as a wholeness through which personhood flourishes. Rather we should envisage education as an intertwined, multidimensional, harmonious fulfilment of the person as she/he gets inherently qualified by being integrated/included in a social context, at the same time creating an existential project that gives the person a sense of wholeness for the work devoted to within a community insertion, where personal life founds the sense of belonging for unfolding. A job is not just a mere process for acquiring means of subsistence, it isn’t also –obviously– not independent of the social context where persons work and –above all– they carry on their life’s narratives, without which they get void or meaningless existences (Han, 2015, 2020, 2024).

So, it is not the case that a job and the corresponding qualification should come first or later than socialisation and subjectification, this one being the domain where people make sense of their lives as a whole. All these domains work intercorrelated and possibly concomitantly. That is why we should not bend to any priority of economy (or the economy language of learning) to the detriment, not just of socialisation and subjectification, but the harmonious wholeness, within which each educand may find a sense for being, working and contributing critically to society (for an extended debate on this issue see: Biesta, 2006, 2013, 2015, 2018, 2020).

Nel Noddings, in her influential works (1998, 2003), has advocated for a holistic stance that goes beyond mere cognitive development but rather implies the multidimensionality of education, which encompasses not only acquiring knowledge and know-how but also developing attitudes, values, and personal perspectives about the meaning of life, which correspond to emotional, ethical, and existential dimensions of education. Noddings goes to the point of arguing that education should focus on social well-being and happiness, prioritizing the development of caring attitudes and ethical values alongside academic knowledge or professional know-how. As García and Jover (2019), have shown, such encompassing desideratum remits to the importance of empathy, and compassion in education, in a way personal meaning and purpose in life unfolds, pointing to the holistic nature of the educational experience and its alignment with the flourishing of integral persons ethically committed to society.

Considering the above-discussed reasons we would not reduce lifelong education to lifelong learning, the latter being more the means supposed to nurture the former. Lifelong Education refers to a broader concept that encompasses not only learning activities but also the policies, systems, the provision of educational opportunities, resources, and school cultures or environments grounded on pedagogical modes that enable persons to engage in continuous (trans)formation throughout their lives. Lifelong Education extends beyond individual learning activities to encompass societal efforts for promoting access to education, equity, and social inclusion across the lifespan. It involves a holistic approach to education that addresses the diverse learning needs and aspirations of individuals at different stages of life, from early childhood through adulthood and into old age.

Method

The subject of analysis: The “Council Resolution on a New European Agenda for Adult Learning 2021-2030” (CEU, 2021) (NEAAL 2021)

Taking the previously discussed theoretical framework in mind, this article aims to provide an analysis of an adult education policy referential document, in particular, we want to focus on a Council of the European Union recent resolution. According to the CEU (2024), a resolution represents a political stance that conveys

a political viewpoint at the same time it establishes political commitments on subjects pertaining to the EU's fields of operation. Typically, Council resolutions outline forthcoming activities planned within a specific policy domain. While they lack legal authority, they may prompt the Commission to propose actions or pursue additional steps. In support of our option, we want to argue that it's not negligible that the document in question has been called the "New Agenda for Adult Learning 2021-2030", which means it represents the overarching reference for sectoral policy in the current decade.

"In the period up to and including 2030, the overall objective of the new European agenda for adult learning 2021-2030 (NEAAL 2030) will be to increase and improve the provision, promotion and take-up of formal, non- formal and informal learning opportunities for all" (CEU, 2021, p.11).

Starting with a "Whereas" section, The Agenda is structured by 9 more sections, which are unfolded into 55 points. It recalls, recognises, and underlines certain strategic aspects along with stating some core subjects of agreement. Furthermore, the Agenda recommends consideration of the principle of subsidiarity, to be taken into account along with the national circumstances for the implementation of instruments that are then identified. The Agenda also makes two invitations, one envisaging the Member States and the other addressed to the Commission, asking both tenants to focus on certain courses of action. The document is complemented with three Annexes. The first makes a recommendation to focus on several outlined areas; the second presents the EU-Level Targets and Indicators; and the third identifies the background documents relevant for the NEAAL 2030.

