Is there any place for Adult Education in the era of Lifelong Learning?

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Abstract

Since several years, we are in an era where the lifelong learning approach has colonized almost all areas of education. Indeed, we are moving from a view of education characterized by isolated units of organized learning to a different view of learning and education that is mainly defined in terms of the continuum of both the learning phenomena and the educational institutions. In this paper, we argue that this is a paradigm shift from an old paradigm to acquire a new form and content. and in many cases old elements are replaced by new elements. After attempting to substantiate the above-mentioned paradigm shift, we would examine these new elements. The methodological approach will be that of diachronic analysis of policy papers and data concerning key issues of adult education and lifelong learning. The following questions will be addressed: What do these transitions mean for societies and the learning citizen? Is education, including Adult Education, still considered an obligation of the state or is the citizen now obliged to attend programs for reskilling and upskilling? To what extent is the citizen held responsible for the possible mismatches between his or her qualifications and the content of labor demand?

Keywords: Lifelong Learning, Adult Education, Paradigm, Continuum

1. Introduction

The perception that the concept of lifelong learning represents a paradigm shift rather than merely a policy issue is relatively underexplored in the literature of educational policy and adult education. Even when this perspective is adopted, the dimensions of this paradigm and the causes of the paradigm shift are rarely explored. Although such viewpoints occasionally appear (see, for example, Wain, 2002; Ohidy, 2008; Karalis, 2008, 2022; Elfert, 2020), the concept of lifelong learning is generally examined through three main approaches: The first approach equates lifelong learning with adult education, precisely because children's education is considered a given. Consequently, any reference to the continuity of learning naturally pertains to adult learning and education. The second, reduces lifelong learning to a tautology, reaffirming the self-evident idea that human beings learn throughout their lives. The third perspective, more prevalent in some strands of European literature, views lifelong learning as either a battering ram or a Trojan horse - as an overt or covert tool for imposing a neoliberal approach to education.

In previous works (Karalis 2008; 2022), we have explored lifelong learning and lifelong education as the emergence of a new paradigm for education, with continuity being the key element that set it apart from the existing paradigm; the notion of *continuum*. In seeking to define lifelong learning and lifelong education, we noted that they represent:

> "…a different approach and perspective for perceiving, understanding, and designing everything related to learning, education, educational institutions, and the learner-citizen—with continuity as the defining feature. Lifelong learning encompasses all learning and educational activities, regardless of type, content, or level, taking place in formal, non-formal, and informal educational contexts. These activities involve citizens of all ages and educational backgrounds at any stage of their biological and social life cycle. This represents a fundamentally different conception of learning and education, grounded in the assumption of *continuum* in both the learning process and educational institutions. It rejects the idea of fixed starting points, endpoints, final destinations, predetermined pathways, or finalities in the learning journey." (Karalis, 2008, p.131)

This definition underscores that learning episodes and participation in educational activities are not isolated instances but rather integral parts of a continuous, uninterrupted journey. One can argue that this is self-evident, but a closer examination of the existing education paradigm suggests otherwise. Until about half a century ago, educational levels and types of education were strictly separated, each serving a distinct and clear purpose. In this paper, we will attempt to examine the emergence and characteristics of this new paradigm, initially seeking to identify what Thomas Kuhn (1970) referred to as "anomalies" in the established paradigm—elements that, from a certain perspective, appear as "violations" of the normal paradigm, aspects that seem inexplicable when examined from a particular point of view. Following this analysis, we will explore the role of Adult Education in this new landscape.

2. **Lifelong Learning and Lifelong Education: What Is and What Is Not**

2.1 The Evolution of a Concept

The idea that humans learn throughout their lives has been recognized for thousands of years and is deeply rooted in major philosophical traditions that have shaped the world. In Ancient Greece, the Oracle of Delphi conveyed this idea through the Delphic Maxim "μανθάνων μη κάμνε" ("Never grow weary of learning"). Similarly, Solon of Athens famously stated, "γηράσκω δ' αεί διδασκόμενος" ("I grow old always learning"), reinforcing the notion that learning is a lifelong endeavor. Likewise, Plato's Allegory of the Cave, in Book VII of The Republic, along with the pursuit of Virtue - seen as a lifelong process from the Homeric period to Aristotle - clearly illustrates the idea of learning that extends beyond the early stages of life (Karalis, 2022, p. 10). Henschke (2014, p. 37) cites similar references in Judaism and Christianity, such as in the Psalms, Deuteronomy, and Paul's Second Epistle to Timothy. More generally, *theosis* (deification)—meaning likeness to and union with the divine—is seen as a lifelong learning journey in Christian theology. In Confucian teachings, we encounter the concepts of the "sage" and the "wise person" (sheng and sheng-ren), which represent the ideal human state achieved through continuous learning. Additionally, the concept of the noble person (Jun Zi) is characterized by the constant acquisition of knowledge throughout life (Basharat, Iqbal, & Bibi, 2011; Sun, 2008). In Islamic tradition, education is divided into two periods: one from birth to adulthood and another from adulthood to the end of life. One of the Prophet's sayings (Hadith) states: "Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave" (Hasan, 2017, p. 263). This is the very expression that later appears predominantly in English literature as "from the cradle to the grave". In Buddhism, similar concepts emerge, particularly regarding the role of experience in learning, through which individuals accept change and recognize that learning is independent of age (MacPherson, 1996; Johnson, 2002).

