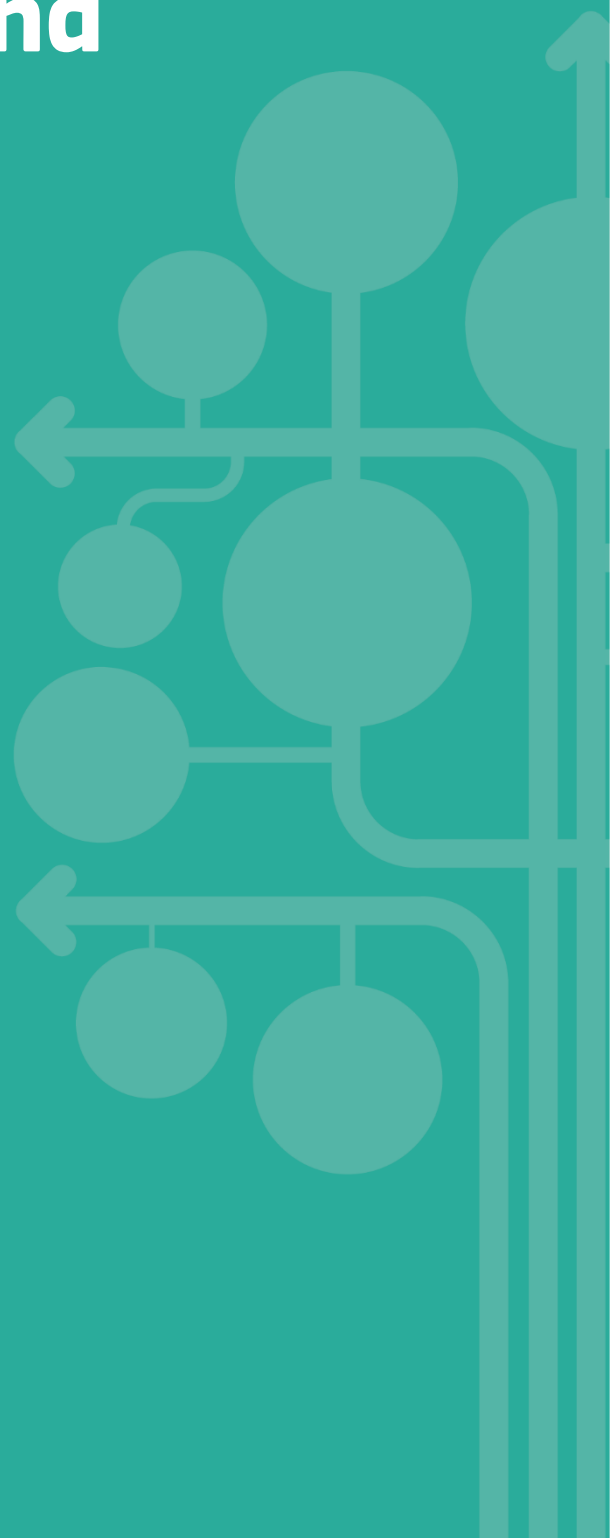


EPALE Podcast: Overcoming barriers, in education and society

With Georg Pirker and
Jonas Abrahamsson



Podcast Episode - LLLP

Overcoming barriers, in education and society

A: A warm welcome to our listeners. My name is Andrea, and I will be your host for today for yet another EPALÉ podcast. This podcast is organised by the Lifelong Learning Platform EPALÉ, the Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe. And I'm very excited to be here with you today because we are going to be debating a topic that concerns us all: inclusion in adult education. So, by now, our listeners should know that we are halfway through the European Year of Skills, running from May 2023 to May 2024. Part of the objectives of the European Year of Skills is to bridge the skills gap, of course. So, to make sure that skilled employees go to the labour market. But education stakeholders have been saying that skills provisions in Europe and in particular key competencies, can also foster more social inclusion in and outside of education systems if policy is done correctly, of course, and with a learner-centred approach. I have the pleasure to be debating this and much more with two guests today. A warm welcome to George Baker from the Democracy and Human Rights Education Network. Hi, Georg.

G: Hello.

A: And to Jonas Abramson, project manager at the project office of the region Vaasa, Gotland. The administration of Falk High School.

J: Hello. Thank you for being here.

A: I have two experts. I've done my talking, my introduction. So let me start off the discussion with a question for Georg. So how do you see the roles of educators with regard to inclusion? How is the fast-changing technological landscape impacting the inclusion of adult learners when we talk about skills?