One has to bear in mind that NEAAL is the product of a long incubation, starting decades ago, an ongoing process that gave rise to its ideological scaffolding. In this regard, Mikulec's (2018) has undertaken a penetrating analysis of such dynamics, regarding EU's nine core official policy documents on 'adult learning' produced between 2000 and 2016. Namely, the Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning (CEU, 2011), which was paving the way for "lifelong learning" regarding the incoming decade, so functioned as the grounding step for NEAAL 2021. It is declared in the document –from the very start– its main concern: the economic crisis. And while rhetorically referring to the "The Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth [it focus on...] lifelong learning and skills development as key elements in response to the current economic crisis, to demographic ageing and to the broader economic and social strategy of the European Union." (CEU, 2011, p. 1). So, the document immediately states its primordial goal as being to instrumentalise lifelong learning in behalf of the economic realm. As we can figurate from Mikulec's (2018) hermeneutics, the EAAL (2011) sways an approach of several realms: the economical, the social, the political and the personal. Nevertheless, it strongly focuses on the 'Economic' domain referring to: adaptability, efficiency, employability, competitiveness, productivity, innovation, and mobility; 'Social' calls to solidarity, equity, social cohesion, social inclusion, are very diluted; The same goes for the 'Political' stances referent empowerment and citizenship, as is the case for 'Personal' development and autonomy (Mikulec, 2018, p. 141). It seems that these values are convocated more to embellish the overall rhetorical effect than to really address genuine major concerns about issues they imply.

After promoting the relatively marginal status of the field to one of prominence, giving it visibility –while establishing the language of lifelong learning, alongside prioritising the economic objectives and instrumental conceptualization of adult education– end up instilling two grand narratives of adult education policy: (1) the contribution to economic competitiveness; and (2) the integration of refugees into the social order of the EU. In fact, as the author acutely shows, EU's AEP has been conceptualised as a technological and instrumental form of 'crisis knowledge', supposed to "solve a variety of educational, socioeconomic and political problems in Europe (e.g. risk society, individual development, economic competitiveness and economic crisis, social exclusion and refugee crisis)." (Mikulec, 2018, p. 134; see also Lima, 2022, p. 36). Underlying such a gesture of EU's AEP, Miculec finds an ideology typical of Modernity (progress, development and self-realisation), that infiltrates an essentialist doctrine insinuated as neutral or 'evidence based', so to install its naturalization, and consequently normalisation. Framed by neoliberal-inspired theories and human capital theory, a naturalized 'vocationalist' conceptualization is formulated by assuming that lifelong learning will provide more education with better productivity and competitiveness, ensuring better jobs and wages, thus inducing an illusion which surreptitiously transfers the responsibility for training and employability to individuals. What is nothing more than the expression of a mythification of qualification as a guarantee of a stable job with good wages and the capacity of education to regulate labour markets and solve the problem of unemployment. An AEP process guided by the liberal economic values of employability, innovation, mobility, and competitiveness set to dominate community-based values, that led to 'outsourcing', articulated with 'digital Taylorism' eventually culminating in a 'global auction' of qualifications, henceforth destined for progressive proletarianization (Mikulec, 2018).

So, the document we will be analysing in the following sections is to be understood within an ideological framework set by the European Union's AEP, which emphasizes individual adaptability to contemporary socioeconomic needs, aligning with neoliberal ideology rather than promoting adult education as a common

good for holistic development and societal transformation. Adult education is viewed as instrumental to EU policy objectives, serving political, economic, and social aims, rather than valuing education for its intrinsic worth. This approach limits adult education to crisis management rather than nurturing its deeper educational and societal significance. Additionally, European adult education policy perpetuates modernity's outdated ideologies, failing to recognize the complex interplay between education and broader societal conditions. This also means that we cannot disconnect AEP from the configurative ideologizations that circulate through the processes of Globalisation and Europeanisation, as complex multilevel dialogical tensions interplay.