In her seminal work, Elena Ignatovich (2020) examined the presence of lifelong learning terminology in the Google Books repository from 1839 to 1959. She identified mentions in 161 sources, all from the United States and the United Kingdom. Notably, the term "lifelong learning" also appears in the 1919 Report of the Committee on Adult Education (Ministry of Reconstruction, 1919, p. 5). However, in most cases, it is used as a synonym for adult education, just as it is in Yaxlee's 1929 book *Lifelong Education: A Sketch of the Range and Significance of the Adult Education Movement*. This book marks the first historical instance where the term *lifelong education* appears in a book title. However, even here, the term is still used as a synonym for adult education rather than as a broader concept.

The idea that education lasts a lifetime, though not the exact term "lifelong learning" itself, is explicitly stated by John Dewey in his classic work *Democracy and Education*: "…the inclination to learn form life itself and to make the conditions of life such that all will learn in the process of living is the finest product of schooling." (Dewey, 1964, p. 51). The continuity of learning, which we emphasized in our Introduction, is also discussed explicitly by Dewey when he examines the two fundamental principles of education: continuity and interaction. He states:

> "Different situations succeed one another. But because of the principle of continuity, something is carried over from the earlier to the later ones. As an individual passes from one situation to another, his world, his environment, expands or contracts... This process goes on as long as life and learning continue."(Dewey, 1938, p. 44)

A few years earlier, Edward Lindeman (1926)—one of the founding figures of Adult Education—also extensively mentions the concept of lifelong learning in his book *The Meaning of Adult Education*.

2.2 The Spread of a Term

Tsafou & Karalis (2025) conducted a bibliographic study on the use and dissemination of terms related to lifelong learning and adult education. Their research was based on an analysis of academic publications in the Google Scholar database, focusing on articles in which these terms appear in the title. The following two diagrams illustrate the frequency of four key terms (lifelong learning, lifelong education, adult education, adult learning) and how their usage evolved over a period of approximately half a century (1970–2022).

As observed, the patterns for lifelong learning and lifelong education confirm what was previously described: before 1970, mentions of both terms were nearly nonexistent. Specifically, between 1955 and 1970, there were only 19 mentions of lifelong learning and 11 mentions of lifelong education (a total of 30 mentions for both terms). However, from 1970 onwards, these terms gained notable momentum in scholarly articles. By 2022, the total number of mentions was 22,127 for lifelong learning and 3,831 for lifelong education (25,958 in total).

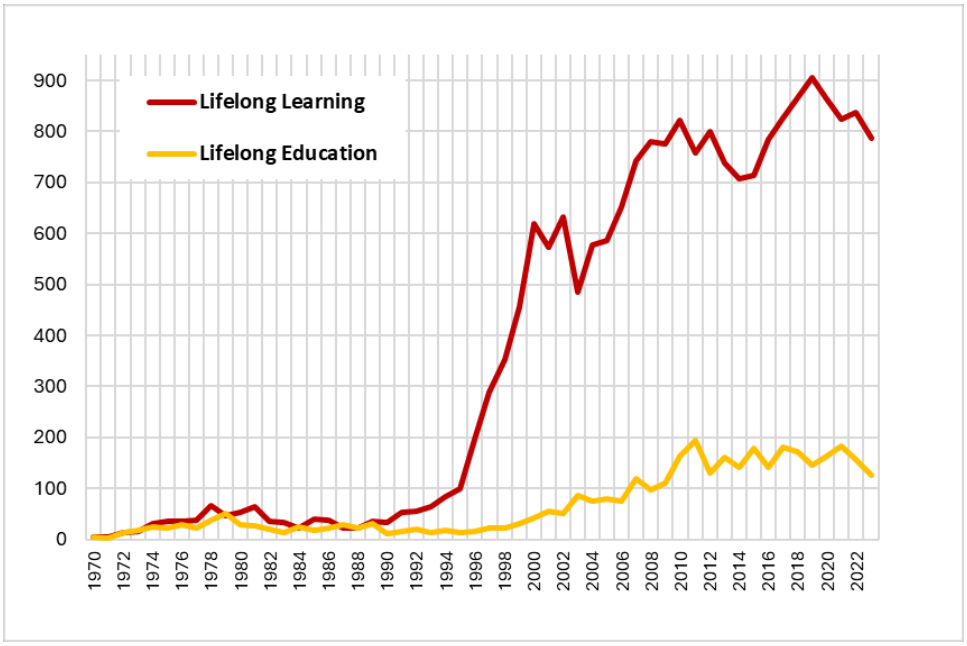

Diagram 1: *Frequencies of reference for lifelong learning and lifelong education (Google Scholar, article title). Source: Tsafou & Karalis, 2025.*

In contrast, the terms adult education and adult learning exhibit an opposite pattern in both their usage before 1970 and their relationship to each other. Until 1970, adult education was mentioned 2,529 times, while adult learning appeared only 98 times—a total of 2,627 mentions, nearly a thousand times more than the combined occurrences of the other two terms. However, between 1970 and 2022, adult education was mentioned 32,744 times and adult learning 11,825 times, bringing the total to 44,569 mentions. As Tsafou and Karalis point out, lifelong learning and lifelong education are not mere substitutes for adult learning and adult education. It is therefore reasonable to infer that they are introduced primarily to articulate a new stream of thought.