G: It's actually it's the two super meta questions you have asked me right now. Um, I would say there is multiple layers affected inclusion as such, I understand as an ever-demanding task, um, from the perspective of adult learning or in the field of adult learning there is on the one hand, the pedagogical question related to inclusion – it means kind of how inclusive are my learning settings, how inclusive is the groups I work with, but also kind of in how far are organisations of adult education kind of having a classical outreach towards communities that go, let's say, beyond the usual target groups of learners? Yeah. So, there's this one dimension for me and on the other hand, closely connected to it, there is this structural and organisational level...kind of in how far organisations that do adult learning and how far their staff, their pedagogical personnel itself, is further developing the organisation to be structurally inclusive. This means, on the one hand,

thinking from a perspective as that initially like to reach out to more groups, specifically vulnerable groups, specifically groups that are labelled to be better included in societies, but on the other hand, in how far the organisations themselves are representing and representative in their structures for these organisations and for these for these groups of people.

And I think this is a very important topic when we when we talk about the role of educators, because we have to be aware that we are also deficitory (*sic*) in our own, let's say, persona as educators. Yeah, we are not kind of representative for all in society. We are just kind of representative for specific groups that might kind of be in the same bubble, have the same abilities or the same talents, or share the same opinions. And this means we must be very aware about our own bag we carry into these processes into such a field when we talk about, let's say, being more inclusive in adult learning and adult education. So, we talk actually about abilities, about diversity, and on the other hand, also about questioning a deficit-oriented approach towards a perspective that is promoted and what society is or not, or who benefits or who not, or who is part of or not. Yeah. To my understanding, it is very important to have this sphere of structural development of organisations and of staff to be representative for society in order to also adhere to the needs of the specific groups and people that are classically labelled with this inclusion in brackets. Yeah. Terminology. Yeah. So, technologically, I would say there is a good citation from a pedagogue I got to know many years ago who said, like "it's about enabling the enabled by disabling disability", so to say. Yeah. And it means kind of it's a perspective change of the mindset how I understand education and educational processes in such. Yeah.

About the second question, which is the fast-changing technological landscape impacting the inclusion of adult learners, I think we must be aware about a very basic issue, which is the fact that digital inclusion goes hand in hand with inclusion as such. So, we cannot separate them. Between analogue or digitally or technically facilitated educational means and processes. It's the same groups affected by exclusion or by discrimination that face this in the digital environment as they are in non-digital learning environment. So, this is I think very important means like towards if we talk about reaching out or involving vulnerable groups. Or then there's the question in how far are we representative on a structural level and how far are we best fit to the purposes, or are we, are we as such able to do that? But on the other hand, also to be aware that the technological dimension is not necessarily less discrimination than analogue learning or adult education dimension.

A: This is very appropriate. Thank you very much, Georg. You kick started our podcast with a lot of information, I think I can definitely subscribe to what you were told in the past about enabling the enablers and disabling the disabilities, or what prevents us and prevents everyone from enjoying learning as such. I think that the number of young people that are not involved in any kind of education or training or even unemployed, so the, the so-called NEET and S for plural, is higher than our targets. This goes for Europe in general and for most of European countries. What is your recipe to lower this number?

J: Good question! NEETs, as everyone says, are a very heterogeneous group. It's hard to say what works on everyone. And I'm more interested in those who are actually not even answering our phone calls, not answering our emails, not answering our mails, not opening the door when we come home to their houses and knock and say hi, do you want to go out for a walk or something? And because that's part of the NEET group, I don't like talking about groups and categories that much. But now we're doing that. And I mean, maybe we have to when it comes to these social problems. And this part of the group is, for me, easier to focus on since the other part of the of the group, let's say, NEETs who want to establish on the labour market, who want to be included in society, who wants all the rights that you get when you when you are employed. But they can't be due to, I don't know, like discriminatory practices or due to other obstacles in society. Then the answer to solving that part of the NEET group is, I guess, to inform people about the, I don't know, convention of the rights of the child or any other information to give out to employers and other key actors.

But yeah, to come back to the group that I'm more interested in. I would say that there have been so many disappointments in these young adults' lives, so many lack of meaningful relationships and relating to the adult world. It's been a lot of blah, blah, blah. As Greta Thunberg once said, I think we need to step up as adults and bring ourselves into the relations and into the meetings and show up, you could say, to show up with yourself, maybe taking a risk, being very honest about how you feel in this meeting, like. "I feel no connection in this meeting. You. It feels like you're very shy. And I cannot handle shyness because I'm not shy myself." Something like that. To create an authentic relation or whatever authenticity is. You could discuss that for hours. But at least to create an honest setting for a meeting, I would say, it's very, very important to not waste their time with the with the too much professionalism and not that much humanity. You could say.

