European and national educational policies between reality and expectations at the level of adulthood

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Abstract

Cognitive societies, the challenge brought about by change, as an argument for the preoccupation with lifelong learning, where lifelong education and training are the most adequate way for anyone to answer the challenges of change; digital technology transforms every aspect of the citizens' life into modern life, offers opportunities and multiple options, but also risks and increased uncertainties. The citizens have the freedom to adopt various lifestyles but also the responsibility to organise their own lives. We emphasise the importance of national educational programmes regarding the facilitation and opening towards the European space of adults, in order to demonstrate respect for the citizens of every European community, respect for a system of values necessary regardless of the economic or political level of each country.
Keywords: educational policies; educational paradigms; education for adults; cognitive societies; lifelong education.

Contemporary society signals a series of aspects which impose the elaboration of the directions of educational policies and reconfiguration of educational paradigms, at macro as well as micro level, by considering certain aspects, like (Ionescu, M., 2005:352): the exponential growth of the volume of information; the increase in the degree of knowledge wear; the high degree of abstracting of certain knowledge products; the restructuring of the system of values promoted by society; the acceleration of dynamics, of the change production rate; the general scientific, technical, cultural, etc. progress; the mobility of

social life, the need to shift tasks, roles, status and professions; the evolution of the labour market.

Therefore, lifelong education starts from the objective need to keep up with the rhythm of changes which appear in society, as well as with the needs of each individual – the self-improvement and continuous perfecting of every person. Lifelong learning no longer represents just an aspect of education and training – it must become the guiding principle of education and participation in the continuous learning process. (Hanches, L., 2007:16-19).

From these perspectives, we will enumerate the major themes recommended as coherent and comprehensive strategy for lifelong education in Europe, described in the Memorandum regarding lifelong learning, 2001:

- Visible growth in the level of investment in human resources in order to grant priority to the most important chapter of Europe – its citizens;
- The elaboration of efficient teaching and learning methodologies and the cultivation of a favourable educational climate for learning during the entire life;
- The significant improvement of the way to participate in learning, especially non-formal and informal, and of the understanding and appreciation of the results;
- The guarantee that every person can have easy access to information and competent advice regarding educational offers existent throughout Europe and during his/her entire life;
- Bringing the educational offer closer to the beneficiaries, in their own communities and wherever possible, through information and communication technology;
- Guaranteeing the general and permanent access to education for the purpose of forming and perfecting the required skills for a sustained activity in the cognitive society.

Cognitive societies, the challenge brought about by change, as an argument for the preoccupation with lifelong learning, where lifelong education and training are the most adequate way for anyone to

answer the challenges of change; digital technology transforms every aspect of the citizens' life into modern life, offers opportunities and multiple options, but also risks and increased uncertainties. The citizens have the freedom to adopt various lifestyles but also the responsibility to organise their own lives. We observe that more and more citizens prolong their education and instruction period, but the distance between those who possess sufficient qualifications to maintain themselves afloat on the labour market and those who become marginalised is increasing considerably. In this type of social world, up-to-date information, knowledge and skills are highly valued.

Therefore, cognitive societies promote active citizens, human abilities capable of creating and using efficiently and intelligently the knowledge, on a continually changing background.

We must emphasise Marijke Dashorst's and Helen Keogh's (2009) preoccupation with keeping adult learning in the European agenda also in the period after 2010.

The 2009 Communication "The strategic framework for European co-operation in education and training" identifies four strategic challenges for 2020 and mid-term priorities for the period 2009-2011. Four strategic challenges are identified:

1. Making lifelong learning and cross-border mobility a reality.
2. Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training.
3. Promoting equity, social cohesion and citizenship in order to contribute to a sustainable society.
4. Enhancing innovation and creativity through developing transversal key competences as entrepreneurship, communication etc. (Dashorst, M. and Keogh, H., 2009,pag.22)

Following these goals we propose targets, at the level of Hunedoara County, the identification of the needs of elderly people from the perspective of national and European policies regarding: social security, improvement of the health system, aspects related to the lifestyle, performing an activity which should provide extra income, participation in courses for qualifying in certain professions/activities, participation in courses training for learning foreign languages and using the computer, organized by foundations, non-governmental organizations (with financial support for the costs). The research instrument we have used is a structured questionnaire which includes information domains regarding the needs of elderly people.