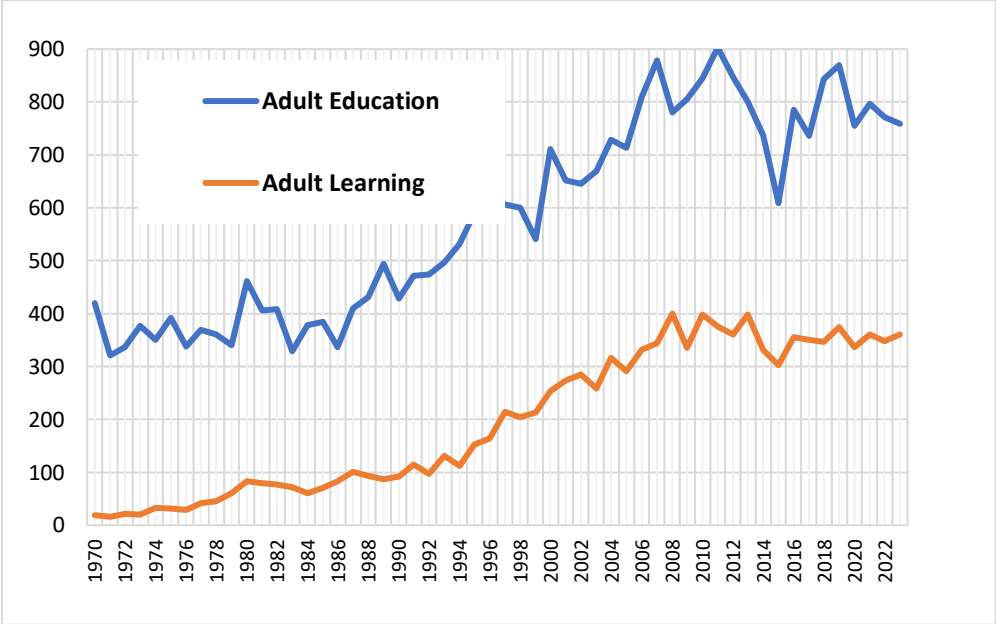

Diagram 2: *Frequencies of reference for adult learning and adult education (Google Scholar, article title). Source: Tsafou & Karalis, 2025.*

2.3 Faure Report: A Prophetic Text for a New Paradigm?

The Faure Report is widely recognized in literature as the UNESCO Report on the Future of Education, published in 1972 under the title *Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow*. Named after Edgar Faure, the chairperson of the seven-member expert committee that compiled it, the report analyzes the state of education worldwide and advocates for lifelong education as the foundational concept for reorganizing educational systems. The core concept of lifelong education is grounded in the continuity of various educational institutions (formal, non-formal, and informal education) and suggests that they should be viewed as an integrated whole. This introduces the notion of a *continuum*, which we mentioned earlier in the Introduction. The report outlines sixteen specific recommendations (referred to as principles) on how lifelong education should be implemented. Additionally, it establishes the concept of the "learning society," a term that had appeared sporadically before but gained widespread recognition through this report. The Faure Report sparked extensive discussions and is rightly considered one of the most influential texts on education. Notably, in 2013, forty years after its initial publication, UNESCO reissued the report. Together with the Delors Report (1996), these documents provide a visionary framework for education or as Elfert (2020, p. 24) explicitly states: "These reports open up a space in which it becomes possible to imagine alternatives to the prevailing instrumental view of education promoted by the current dominant economic and political order. In that respect, the Faure Report and the Delors Report exemplify both the limitations and the possibilities of a utopian vision of education."

At the same time, we argue that the Faure Report functioned as a prophetic text, a forerunner of a paradigm shift, precisely because it identified the “anomalies” of conventional thinking about learning while simultaneously proposing a radically different way forward -one based on a completely new understanding of education based on the concept of a continuum. A small segment of the literature interprets the Faure Report as a precursor to the shift towards lifelong learning, viewing it as a tool to address the structural crises in the Western development model during the Cold War era. However, this superficial critique overlooked an important fact: The seven members of the Faure Committee did not represent only Western societies but all regions of the world, including Chile, Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iran, the United States, France, and the Soviet Union (USSR). Interestingly, Ignatovich & Walker (2022) argue that the Soviet Union had developed a comprehensive lifelong education system, elements of which were incorporated into the final text of the Faure Report at the suggestion of Professor Arthur Petrovsky, a member of the USSR Academy of Pedagogical Sciences and a member of Faure committee too. Additionally, another superficial critique of the Faure Report—that it primarily focuses on aligning education with the needs of the economic sector—is contradicted by the fact that many of its principles extend beyond the economic sphere. What this critique fails to recognize is that the concept of a continuum in the Faure Report applies not only to education but also to the citizen as a whole. The report does not view individuals as fragmented between their roles as workers and citizens; rather it perceives them as holistic beings, encompassing both dimensions within a unified framework.