The complex dynamics of NEAAL's (2021) gestation were incisively dissected by Milana and Mikulec (2023), exposing a process of "political mobilisation" that filtered the "belief systems" of the eleven preponderant "actors", involving three main "advocacy coalitions", directed towards the "agenda setting" of Lifelong Learning Policies. As a virtue of the Agenda, the authors devise the option "for an increased social dialogue to give 'voice' to professionals, employers and policy makers" (Milana & Mikulec, 2023, p. 225). Thus gaining a "substantial consensus because of shared policy core beliefs" that supported a holistic, multi-level cooperative and balanced approach –encompassing work, personal growth, and social coexistence–, so to avoid the pitfalls of the instrumental, economic and vocationalist approach. However, along the one-year process analysed, several actors had the opportunity to leave imprints relying on divergent deep core and policy core stances, hence giving way to a compromise document, in which ideas more concerned with personal autonomy and growth, along with active citizenship conducive to inclusive social coexistence, are opposed to trends in policies eminently more instrumental and oriented towards professionally serving the markets. The analysis provided by this study gives as a ground to infer that the harmonic fusion of such barely intersecting worlds is not only difficult, as the most likely outcome ended up being a very hybrid framework.

Instruments of analytical procedure

An exploratory content analysis

Methodologically, we initiate the analysis using MAXQDA to evaluate the relevance of a predefined set of categories derived from our theoretical framework, including terms such as "education," "learning," "training," "work," "lifelong learning," "skills," "competences," and "professional," as being the most prominent, so to underpin our demystification semiological reading. Having found a network of alignments of "learning" with "education", "trainer" with "educator" and "knowledge", and "skills" with "competences", the analysis —developed in our interpretative framework— reveals that such "aligning" procedures lead to a reduction of the concepts' meaning, which serves to show how a naturalization process is installed and literally legalised.

A complementary semiological approach of mystification

Our reading of the so-called "alignment procedure" will, subsequently, be exposed through an analytic —based on Barthes's (1972) mythologies critique— focusing on the process that renders historically symbolic constructs as manipulated "naturalisations" intending to establish a hegemonic approach while making their gesture and the alternative perspectives invisible. So, what is given as a supposedly neutral depicting discourse of reality becomes —and should hence be demystified as— the commonsensical normalising reference for all understanding and practice.

Retrieving some of the artifacts of ideological criticism of the stated proposals, we have found ourselves compelled to follow Roland Barthes' recommendation to attempt a discourse demystification by questioning their presumed "scientificity". In this sense, and being aware that theoretical speculations can "make sarcasm the condition of truth", we will have to make understandable to what extent the discursive forms of some official recommendations can embody themselves as "mythological", in the Barthesian sense. In other words, we will approach the document as a "mythical speech" in the understanding that it is made of a material which has already been manipulated so as to be fit for communicating a mystified narrative (Barthes, 1972, p. 108).

If the goal of myth as a discursive form is to elicit adherence, we are compelled to an analysis that —not being *stricto sensu* "semiotic"— it will, nevertheless, analogously to what R. Barthes pointed out, seek to discern the producing of metalanguage that constructs a sort of delusion working over a first level language (Barthes, 1972, p. 114). Specifically, our analysis will have to interpellate the textuality conveying of a mythical sense of "learning" and "training" as supposed equivalents to education, in the same measure as Barthes warns "myth is speech stolen and restored" (p. 124). Being aware that "mythical meaning itself is not entirely arbitrary" (p. 124), we would need to highlight the conjunction of the underlying ideological

decryption with the implied intentionality, which, precisely, serves to support the intrinsic duality of myth in its propulsive function of action.

Findings

A content analysis complemented by a semiological approach to the NEAAL 2021 (CEU, 2021) The alignment of “learning” with “education”

The “Agenda” defines right in the first paragraph that “adult learning” constitutes a part of “lifelong learning”, despite it has profusely been critically recommended that it should be given preference for the alternative term of “lifelong education”, which alludes to a much more integrative conception and a broader spectrum of scopes and purposes. In fact, in the only three instances where “adult education” is mentioned, it serves to somehow establish a parallel with training and learning: the first case refers to the citation of the Eurydice Report “Adult education and training in Europe: Building inclusive pathways to skills and qualifications” (European Commission - EC, European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2021) (CEU, 2021, p. 10); the second case it appears for pointing out the need to “strive to develop a comprehensive approach to adult learning which includes all types, forms, and levels of adult education and training and other relevant forms of learning opportunities” (CEU, 2021, p. 15); and, finally, in a third case it serves to stress the importance of “quality assurance of adult education and training providers” (CEU, 2021, p. 17). Anyway, in all these instances we can see an alignment of education with learning, skills, training, and qualifications for labour markets. Actually, we found out that while “education” is referred 68 times, “learning” appears 176 times, along with “training” 46, while “work” is referenced 49 times.