A: Ah, this is a very nice note to conclude your intervention, and thank you very much for providing such, such a practical one. I don't know if Georg wants to have a say on this.

G: Yes, I pretty much I'm very impressed by the last words Jonas actually said, because for me this question is also a bit kind of when we talk about NEETs these, a very abstract group of people who, for whatever reasons, are like kind of having difficulties to access employment, education, training, which is actually 2 or 3 distinct fields. Yeah, necessarily they are connected, but not necessarily people are, for various reasons, like kind of facing barriers, a difficulty in accessing these fields. And for me is also a bit the question like kind of when we look from a skills or competence-oriented view or perspective on that, if this is really just to the issue. Because it is also about somehow learning or unlearning the stigmatisation and, more from a relational perspective, understanding kind of the situation of a concrete person and developing a very, let's say, individual approach and a path to accompany the persons with these that are in a situation statistically but, as a person, you are not only statistically in a situation, but you have a life story. And this means like kind of

the relational work and the aspect to accompany this people or this person individually is a very demanding task for an educator because it also exceeds to a certain extent, let's say, the provisions you have in a in a classical adult learning setting where you have a seminar, a workshop, probably an individual accompanying process or something like this where people hook in and hook off. Yeah. But the process to get through these, let's say to these statistical areas where you fit the needs group is much longer. Yeah. And this takes like kind of enormous efforts from an educator, or which is more like than a counselling person, a facilitator. It takes a multi-dimensional approach. Also like from different let's say from, from different institutions to go a step forward in a direction which helps the person *de facto* then.

A: No, this is very appropriate and especially the verb “to accompany” I think it's very appropriate. Anyone who has had experiences working with counselling or with guiding needs to find their path can subscribe to this point of view. And Georg let me stay with you, because earlier you said that inclusion in education and specifically in adult education is a part of a wider problem that is inclusion in society. And I have the feeling that inclusion is always present in our discourses because it is rooted in our reality. Now, I wanted to ask you, what does it take to make all the European policies that we have in skills and in inclusion effective? How does the EU fit this scenario? What can it do?

G: So, I cannot provide a one-size-fits-all answer. And for me the question is a bit like kind of in how far we are in how we interpret this, the discourses and how also we interpret the policies. From a narrow perspective, focusing on this NEETs situation and dilemma is like having a clear perspective on bridging, let's say, bridging with education towards fitting certain labour market needs or towards kind of bridging, bridging adequately for a person the gap or the skills gap. Yeah. But I think sometimes the whole issue is a bit wider because people are for very distinct elements or for distinct reasons, like kind of in a situation that they are that they need to. Yeah. And the need for upskilling or that they when I have the perspective really from a labour market policy or from a work-related policy. But there is a social dimension in it. There is a life wide dimension in it because we have like this connection between self-esteem and the access to work or the access to a decent, let's say, standard of living and income. There's a lot of connections to make. Yeah. And so, I would always kind of ask kind of what is this? What is actually the connection between the so to say more narrow perspective on upskilling for a certain employment, or because labour market has transferred or change and the wider civic perspective. So, what do I learn in it? What is useful for me in society? Because often, let's say a skills gap is easy to analyse and to use, because it affects persons individually. But the situations *why* a skills gap exists because kind of an industry has transformed something that exceeds very much the individual and the personal level even if I have the narrow look on and understand inclusion as inclusion in a labour market or in employment policies.

If I have a wider look on the perspective of society, then inclusion is of course a lot of different issues, which probably would much more kind of adequately be answered kind of with realising these whole different aspects included in the European Pillar of Social Rights or in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, where we talk about everyone as a person as they are. And not as just reduced to the aspect of labour or work. Depending very much on how I read this, I think the provision for skills and competencies fit or do not fit this scenario. And for me, it's always helpful to have a look, for example, from a life skills perspective, if there is this set of models on life skills, which then makes, let's say, a distinction between these core competencies, which really provide basic access to participate meaningfully in society, into transversal competencies which kind of relate to these processes of thinking, social communication. But on the other hand, also self-management, learning to learn physical and manual, which you can read as a skills and competencies that are probably more kind of targeted towards these labour market policies and needs. Where the others are thinking is more like this, what we have classically in this civic education, human rights, education, social and inclusive education dimension. Yeah. And let's say in order to holistically have a look on the person as a learner or also on the educator, we need to think these aspects somehow together and say, okay, these policies are then effective.