2.4 Shooting at the Term

As illustrated in Diagram 1, the term *lifelong learning* has become predominant in scholarly article titles since 1990, surpassing *lifelong education*. Although the Faure Report (1972)

introduced the term *lifelong education*, the term *lifelong learning* gradually replaced it in academic discourse. For over two decades (1970–1990), both terms were used relatively equally. However, from the early 1990s onward, we observe a clear detachment of lifelong learning from lifelong education. This trend carries a significant risk for public policies. As many researchers have pointed out, it marks a shift from education- which implies and is associated with structured institutions and state responsibility—to learning, which places the onus on individuals to seek and utilize learning opportunities independently. However, the term "opportunity", when used in public policy contexts—especially in the context of educational opportunities—is clearly inspired by neoliberal ideology, as it emphasizes the existence of opportunities over citizens' capacity to access them. This concern was raised as early as 1973 by Ravindra Dave, one of the most influential lifelong learning thinkers and later Director of the UNESCO Institute for Education: "There are three prerequisites for lifelong learning: opportunity, motivation, and educability." (Dave, 1973, p. 23)As mentioned in the Introduction, many scholars viewed lifelong learning as a battering ram or Trojan horse, facilitating the gradual withering of state intervention in education, whether overtly or covertly. This critique gradually led to a deconstruction of the term itself, primarily, if not exclusively in European literature, as if the term were deemed responsible for any neoliberal attacks on educational institutions.

To address this trend of delegitimizing the term, we highlight the following points: First, learning is a broader concept than education. A learner can certainly learn outside structured interventions and environments. In fact, the amount of informal learning may sometimes be more significant than formal or even formal and non-formal learning combined. This applies even to learning in the workplace. As Billett (2018, p. 6) notes: "...it is essential for lifelong learning to be understood as a process that goes beyond what arises through lifelong education. It is enacted as adults engage in everyday working life… and it is largely mediated by individuals themselves…". Second, as Jarvis points out, this critique underestimated that even in the European policy papers, “the aims of lifelong learning had become: personal fulfillment, active citizenship, social inclusion and employability/adaptability” (Jarvis, 2014, p. 53). Third, critiques of policymakers' distorted use of a term should not lead to a distorted conceptualization of that nor result in self-censorship regarding the full scope the term encompasses. This applies even more strongly in the case of a term like lifelong learning, which is associated with self-actualization and giving meaning to life. While it is crucial to continuously remind governments of their responsibility to provide the means for citizens’ education, it is equally misguided to portray citizens as lay figures who merely accept the educational choices available to them, rather than as active subjects who make choices—provided those choices exist. The risk of “throwing the baby out with the bathwater” is highly evident in this case, as has been noted in the literature. Some terms—such as democracy, freedom, and inclusion—are foundational to humanistic traditions. Lifelong learning belongs to this category, and its value should not be questioned.

As mentioned earlier, this critique primarily concerns European literature and is largely confined to *lifelong learning*. For instance, a similar critique is absent from discussions of *e-learning* and *e-education*. The predominant use of "e-learning" in scholarly discourse does not imply that theorists in this field ignore the risks we have outlined. Instead, they continue using the most scientifically valid term while simultaneously developing their critical perspectives. Furthermore, in the United States, during the same period that witnessed both the increased use of "lifelong learning" and the rise of neoliberalism, this critical trend did not emerge—neither in educational policy nor in academic critiques. In the U.S., the term lifelong learning has primarily been used in the first sense outlined in the Introduction, namely as synonymous with adult education. For instance, the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) published the scholarly journal *Lifelong Learning:*

An Omnibus of Practice and Research from 1986 to 1989. However, its content focused exclusively on Adult Education.

3. **Towards a New Paradigm?**

In this section, we will attempt to substantiate the argument that the term lifelong learning encompasses the slow emergence of a new paradigm for learning and education, which has been observable for the past fifty years. This trend is evident not only in capitalist markets and economies but also in other societies, progressively replacing the conventional approach to learning and education. First, we will examine the reasons why this shift became necessary, and then we will explore the dimensions of this new approach.

3.1 The Golden Century of Education

There is little doubt—regardless of the data used to examine this issue—that the previous century was the Golden Century of Education. Among the many achievements of humankind in the 20th century, one of the most remarkable was the expansion of access to education—both in scope than before and on an unprecedented scale. Despite persistent and alarming inequalities in access to education at all levels, the massification of education in the last century occurred at an extraordinary pace. A detailed analysis of these changes goes beyond the scope of this article, but according to data compiled from multiple sources and presented in Our World in Data (Roser, 2021)): Global illiteracy fell from 87.95% in 1820 to 12.64% in 2023. The percentage of people without formal education declined from 82.8% in 1820 to 13.1% in 2020. Despite the discouraging reality that 8% of children today still lack access to primary education (rising to 19% in Sub-Saharan Africa), the expansion of access to primary education over the last century is remarkable. For example, in the United Kingdom, the percentage of the population with access to primary education was 14.4% in 1820, increasing to 99.9% today. The two most populous countries in the world have also experienced significant progress: In India the proportion rose from less than 0.1% in 1820 to 98.5% in 2023 while in China it increased from near-zero in 1820 to 93% by 1997 (Our World in Data, 2015).