Considering that quantity does not equal meaning, our analysis will now evolve by trying to clarify how the discrepancies and alignments of words sustain the weave of a mythologisation. Through which education is subsumed under training or qualification, thus being reduced to the generic —never-explained— purpose of learning. Consequently, implying that the processes of socialisation and subjectivation are lost of sight, with the result that the Agenda ends up sending out the message that adults should more be learned and not so much educated. Something that we could categorise as an “educational adult-eration”.

It is worth noting that the Agenda pairs “education and training” 37 times, so as to serve a set of purposes, as we will try to show.

One artifice that emerges very clearly concerns the relationship between “adult education and training” with a series of aspects, such as: inclusion and social cohesiveness (p.9, p.19); vocational education and training (p.10, p.19); the diversity of its forms and levels (p.10, p.11, p.15, p.18), the need for monitoring (p.10, p.12); its relationship with skills and qualifications (p.10, p.16); its extension to higher education and investment control (p.12, p.16); the relevance of professionalization and continuous training of adult educators and trainers (p.13), among others and the list is long. Such systematic and transversal pairings establish a homology between education and training as the correlatives of learning, so the latter becomes installed as the preferred desirable goal. For clarification purposes, we want to notice here that such alignments between “education” and “learning” concepts are provided by the procedure of: [1.] presenting them as distinct by simple enunciation, while they get confused due to the very systematic reference in mutual connection, [2.] without ever being given an explanation of their differentiation. The subterranean bonding that is thus formed constitutes the underlying assumption supporting the blurring of the differences that are so neglected or, perhaps, even intended to be ignored. Consider, in this regard, the following passage as paradigmatic:

“At the 2017 Gothenburg Social Summit for Fair Jobs and Growth, the EU leaders jointly proclaimed the European Pillar of Social Rights, establishing the right to quality and inclusive education and training and lifelong learning for all as its first principle” (CEU, 2021, p. 9).

In something as decisive as the “Pillar of Social Rights” we are remitted to “education” and (!) “training and lifelong learning.” Wouldn’t it be more meaningful to use the expression “lifelong education”? Of the utmost importance for appreciating our claim here, is the subsequent statement that “lifelong learning includes all forms and levels of education and training from early childhood education and care to adult learning, including vocational education and training (VET) and higher education” (p. 10). One should not fail to notice how such discursive articulation explicitly —and although elusively— conveys by its very ambiguity that “learning” includes “education”. But shouldn’t it be the other way around?

The pursuit of a certain “learnification” conceptual hegemony becomes even more ingrained through the utterance of a need to establish “a new learning culture” (p.10), by emphasizing

“the importance of basic skills for all and the continuous acquisition of relevant knowledge, skills, and competences at all levels within formal, non-formal, and informal learning contexts throughout one’s life.

Individuals with a developed lifelong learning mindset are better equipped to adapt to new circumstances and develop the skills they need for jobs as well as for full participation in society and personal development” (p.10).

Such a programmatic statement clearly makes a blank state of education complexity so to place it on the service of the economy and the markets, indicating —without saying— how “lifelong learning” can serve “full participation in society and personal development”. Our allegation here is that such a desideratum cannot be narrowed to learning —and qualification and training— as it rather involves a broader span of dimensions intrinsic to education, such as socialisation and subjectification. Dimensions that the Agenda so co-opts while simultaneously erasing them from consideration. And that is precisely what brings us to point out that the implied global procedure performs the function of an ideological mechanics of mythologization, which we will later address.

