

Educational needs

(Educational Needs Assessment)

Dimitris Vergidis

University of Patras, vergidis@upatras.gr

Freire's view that the content of education cannot be based on what educators think is best to be taught to the learners, gets to the heart of the matter of adults' needs assessment in a very concise way.

The baseline for organizing the programmatic content of adult education, according to Freire, should be the existing concrete situation, which is problematized, i.e. it is posed as a problem. In order to define the thematic content of the adult education programs within an area, specific investigation is required. The assessment team, at first, exploits secondary sources to register and analyze the current situation in the area. Afterwards, the team cooperates with volunteer informants, gathering more facts on the important data of the area. Participatory research continues with on-the-spot visits of the investigators, in order to approach the population's reality, through discussions with the habitants and observation. The research material is gathered and analyzed by the investigators, the informants and representatives of the habitants, aiming to organize the programmatic content of the educational action.

During the second stage of the investigation, the team codifies the problems and contradictions that have been chosen. These codifications (schemes, photographs, posters, short texts, sketches, etc.) should present situations that are familiar to the population of the area (existential situations), given that, according to Freire, the habitants engage actively when codifications are directly relevant to their needs. However, as he points out, it is common that the participating local habitants do not realize the relation between their needs and the direct and indirect causes of those needs.

During the third stage of the investigation, thematic cycles of investigation are scheduled. In every cycle of investigation, a maximum of twenty people may participate from the local habitants, apart from the coordinator, along with a psychologist and a sociologist. According to Freire, 10% of the local population should participate in the "cycles of investigation".

In the last stage of the investigation, the themes that have emerged from the discussions with the participants (generative themes) are classified by the investigators into the various social sciences, by conducting a cross-sector/ interdisciplinary study. After the codification of the issues and their classification into chapters has been completed, the educational material should be prepared (photographs, posters, slides, movies, texts, etc.).

When the necessary resources to carry out the thematic investigation are not available, Freire specifies that educators may, based on the available secondary sources, choose certain core issues for the first educational meetings. Moreover, they structure any further thematic investigation together with the participants, so that the content of education reflects their needs.

Diametrically opposed to Freire's approach on educational needs is Parsons' Structural Functionalist approach. According to Parsons, what is socially expected becomes individually required. Culture (common values, rules, knowledge and beliefs) define social structure: social positions (status) and social roles performed by individuals. The individuals during their socialization acquire implicit needs that require them to fulfill the expectations and demands

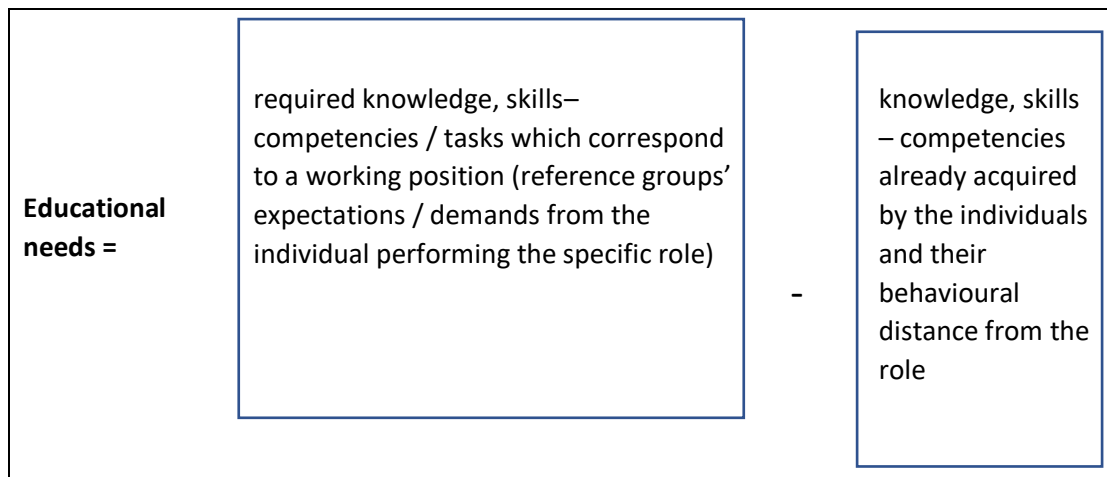
of the reference groups, which constitute their role. Consequently, the individuals' educational needs are socially predetermined and consist of the expected knowledge, competencies and attitudes they role bearers should have in order to effectively perform it. The needs expressed as the people's explicit requests derive from the social structures – they are a subjective expression of the objective needs – and it is thought that they should converge with the functional prerequisites of social structure. Any dysfunctions and structural tensions within a social organization create new educational needs.

The concept of “need”, according to the above, should not be confused with any related concepts, such as:

- Necessity, which leads to the uncritical acceptance of any educational program which is presented as a “necessity”. Necessities by definition are not subject to collective investigation, dialogue and negotiation.
- Wish, which points to subjectivism without any criteria.
- Demand, which points to automatism of the market and the sum of individual or collective requests.
- Preferences, which are based on the assumption of people's rational choice.

In the area of continuing vocational training, in order to define the educational needs we may exploit the available professional profiles or perhaps carry out task analysis or skill needs analysis for the specific occupations and working positions. The aim is to determine the knowledge and skills – competencies which are required to pursue a specific occupation or a working position and, more generally, to effectively perform a role. The deficit of adults in relation to the demands of the occupation, working position or role is represented schematically below.

Scheme 1



According to the deficit theory, the difference between the actual and the satisfactory is required in order to pursue a profession, an occupation or a role. The educational program should make up for this deficit.

This approach downplays or even negates the contribution of the participants (individual and/or collective) to defining, signifying and highlighting their educational needs, within their own space and time and in their lived reality.

The educational needs may have a subjective dimension, which is illustrated by the experiences, any personal and professional problems, any changes in the participants' lives, their signification, their differentiation in performing a role and assuming new roles (individuals interacting with the natural and social world and bestowing meaning to them). Moreover, they may have an objective dimension which is illustrated by the developments and changes in the labour market, the technological advances, social and/or working problems (structural tensions), changes in culture (problematization of the current situation).

The web and spectrum of the roles that participants are asked to assume, often involve contrasts and contradictions concerning the expectations and demands of the reference groups, and as a result, conflicting needs emerge. In these cases, negotiation of the participants' group needs is required. In addition, even when participants have realized their educational needs, they may not express them explicitly. Based on the above, the needs may be categorized as follows:

- a. conscious and expressed, which are expressed either as demands or as requests,
- b. conscious but not expressed, which are not expressed either due to the silence culture, or due to other reasons,
- c. latent, implicit or emerged, which are illustrated by the problematization of the situation of the participants (their lived reality), the assessment of their experiences and the contradictions of their field or area.

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