A particularly important indicator is global access to tertiary education. As Baker refers (2014, p.25) “At the turn of nineteenth century less than 1 percent of university-aged youth across the world attended; now 20 percent, or approximately, one million, attend some kind of higher education setting”. By 2022, it had increased to 39.1% for men and 44.8% for women. We highlight this specific data point because we believe it is directly linked to the evolution of educational institutions, a topic we will explore further in the following sections.

3.2 Why a Paradigm Shift?

As stated in the Introduction, the lifelong learning approach differs significantly from the conventional one—not only in terms of the traditional division of education into levels but, more importantly, in the role that educational institutions are expected to fulfill across different historical phases. As extensively discussed, (Karalis, 2022), the educational institutions of the industrial era, shaped by modernity, are no longer able to fulfill their role. This is not due to an internal, vague "crisis" but rather because this crisis is structural and relates to their ability to meet their goal, primarily due to the massification of education, as outlined in the previous section. According to Collins (1979), formal education credentials serve as exclusionary mechanisms, restricting access to higher-status jobs to those who possess them. This function of the educational system was sustainable only as long as the number of credential holders remained below the number of available high-level jobs. A similar argument was made by Bowles and Gintis (1976, p. 4) “For a half of a century or more, the educational system provided an admirable safety valve for the economic pressure cooker… But by the late 1950s, the educational system was pressing its limits”. In other

words, the expansion of access to education—particularly higher education—has gradually undermined the longstanding function of the educational system, which traditionally played a key role in the social division of labor. Moreover, it has significantly reduced its effectiveness as a mechanism for vertical social mobility. This is perhaps the most critical "anomaly" of the old paradigm—one that pushes the paradigm to its limits and necessitates the development of new, perhaps radically different approaches. Within this context, we include the debate on the crisis of education, which becomes particularly prominent after the mid-1960s, i.e. some years after the expansion of higher education.

One aspect of this discourse clearly concerns the content of education, the internal characteristics of the educational system, and its organizational parameters, all within the broader climate of social unrest and contestation in the 1960s. The discourse on the crisis of education within the old paradigm triggered significant efforts to restore educational institutions to their original form. However, these efforts do not seem to be effective as the root causes of the crisis do not originate within the institutions themselves but rather stem from external factors. For instance, interventions in curricula or teaching methodologies, while undoubtedly significant, have often been cyclical and repetitive, functioning as "factory resets", whereas the current context necessitates a fundamentally different kind of change. The expiration of an old paradigm is typically marked by its inability to explain emerging phenomena using its existing tools or to be more precise, by the fact that previously effective tools become increasingly marginal in their impact and produce merely localized effects.

The period also witnessed arguments for a broader critique of the educational system, exemplified by Illich's call (1971) for deschooling society. Yet, such views did not take hold, and education, as a fundamental societal institution—especially in its public form—continued to be deemed indispensable, albeit in need of significant change. A crucial contribution to this debate is P. H. Coombs' book, *The World Educational Crisis: A Systems Analysis* (1968), which we see as a precursor to the Faure Report that emerged four years later. In this work, Coombs lays the groundwork for a typology of educational activities, distinguishing between formal, non-formal, and informal education. We consider the most significant aspect of this typology to be the attribution of an educational dimension—not merely a learning one—to informal education. This refers to the knowledge, skills, and values acquired through various activities and interactions with learning sources and resources. This perspective lays the foundation for viewing lifelong learning as a concept that integrates formal, non-formal, and informal education into a continuum across the lifespan.

Beyond the massification of education, the notion of a paradigmatic shift is also grounded in other factors, such as globalization, the rise of computing - particularly the internet- and the rapid transformations in professional fields, which in turn lead to evolving demands for qualifications, knowledge and skills. These changes do not pertain solely to the economic sphere but also to citizens' ability to cope with the ever-increasing complexity of life and, often, the necessity of shaping their own biography and defining their place in the world without relying on tradition, as was frequently the case until quite recently. A new social contract, renewing the Faure Report promise now seems more necessary than ever (UNESCO, 2021; Toukan & Tawil (2024); Nóvoa (2024).

3.3 Delineating the New Paradigm

The concept of a new perspective of learning and education is essential to address the anomalies we discussed earlier. As noted, this represents the emergence of a paradigm that places a much stronger emphasis on learning and is grounded in the idea of a continuum rather than distinct educational stages and settings. The structured, sequential acquisition of learning through the prescribed levels of formal and, to some extent, non-formal education, as well as the predictable trajectories toward obtaining qualifications, are increasingly seen

as elements of a framework that can no longer adequately interpret contemporary developments. The attempt to caprture these transformations is a key concern in literature, aiming to delineate the underlying components of this evolving perspective. As previously stated in the Introduction, the notion of a continuum applies not only to learning itself but also to educational institutions and the learner themselves. Some of the components of this paradigm shift are analyzed further below (Karalis, 2008; 2022): (a) citizens are regarded as lifelong learners rather than segmented entities - students, employees, unemployed individuals, or retirees, (b) the institutions where learning occurs are no longer distinct and specific but comprise a variety of learning resources, (c) the clear distinctions between starting points and endpoints in education, which are characteristic of conventional views, are no longer applicable, (d) educational achievements are not necessarily equated with the completion of participation in organized educational activities.