The above-mentioned “alignment” process deepens when the Agenda, on the one hand, stresses that adult learning is “of the utmost importance” for the “quality of work processes and outcomes, as well as for the quality of workers’ engagement with their work [, thus contributing] to productivity, competitiveness” (p.11), while assuming that “adult learning needs to go beyond the development of work-related skills” (p.11), namely contributing to “social inclusion, gender equality, creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship.” The use of the “contributing” marker suggests that “lifelong learning” is taken as part of “lifelong education,” in this case (surprisingly?) indicating an awareness that education encompasses more than just learning. It also states that “adult learning has the power to enhance life and work” and “can contribute to active citizenship [while] it also supports personal, social, and professional development and fulfilment, health and wellbeing” (p.11). These are all true insights that nevertheless marginalise education’s role in relation to learning. Even the claimed “holistic approach” (p.11) for adult learning ends up being reduced to a mere suggestion for coordination of policy levels, rather than serving to reflect on the intersection of the domains of purpose relating to the educational functions of qualification, socialisation and subjectivation; i.e. the important problem of the integrality of education, its “unitas multiplex” – just to make a parallel with the anthropological perspective of Edgar Morin (2001).

Furthermore, when the Agenda addresses the contribution of lifelong learning to complex desiderata, such as “societal transitions”, it only aligns it with labour market needed skills and career development transitions. As if such transitions were expected as automatic, inherently desirable, neutral transitions, and not the result of social-economic choices, which are certainly not independent of stances taken through political choices. So, once again, the underlying procedure appears to elliptically convey a naturalization of historical options, concealing what should be brought forward for discussion. In fact, when the Agenda calls for “cooperation and partnership of stakeholders at national, regional, and local levels [to] meet the needs of adult learners and employers” (p.15), it is not considering society as a whole, which betrays the fragmented scope that the Agenda relies upon. As learning subsumes education, so the markets subsume society. This culminates in an ideological parallelism or —if you like— mystification achievement.

Our study sought support on a semiological approach envisaging a demystification of the processes executing a transformation of an object language upon which the myth is taken to build its own system, a metalanguage, while a second language in which the first is spoken. Through such metamorphosis, the addressees are diverted from history and the establishment of a hegemonic reading is hence settled as natural. Often, the mere choice of expressions betrays the hidden intention or the conviction (never challenged). Regarding the Agenda, this could be the case when the long-studied concept of educational “personalization” is replaced by the expression “tailor-made”: “Adult learning should become more tailor-made” (p.15). Is it that a formatting strengthening of learning for labour markets is being sought here?

The alignment of “trainer” with “educator”

The used alignment of learning with education is mirrored by applying the same processes to “trainer” (11 cases) and “educator” (8 cases). A paradigmatic stance appears in the commitment of the authors in raising “the occupational status of and support the professionalisation of adult educators and trainers(5) and improve their initial and continuous education and training and professional development” (p.13). As the reader may have noticed the sentence has a footnote mark, in which one can read:

“For the purposes of this Resolution, a teacher is a person who is acknowledged as having the status of a teacher (or equivalent) according to national legislation and practice, while a trainer is anyone who fulfils one or more activities linked to the (theoretical or practical) training function, either in an institution for education or training or at the workplace. They encompass teachers in general education and higher education, teachers and trainers in initial and continuing VET, as well as early childhood education and care professionals and adult educators, in line with the Council conclusions on European teachers and trainers for the future (OJ C 193, 9.6.2020, p. 11).”

We consulted the “Council conclusions on European teachers and trainers for the future (Council of the European Union, 2020)” and verified that the cited content corresponds “ipsis verbis” to footnote 1 of the document. So, a “trainer is anyone” who lacks legal status of being a teacher, but who can supposedly do exactly the same as a teacher. One could say —for differentiation purposes— that the trainer could perform their duties at the workplace. Nevertheless, the functional content of both roles doesn’t differentiate because of that, rather stays equivalent, they both fulfill, to some extent, one or more “activities linked to the (theoretical or practical) training function”. Now, we think we are doing justice to the document’s spirit in saying that the difference between teachers and trainers is not of substance, although we have to add that what the Agenda advances is not substantial either. The real point here is that it is not because we call someone a teacher or a trainer, presupposing different statutes that we make them or exclude them from being educators. It is a case of saying that the habit does not make the monk.

Moreover, it becomes crucial to note that in this regard the authors do not want to commit to a concept of education and educator, as much as they seek to avoid the question of the functions of education, its purposes, that is, the problematic field of the teleology of education. Avoiding addressing such issues makes it easier to say that educators and trainers are equivalent, moreover, since they are both dedicated to learning, we could say they are both a kind of “learners”.