The research sample comprises 102 subjects: 62% from the urban area and 38% from the rural area; the age category 50-70 represents 43.4%, and the age category over 70 years represents 16.6%. Information about occupation is relevant: 60% of the subjects are retired, and the level of education is mostly high school (52%). The demographic data of the research sample are presented in the table below (table I.)

Table I. Demographic Data

	Percentage
1. Age category	
50-60 years	54%
60-70 years	29,4%
over 70 years	16,6%
2. Place of residence	
urban	62%
rural	38%
3. Gender	
male	51%
female	49%
4. Nationality	
Romanian	97%
Hungarian	3%

The second dimension regarding *EU and national policy between reality and expectations* at the level of late adulthood emphasises the need to improve the current national policy regarding elderly people, which 98% of the subjects consider inadequate

Out of the national and European policies, the following areas are considered a priority: the improvement of social protection (increase in pensions, subventions for food, heating and transportation). This component is represented by an overwhelming percentage of over 80%, which shows a high economic deficit; we could even call it an alarming poverty threshold for this part of the population, who cannot satisfy their primary needs concerning food and heating.

We have also identified acute needs in connection with the health care system from the perspective of the purchase power of medicine; 83% from the subjects consider it necessary either to reduce

the price of medicine or to compensate for a part of the price. There have been dramatic situations exemplified, where people have been unable to buy their medicine on which they depend, suffering from chronic diseases. The table below shows obvious percentage on this situation and the need to formulate national laws which should meet the social needs of the elderly population.

Table II. EU and national policy between reality and expectations

	Percentage
1.Consider the current national policy regarding elderly people good:	
yes	2%
no	98%
2. Consider as priority national and European policies in the areas:	
a) improvement of social protection	
- increase in pensions	
yes	84%
no	16%
- subventions for food	
yes	85%
no	15%
- subventions for heating	
yes	85%
no	15%
- subventions for transportation	
yes	78%
no	22%
b) improvement of the health care system	
- reduction of medicine price	
yes	83%
no	17%
- subventions for balneary treatment in the off-peak season	
yes	67%
no	33%

3. Are you satisfied with your social status?	
yes	8%
partially	34%
no	58%
4. Do you want to improve your living conditions?	
yes	52%
partially	41%
no	7%
5. If your answer is 'yes', are you willing to perform an activity for extra income?	
yes	54%
partially	28%
no	18%
6. Are you willing to participate in courses to qualify for one of the above-mentioned activities?	
yes	50%
partially	29%
no	21%
7. In the context of current European requirements, do you consider necessary to participate in courses for learning foreign languages and using the computer, organized by foundations, non-governmental organizations (with financial support for the costs)?	
yes	60%
partially	22%
no	18%

The final conclusions of this micro-investigation reflect the correlation of the economical/social/political/educational factors in our country, Romania, in the present: *the national policy concerning the elderly* is inadequate; there are attempts to relate to European policies, there are attempts to access external funds. However, these initiatives are granted mostly to the people who have reached extreme living

situations; the role of preventing or, more accurately, the role of improving the quality of life in late adulthood, are not put into practice through common actions, implemented in every community or geographical area. As we have previously shown, we consider policies in the areas of social protection and health system to be a priority.

In order to improve living conditions, we note an important willingness to participate in training courses in order to perform additional activities, on the one hand for supplementing their income, on the other hand to help their fellow citizens. For this, we point out the need for organizations which should carry on activities and at the same time have professional services by hiring qualified staff.

According to D. Billington (1990), efficient educational programmes for adults have the following characteristics:

- A learning environment where the participants feel safe and supported, where their individuality, life experience, abilities and competences are appreciated;
- A learning environment which promotes and encourages critical thinking, exploring and creativity;
- Learning is mostly self-controlled, the students or trainees assuming responsibility for their own learning;
- Learning is individualised, centred on the concrete interests and needs of the students, who collaborate with teachers in their step towards the individualisation and adaptation of curricula;
- The learning environment is stimulating, the situations-problems constituting real intellectual challenges for the students;
- A strong involvement in learning; the students are not passive listeners, they get involved in the dialogue, they interact with each other and with the teacher, they formulate problems, express opinions and exchange ideas, practise, cooperate, use their personal experience to concretise the theoretical aspects, etc;
- Efficient feed-back mechanisms, through which the teacher collects information almost permanently, adapting his/her teaching activity and guiding learning according to results.

We emphasise the importance of national educational programmes regarding the facilitation and opening towards the European space of adults, in order to demonstrate respect for the citizens of every European community, respect for a system of values necessary regardless of the economic or political level of each country.

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