These elements have direct implications for the traditional structure and function of educational institutions while also raising important policy questions that need to be urgently addressed. The most critical aspect is the public nature and provision of education, as these are no longer confined to established educational institutions but extend to a wide range of educational and learning resources, access to which is evidently not evenly distributed. New types of inequalities, beyond those long identified in the literature, have almost certainly emerged and will continue to emerge increasingly. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, inequalities in access to computers and the internet became highly evident, not only in specific regions of the world but also within Western societies, as a significant portion of students and learners were unable to benefit from emergency remote teaching.

Another issue is the opening of communication channels between formal, non-formal, and informal educational activities. Policies such as second chance institutions have been successfully implemented, yet further connections need to be established, particularly between formal and non-formal education as well as informal learning. Systems for the accreditation of prior learning, which were marginal until fifty years ago, have evolved and are expected to further expand, precisely because we have transitioned to a new conceptual framework for learning and education.

Relevant to the above issue is the loss of the accreditation power of formal education. Gradually, this power is shifting increasingly towards non-formal education systems, while policies such as microcredentials seek to address the challenges posed by the massification of education and the oversupply of traditional credentials. Given that the educational system faces challenges like those outlined in the previous section and is unable to effectively regulate the social division of labor, we argue that we are in a transitional phase where new mechanisms are emerging to serve this purpose. We can already witness a shift from the oversupply of hard skills towards soft skills – an attempt to address the very issue we have just mentioned. At the same time, we notice experimentations with new methods, such as microcredentials, through which the formation of new selection mechanisms and the restoration of the equilibrium between supply and demand of labor markets are attempted. However, such mechanisms, which remain tied to conventional conceptions of education are expected to create even more challenges, since the proliferation of credentials will lead to an ambiguity in the signaling function of diplomas making it increasingly difficult for demand-side actors to assess the actual content of the supply.

Crucial issue also is the future of education as a public good and its implications within the ongoing paradigm shift. With a significant portion of education now delivered through non-formal and informal education mechanisms, how can we ensure that these mechanisms remain accessible to every interested citizen? To approach this differently, since both educational resources in general and formal education are essential for the education of

citizens, the challenge for the future is to ensure that these resources are open and available to all, not just to those who have the means to access them. Production, ownership, processing, and redistribution of information are more critical than ever.

A careful analysis of the data on the expansion of formal education (see: Barro & Lee, 2015; Baker, 2014), suggests that this process unfolds in three waves, each corresponding to a level of formal education. The first wave concerning the expansion of primary education occurred around the mid-19th century, the second concerning secondary education around 1930, and the third pertaining to higher education appeared approximately a decade after the Second World War, becoming particularly prominent in the 1960s and beyond. Following the publication of the Faure Report, other scholars systematically examined this new proposal for reorganizing the educational system. They emphasized both the importance of formal education for achieving the continuum of lifelong education and exploring the scientific fields from which this new field is irrigated, as well as the areas it affects. For example, Ravindra Dave, one of the most significant scholars in lifelong education, identifies approximately one hundred issues related to this new approach across seven different disciplines, namely philosophy, history, sociology, psychology, anthropology, ecology, and economics (Dave, 1976). A crucial element in the writings of theorists from this initial period is their emphasis on the vital role of formal education within this new paradigm, specifically to prevent lifelong education from being perceived as "competing" with schools, and to ensure that the proposed approach does not undermine formal education institutions, and much more importantly, formal education as a public good (Dave, 1973).

4. **Adult Education: Which way forward?**

As the title of this section suggests, adult education both as an institution and as a social practice has undergone a significant evolution over the past 150 years. The question we seek to address here is to what extent, and more importantly in what ways, adult education can remain meaningful within the context of the new paradigm of the lifelong learning continuum. To phrase the question differently: Is the current form of Adult Education sufficient to fulfill its mission? As indicated by the preceding discussion, adult education is not synonymous with lifelong learning and education; it clearly constitutes a distinct domain within the continuum. This means that, on the one hand, it represents a distinct academic field with its own theoretical tradition, and on the other hand, a domain of educational activities characterized by specific design methods and educational approaches. Despite the osmosis with other types, levels, and forms of education within the framework of the lifelong learning continuum, adult education remains significant as it represents the area of the educational continuum that validates the effectiveness and success of lifelong learning policies. If access to preschool education is considered the most reliable predictive index for lifelong learning policies (Karalis, 2009), then access to adult education is undoubtedly a performative index, an index for implementation. We note that in the following sections, we will attempt to explore some of the key issues concerning the role and importance of adult education within the lifelong learning continuum, rather than the potential forms and modalities through which it will be delivered (face-to-face, e-learning, synchronous and asynchronous modes, etc.).