The alignment of knowledge, skills, and competences

The document analysis returns 48 mentions for “skills”, 17 for “competences” and 10 for “Knowledge”. This distribution points to the overvaluation of skills, that align adult education with learning, narrowing the spectrum of its purposes. To this, we have to add a nefarious practice that could be observed in the education policy documents of the European Union, namely the advancing of conceptualizations without reporting certain academic advances in the field and, even, producing educational policy documents that contradict each other.

So, the Agenda expresses a concern with needs, formal, nonformal and informal adult learning —not education— opportunities, in order to provide “knowledge, skills and competences to create [something as transcendent as] an inclusive, sustainable, socially just and more resilient Europe”. From one side we would argue that it is to ask too much from learning —as something different from education, although pretending to be education itself—, from another side we have to comment that to refer to “knowledge, skills and competences” without giving any clarification of these concepts is equivalent to producing a miscellany that drowns the discourse in ambiguity, which in this case seems to serve to overvalue skills, avoiding the need to justify oneself.

As we have seen, the Council of Europe (2016) makes “tabula rasa” of what is being said by the Academy and fogs its discourse so to set its Agenda. As one can realise from the CE (2016, pp. 23-24) understanding, competences involve knowledge, skills (which in this case are representing know-how), attitudes and values, which means that competences cannot be confused with skills. As the Agenda prolongs the cultivation of such equivocality is it another case to suspect of its tendency for “educational adult-eration”?

A semiological demystification of adult’s “learnification” policy

“Myth has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us.”

(Barthes, 1972, p. 115)

We depart from the understanding that a myth is constructed every time that an object language is taken to create a metalanguage through which a naturalization of history is performed. After what we have adduced above we can now turn to the processes of aligning learning with education, undertaken by the Agenda, and turn to its ideological mystification, seeking to clarify the process.

Due to the myth’s double function, it indicates and, at the same time, imposes, an understanding that reduces education to learning, which not only impoverishes its complexity as it evacuates the teleological domains of socialization and subjectification in the benefit of qualification. A similar process of symbolic sleight of hand occurs by insinuating an innocuous intention of neutrality which —precisely— neutralizes all alternative understandings while making them invisible at the same time as it insinuates and imposes, a naturalisation of learning. And “a naturalisation of learning” as serving training, i.e. formation, while being the sole admitted purpose of... “learnification”, rather than education. As the latter has disappeared in the process, it has been, so to say, “lost in translation”. With Figure 1 we try to equate the process of

mystification or, if you like, the naturalisation of history, into a graphic form, following Roland Barthes (1972, p. 113) own scheme, which in this case also represents the establishment of a “legalisation” of an understanding of what “adult-eration” should be.