If some of the competency areas kind of managed in educational field are probably improving (let's say the abilities of a person to meaningfully participate in market) but on the other hand, at the same time help them to lead, let's say, to be as a person better recognised in society, and discounts for, let's say, these groups that are for various reasons in, let's say, difficult labour market conditions, which is not. And this has to be analysed very thoroughly, I think, before kind of saying, well, initiative is effective or not. Yeah.

And often I see like in the adult education few days, this close connection that really makes the educator rather a person kind of facilitating or accompanying a long-term process, often in pilot projects, unfortunately, in a lot of countries and often in. So, I would characterize it in archipelago island character, there is a lot of different islands where people make meaningful work and meaningful contribution, but often then the overall policy is then kind of read, okay, how many rate did it kind of contribute to decrease the unemployment rate or not or whatever, which is then just having a facet of the overall image? Yeah. And so, it means kind of this. Having a look at the structures, having a look at the opportunity, if I can, with such European polities, the policies change structures as they are in terms of politically, socially and how in how far adult education is enabled to provide mirroring full society in in their structures, in their needs here think there happens a lot of the ground there is for me is always a nice project or a nice kind of. A small project in which we are actually involved with a network which is called "linking adult learning and citizenship education with employment policies". The initial thought to have more the narrow approach on labour market policy is meaningful or make sense to the participant only if there is kind of the civic and a social dimension also kind of accompanied and included this, I would say. Then bridging the labour market gap helps, but only if it helps meaningfully for the person also to gain as a person in other dimensions.

A: That's very appropriate again. I like very much the metaphor with the islands, and I think that there is a lot of work being done in each of those islands, and especially at the local level on the ground. That's where the real things happen. And Jonas, look at that: you work on the local level. So, what can you tell us about the best practices that could help other regions in Europe? How transferable are the good ideas and practices that you put in place on an everyday basis?

J: I was thinking a lot about what Georg said. I don't know if it was like 15 minutes ago or something, but you talked about the necessity of unlearning, and I think that's the key; actually to put emphasis on how important it is for us to step back in meetings with the young adults who are facing problems in entering the labor market, or finding a study environment that they feel meaningful to them. And yeah, I think we need to step back and to unlearn. Basically, I was thinking about Star Wars when you said that. I think there is this, I don't know, Star Wars that - well I'm too young to know, I was a kid when the first episodes were filmed - but I think there is one of these passages where Yoda tells Luke Skywalker that he has to unlearn everything he's learned in order to become the Jedi Master. And I think it's something about that to actually unlearn all the proportionality and all the skills and everything and to unlearn them in order to step into the meeting and meet what we have in front of us and not and not hiding behind all the skills that we have. It's good to have them, but it's good as well to have it have them in our rucksack rather than having it in front of the table or as a shield in front of us. That's kind of the best practice that I found in this project. Me and my Swedish colleagues, we sometimes joke about all the competence developments that we are joining at work in Swedish. It's called the competence. And we make fun of each other sometimes and say, oh, so you're going to the competence of weakling today. And competence of weakling means like competence liquidation or something. Because there's so much on competence development. So, we kind of we kind of longing for a competence liquidation sometimes. And I think it's beautiful to think about. Yeah. Unlearning your skills and put them in your rucksack but deep below and bring in yourself in the meeting with these young adults because they are longing for meetings, and they are longing for motivation. I think motivation is the most important thing. And that's what we need to spur in young adults the reason why they should become motivated. Because I don't think the adult world have legit reasons these days. We need to redevelop reasons behind motivation.

A: Yeah, and the work of a counsellor is so much more than this, so much more than the work of a counsellor. It's really multi-dimensional, as you both said before. Um, but thank you very much for staying with us. I don't know about our listeners, but I certainly learned a lot today and listening to different perspectives and to different angles through which we can address the issue of inclusion of, of young adults in education and training. So, I think that what's left from me is to thank you both once again for your presence today. Thank you very much, Georg.

G: Thank you, a lot. I enjoyed it.

A: And thank you very much. Jonas.

J: Yes, thanks a lot. And one last thank you to our listeners for tuning in today. This episode will remain at your disposal on EPALÉ and until the next one.