4.1 A Continuum for Adult Education too?

Traditionally, adult education was considered to consist of two distinct areas: continuing vocational training and general adult education (sometimes manifesting as liberal adult education). More generally, it was thought to have two pillars—one connected to the

economy and profession, and a second associated with the personal sphere. Even though such a division is not epistemologically valid, it has served as an analytical tool for policy analysis in several cases. Today, within the framework of the lifelong learning continuum, the boundaries between these two pillars have become less distinct. For example, when examining the shift towards soft skills, it becomes evident that both the acquisition and application of most of these skills (such as communication, teamwork, digital or green skills) transcend the traditional division between the professional and personal spheres, creating an integrated framework – a continuum for these activities. Similarly, many of the core themes of one pillar now overlap with the other and vice versa, creating a continuum for educational programs of adult education. This trend has been evident since the 1970s, but its interpretation necessitates a different conceptual framework than the traditional one. The osmosis of adult education with other forms and types of education has resulted, among other things, in the exchange of practices with other forms and types of education. Practices such as accreditation and evaluation, traditionally linked to formal education, have become more pronounced in adult education programs compared to the pre-1970 period, while participatory teaching approaches are moving from adult education into formal education.

Another point for examination is the simultaneous participation in various educational settings, which is now much more common than in the past. An adult learner can simultaneously attend a graduate program at a university (formal education), a continuing education program (non-formal education), and acquire new knowledge on a subject from an online source (informal education). This simultaneous engagement requires different learning attitudes and behaviors, something that was not very typical in the recent past. The frequent changes in job content have resulted in work time and space also becoming, to some extent, educational spaces and times. As Jarvis stated, “lifelong learning became associated with workplace learning” (2014, p. 53). Therefore, the concept of the continuum extends to all three types of educational activities within Coombs' typology.

4.2 Participation – in what and how?

As Crowther (2000, p. 479) stated years ago, “perhaps the most ploughed furrow in adult education research is that of participation.” The exploration of both the rates of adults engaging in educational activities and the reasons and barriers to participation has been a systematic focus of study for over eighty years. As Mezirow (1971) noted in his overview of research on participation by Brunner, Wilder, Kirchner, and Newberry (1959), there were already over 600 research papers in the United States by the late 1950s addressing the characteristics, interests, and motivations of adults in educational activities. The long-standing effort to develop a model that accurately captures or predicts adult participation has proven fruitless, to the extent that we might characterize this issue as the "Holy Grail" of adult education research—nobody knows if it exists, and up to now, no one has been able to predict its form if it were to be found. Merriam and Caffarella, after a comprehensive review of participation models, emphasize that “The value of these models in explaining and predicting participation has yet to be determined through research and testing” (1999, p. 71).

For this reason, research has primarily focused on documenting participation rates and investigating the reasons that encourage participation as well as the barriers that impede it. This focus has gained momentum especially after the seminal works of Houle (1961) and Boshier (1971), which established a new foundation for measuring participation. Historically, studies on participation have emphasized the reasons for participation, where nearly all research indicates a strong connection to professional development. While job-related reasons may not always be the primary factor, they are undoubtedly among the strongest motivations (see indicatively, Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Karalis, 2017);

however, other types of motivations also rank highly (such as those associated with the intrinsic value of learning, the formation of social networks, and active citizenship).

Perhaps the most critical finding across all these studies, regardless of context, is that participation in adult education is not evenly distributed; rather, it is characterized by pronounced inequalities. Specifically, the most privileged learners and those with educational qualifications corresponding to higher levels of formal education participate at significantly higher rates in adult education. Thus, while the stated goal of lifelong learning and adult education policies in the EU is to reduce inequalities through participation, the actual outcomes often contradict this aim, as the more educated individuals tend to participate more, leading adult education to function as an amplifier of existing socio-economic inequalities. This phenomenon, is referred to by Singh (2024, p. 3) as the Matthew Effect in adult learning: "The Matthew effect implies when the socially observable phenomenon of an increasing gap among the advantaged and the disadvantaged in society results from initial advantages and disadvantages." In the case of education, "the effect is widely visible when high-skilled, high-paid learners from advantageous socio-economic backgrounds manage to avail opportunities and advantages in learning when the low-skilled, low-paid, unemployed learners coming from disadvantaged (poor, rural, e.t.c.) backgrounds are unable to avail opportunities and advantages in learning". This situation essentially creates a vicious circle for citizens from the poorest socio-economic backgrounds, which neutral adult learning policies cannot effectively address, thereby perpetuating a lifelong widening of educational inequalities.

Interesting conclusions have also emerged from a research program measuring participation in Greece (2011–2019) during the period of economic crisis, conducted by the research institutes of the Trade Union Confederation and the Confederation of Professional, Craftsmen, and Merchants of Greece. This research revealed that participation rates reflect the evolution and intensity of the crisis (Karalis, 2017). In support of Singh's argument regarding the Matthew Effect in relation to educational and socio-economic inequalities, the participation measurements in this study show that job insecurity is another factor affecting participation. Those employed in more stable and safe work environments are more likely to participate in adult education programs. In this way, yet another vicious circle emerges between insiders and outsiders in the labor market, as the unemployed have fewer opportunities to participate in reskilling and upskilling programs, further exacerbating their already precarious position in the labor market. To address all the inequality trends mentioned, the only solution lies in implementing compensatory policies, that is, affirmative action policies in the provision of adult education programs, aimed at mitigating the impact of entrenched inequalities throughout the life course.