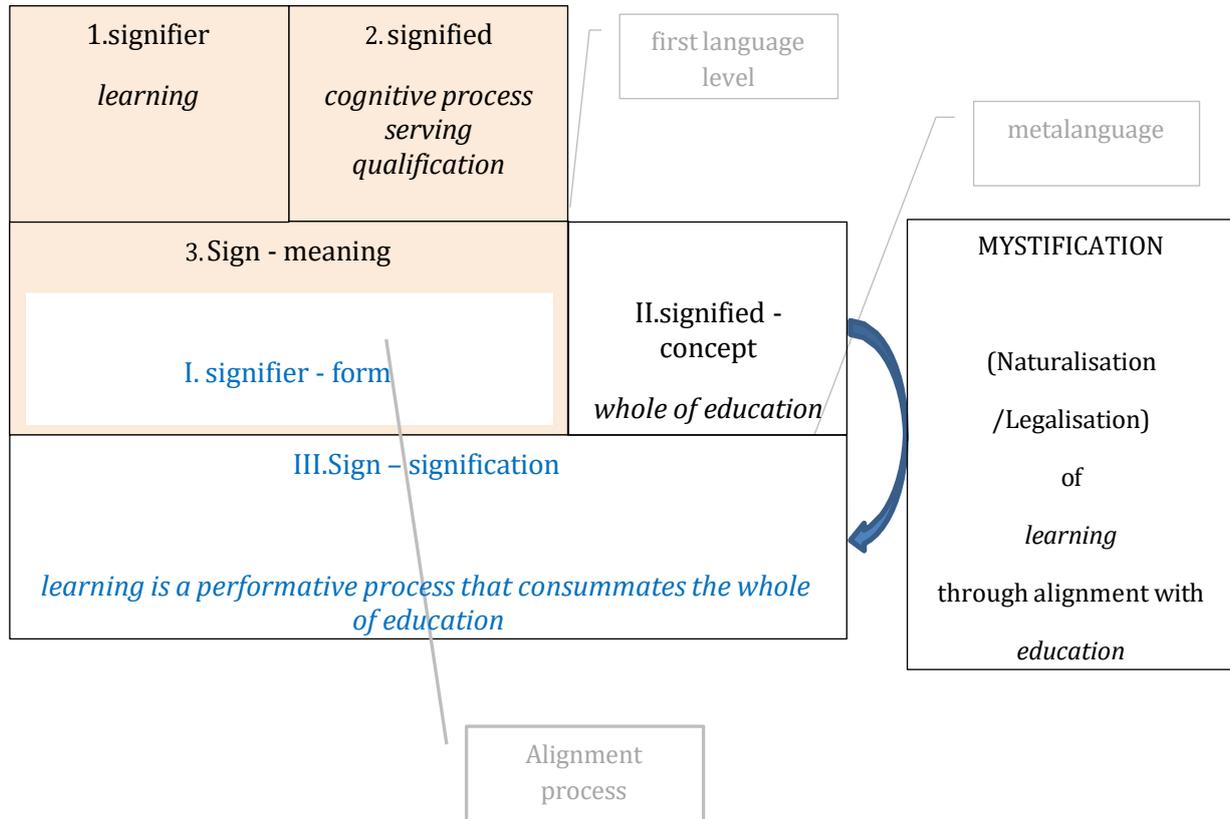


Figure 1: Scheme of mystification process — adapted from Barthes (1972, p. 113)

Results, Conclusions and Recommendations

After critically examining the alignment of “learning” with “education” in the “Council Resolution on a New European Agenda for Adult Learning 2021-2030”, we exposed the prevalence of the term “adult learning” over “adult education,” emphasizing a preference for the former, which, we argue, reduces education to the generic purpose of learning. Moreover, our analysis reveals a systematic reference to the alignment of terms like education, learning, skills, training, and qualifications, ultimately blurring the distinctions and overlooking the socialization and subjectification processes. We also note a frequent pairing of “education and training” in the Agenda, serving the purpose of relating adult education and training to various aspects while establishing homology between education and training as correlatives of learning. Consequently, we question such “new learning culture” that prioritizes economic and market concerns, potentially overshadowing broader educational dimensions such as socialization and subjectification and, broader educational dimensions related to social inclusion, gender equality, creativity and innovation, to mention a few. In this regard, it is pointed out a potential naturalization of historical options and a lack of consideration for society as a whole in the call for cooperation and partnership.

The analysis also found an alignment between “trainer” and “educator” in the NEAAL 2030, and we highlight the document’s commitment to raising the occupational status of adult educators and trainers, defining trainers as those without the legal status of teachers but performing similar functions. However, in our view, calling someone a teacher or trainer doesn’t exclude either of them from being educators, impeding a possible equivalence in their roles. That is why we criticize the document for avoiding a commitment to a clear concept of education and educators, allowing the conflation of roles under the vague umbrella we could call “learning managers” or “learningers”.

Moreover, we note a significant overemphasis on skills, aligning adult education closely with learning and thereby narrowing its broader educational purposes. Adding to this, our analysis criticizes the European Union’s policy documents for advancing conceptualizations without acknowledging academic

developments and even producing contradictory conceptual readings. That is why we delve into the evolution of the competence concept as incorporating three constitutive axes: knowledge, know-how, and attitudes. We assume that competence is an integrated result of these dimensions, which interdependently contribute to develop the former. However, being the “Agenda” an EU official AEP setting it seems to ignore such conceptualizations that are acknowledged in other referential documents. So, we challenge the Agenda’s vague use of “knowledge”, “skills”, and “competences”, arguing that it overvalues skills without clarifying these concepts. Specifically, we point out the document’s inconsistency with the Council of Europe’s project on “Competences for Democratic Culture” (2016), which defines competence as the dynamic mobilization of psychological resources to respond effectively to complex demands, while differentiating knowledge, know-how, attitudes and values as competences components. The Agenda’s lack of clarity on these concepts is thus criticized for drowning the discourse in ambiguity and overvaluing skills without justification. Overall, we call for a more precise and coherent conceptualization of knowledge, skills, and competences in adult education policies.

To conclude, we have to stress that the Agenda semiological analysis indicates a mystifying “naturalisation” establishment of an AEP that reduces education to learning, hence narrowing its social and existential potentialities. So being, it seems fair to say that the “Council Resolution on a New European Agenda for Adult Learning 2021-2030”, alias NEAAL 2030 (p.11 and so forth), wants us to “kneel” to lifelong learning as part of a reductionist mindset delivered to the service of the learning economy, i.e., the “learnification of education”, and the shutdown of the problematicity of education’s ample purposes debate. That is why we want to claim here for a restoring of the democratic education’s significance, as democracy thrives on continuous pluralisation from and living with diversity, and the plurality of purposes as qualification, socialization and subjectification, through a lifelong pursuit indispensable in contemporary society’s search for democracy and justice (Escobar, 2018). In particular, we want to claim the need for a theoretical framework that calls for taking AEP beyond qualification, training, and adaptation to the learning economy, by opening it to an inclusive socio-ethical-political approach, not exclusively pragmatist, but rather critical, interventive, creative and existentially anchored.

As to the Prevalence of “Adult Learning” over “Adult Education”, reducing the latter to a generic purpose of learning, one should consider it as a natural alignment with the normative presumptions of adults’ education policy developed in the last decades by the European Union. Gradually the EU has been establishing a rather narrowly defined instrumental conceptualisation of adult education, understood as ‘adult learning’, emphasising human capital and the vocational perspective of lifelong learning, where employability (accommodating European competitiveness) is considered ‘the’ undisputable imperative for life (Mikulec, 2018). Such normative presumptions establish that education as learning is only relevant for the provision of the ‘right’ basic skills and/or competences to the economy and its game of jobs markets. Thus configuring the European order as a learning order, an “empire of knowledge” that understands knowledge as impersonal instrumental and decontextualized information. That is why the above-mentioned blurring of distinctions serves to overlook socialization and subjectification processes, by neglecting broader intellectual, aesthetic, moral, and social development. As Guimarães (2017) has shown, as the EU focus intensifies on the practical utility of adult education for economic development and human resource management, there’s a reducing emphasis on its humanistic values and critical educational objectives. In fact, although NEAAL (2021) collects an agreement of the three main coalitions behind its congemination on a more holistic approach (Milana & Mikulec, 2023), it doesn’t mean that the whole process didn’t end up filtering a primarily economic, instrumental, and vocational perspective about adult learning.

Such a normative strategy indeed seems bound to produce a form of accommodative subjectivity –of ‘subjects who know’– for the precarious labour markets within the neo-liberal order (Mikulec, 2018, 143). Its ideology is drawn from Modernity’s educational myth –now assigned to adult learning– which overestimates the power of education to eradicate unemployment, poverty, crime, and wars, along with assuring a just restructuring of the social order, although taking no consideration of the encompassing economic, political, and psychological conditionings (Mikulec, 2018). One can even come to the conclusion that the NEAAL 2021 is a well-aligned outcome of the EU’s adults learning policy, with its grand narratives –prolonging the failed projects of Modernity– that seek continuous progress by solving structural problems solely relying on education and –which is more dramatic– by burden, the accountability of ‘the problems of the world’ on the shoulders of adults’ obligation to endure a pilgrimaging strive within the roller-coaster of lifelong learning.

AUTHOR STATEMENT**Data availability statement**

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the author, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The author declares that this study did not require ethical approval under national legislation and institutional regulations.

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The author solely contributed to all stages of the manuscript.

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Annex Gram metrics of reference time – 1960-2019