Beyond the issues highlighted by the "traditional" approach to participation—namely, the enrollment of adults in programs of non-formal and sometimes formal education—it appears that participation, both as a concept and as a measurable entity, is entering a fuzzier and more fluid dimension. The emergence of numerous new educational environments of informal learning reshapes the concept of participation. For instance, can attending a MOOC program or experiencing a cultural activity via virtual reality in a museum be considered participation in adult education? In such cases, are the motives, reasons, and barriers the same as in the traditional approach to participation, or do they take on a different form? What factors may influence not only attendance and engagement in such informal educational activities but also dropout rates? Within the paradigm shift we have analyzed, another area of investigation concerns what is considered and measured as participation, as well as the internal structure of this concept. In fact, we may be witnessing a retrospective vindication of Coombs, who, as early as 1968, attributed educational characteristics to

informal learning, naming education—and not merely learning—as the third type of his typology.

4.3 New responsibilities in a changing landscape

The rapid changes in technology and the economy have clearly made lifelong learning essential for economically active citizens. As we saw in the previous section, employment-related reasons and motives for participation rank among the top priorities for learners. This, of course, justifies the emphasis on funding such programs through European policies but does not justify the underfunding of general/liberal adult education programs. At this point, it is important to acknowledge that the massification of education—explored earlier—and the fact that we now have the most educated population in human history have led to rapid technological progress but not to a corresponding advancement in the moral and political spheres. In this regard, for several decades, we have witnessed growing disillusionment with the expectation that broader access to education would lead to better societies. The rapid and ever-intensifying rise of populism in many parts of the world suggests the presence of an elephant in the room, which could be assumed to be the failure of education—both formal and non-formal—to cultivate citizens who participate more actively and engage in rational, argument-based discourse; in other words, citizens with critical thinking skills. One might further ask why we are witnessing a continuous rise in populist parties, some of which even participate in governments, and why a significant portion of the population is drawn to anti-scientific and even conspiracy-driven interpretations of social phenomena. The discussions in earlier sections regarding a paradigm shift may help explain this phenomenon. If we view learning and education as a continuum, then the problem may lie in an axiomatically optimistic perception of the potential of formal education, accompanied by an underestimation of the impact of informal forms of education—particularly that provided by the internet.

However, the issue here likely lies in the absence of critical approaches in education, as well as in the failure to account for the role of informal education in shaping active citizens. When examining the impact of informal education, and more specifically that of the internet and social media, we find ourselves in what could be described as a perfect storm for critical thinking, shaped by three conditions. The first is the equivalence of opinions, meaning that scientific and anti-scientific perspectives enjoy the same level of acceptance and dissemination. The second is the way social media algorithms function, directing individuals toward content that aligns with their existing preferences, ultimately creating echo chambers that reinforce a single perspective. The third, and most recent, factor is the advancement of artificial intelligence, which while facilitating information retrieval, also has the potential to shape and internalize opinions as if they were one's own.

Within this context, adult education assumes a crucial role in the framework of lifelong learning—that of fostering critical thinking and critical reflection. This role undoubtedly functions in a remedial capacity, addressing potential shortcomings of formal education and mitigating the influence of informal education, particularly from social media. Critical reflection can be cultivated through well-designed educational interventions that emphasize the learning process rather than merely focusing on learning outcomes. Such interventions should aim to develop what Mezirow (1997, p. 5) describes in transformative learning theory as a "more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience" frame of reference—that is, a set of habits of mind and points of view that enable individuals to engage in a more mature and critical analysis of reality, making them more resilient to the influences previously discussed and better equipped for civic participation. The cultivation of critical thinking skills could serve as a longitudinal theme, aligning with the foundational mission and

core mandate of adult education— which is none other than the continuous education of citizens so they can first understand and then shape the world.

5. **Concluding Remarks**

In this article, we have argued that the major and rapid changes in education over the past few decades can no longer be adequately interpreted using traditional tools. Drawing on key texts, such as the Faure Report, alongside other theoretical analyses and empirical data, we arrived at the conclusion that these changes are not merely part of a new understanding of learning and education— but rather constitute a paradigm shift. To interpret these developments, both within education itself and in its relationship with society, it is essential to account for the osmosis between formal education and institutions of non-formal and, most notably, informal education, which now play an increasingly significant role in shaping citizens' education. From this perspective, longstanding demands, such as ensuring education for all and recognizing education as a public good, now take on a broader and more inclusive form. Beyond formal education, this imperative extends to the entirety of educational resources and citizens' access to them.

Within this new landscape, adult education is entrusted with new responsibilities. Although it has always played a remedial role in addressing educational deficits among citizens, this function has now become more pronounced and even more critical than in the past. While the necessity of updating skills in relation to employment and professional development is undeniable, it cannot, if pursued in isolation, foster resilient and inclusive societies. Instead, adult education must focus on empowering citizens, cultivating critical thinking skills, and promoting the continuous dissemination of human intellectual achievements through critical literacies across various fields. These do not represent a new institutionalization of adult education, but rather a return to its roots.

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