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Empowering vulnerable adults through second-chance education: a case study from Cyprus

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether and through what mechanisms vulnerable adults are empowered through a second-chance education programme. At the same time, the paper aims at unveiling the obstacles hindering learners’ empowerment process and making suggestions for the improvement of the educational programme fostering further empowerment of the learners. To achieve the objectives set by the research, a hybrid methodological design was applied combining hermeneutic phenomenology and critical discourse analysis. Data collection was performed using three tools: semi-structured interviews, reflective journals and document analysis. The results led to the emergence of a multilevel empowerment scheme of vulnerable adults in the programme. The empowerment mechanisms that emerged were as follows: (a) empowerment through participation as a self-value, (b) empowerment through the reconstruction of past experiences, (c) empowerment through the strengthening of their social capital and (d) empowerment through literacy skills. At the same time, the study shed light on a number of factors that inhibit the process of learners’ empowerment, which unveil structural and operational weaknesses of the programme as well as of the policies pursued by the State.

KEYWORDS
Adult education; vulnerable adults; empowerment; second-chance education

Introduction

Despite great interest in recent years concerning adult education, the contemporary population of vulnerable adults and how they benefit or not from educational programmes remain at the periphery of academic research. Second-chance education (SCE) represents an open pathway for poorly educated adults to offer them an opportunity to complete their basic and/or secondary education. The demographic profile of learners attending SCE is characterised by low socio-economic background (Lamb, Markussen, Teese, Polesel, & Sandberg, 2011; McGregor & Mills, 2012). Their low level of educational achievement is usually combined with sensitive life stories. These characteristics suggest that they are at high risk not only educationally, but also they are disadvantaged and marginalised economically, socially and even in terms of health status (Hämmerström & Janlert, 2002).

What is critical regarding the role of SCE is the fact that such educational programmes are required to address the needs of a special population, specifically low-educated adults, and to challenge their multilevel vulnerability. Research supports the critical role of educational achievement in predicting employability and economic status (Gesthuizen, Solga, & Künster, 2011; Solga, 2008) as well as social inclusion (Bäckman & Nilsson, 2010; Collett et al., 2011). Consequently, SCE is perceived as providing the potential to counteract the educational, social and economic...
inequalities that low-educated adults experience in their personal, social and occupational lives (Nordlund, Bonfanti, & Strandh, 2015).

At the same time, the implementation of high-quality adult educational programmes in order to combat low participation and enhance basic adult skills around Europe has been one of the main targets of the most recent European Union educational policies (EC, 2011; EC/EACEA/Eurodice, 2015). Within the context of the renewed agenda focusing on adult education (EC, 2011), particular attention is paid to the vulnerable adult population, namely the low educated and low qualified, and the need for developing second-chance opportunities for them. Member states are urged to take measures to improve basic skills for those who left the educational system prematurely.

Regarding Cyprus, the results of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) (OECD, 2016) recorded a high number of adults with low proficiency in basic skills. Although the participation of the adult population in formal learning has historically been minimal, that of the low-qualified has been traditionally even lower. In 2012, according to CYSTAT (2014), overall participation in adult learning activities of those claiming lower (basic) secondary qualifications or under approximated only 1% (compared to 3.7% for overall participation of the general population).

In Cyprus, there is still a lack of empirical research in the field of adult education, in general, and especially in the field of SCE. Much of the paucity can be attributed to the fact that adult education has a very short history in the country, and it has not become fully systematised (Gravani & Ioannidou, 2014). In the absence of other research attempts in the field, the present study represents a first endeavour to explore the efficacy of SCE in Cyprus and especially of the educational pathway provided by the Evening High Schools (Esperina Gymnasia-Lyceums) for vulnerable adults who wish to complete their secondary education. The ultimate aim of the research is to illuminate the notion of empowerment of vulnerable adult learners in the context of second-chance schools (SCS).

The concept of empowerment is used in a variety of contexts – in education particularly – and with various connotations. The research adopts an interdisciplinary approach, investigating empowerment by using concepts from the fields of Education, Psychology and Sociology. Consequently, empowerment is investigated at three different levels: the cognitive, which refers to knowledge and skills; the psychological, which refers to the sense of self; and the sociopolitical, which refers to the social and political actions of the concerned individuals (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Levels of empowerment (page 2).
Therefore, the three main aims guiding the research are to:

1. unveil the empowering experiences of vulnerable adult learners in a second-chance educational programme;
2. identify the ways in which they interpret and make meaning of those experiences, as possible ways of giving voice to groups of adult learners who are marginalised; and
3. explore any possible barriers which might hinder the process of adult learners’ empowerment.

In what follows, the context of the study, literature review, research questions and framework are presented; then, methodology and data analysis are described. Finally, data are discussed, and concluding remarks are made followed by implications for theory and practice.

The context

Although significant efforts have been made the last few years to enhance adult education provisions in Cyprus, the available structures and programmes are still limited. Especially, with regard to the low-educated adults who wish to continue their education, there are only two official pathways provided: the Evening Schools (ESs) (Esperina Gymnasia-Lyceums) and the Evening Technical Schools (Esperines Technikes Scholes), which offer general and vocational secondary education to adults, respectively. Both provisions play a key role for the low-educated adults who desire to acquire knowledge and skills, improve their place in the labour market or continue their educational careers.

The present research focuses on an ES in Cyprus. ESs are public institutions under the Administration of Secondary Education. They offer academically oriented curricula equivalent to that of ordinary secondary day schools. Courses are delivered in traditional face-to-face format and, accordingly, students must attend school full time. Secondary education teachers with no necessary experience and qualifications in adult education are allocated to teach at ES.

The present study examined the views and opinions of adult students in one ES located in an urban area of Cyprus.

Literature review and research questions

The research evolved around two main concepts: ‘vulnerable adult learners’ and ‘empowerment’. Regarding the first, there is no single definition; nevertheless, there are some particular characteristics which can lead to the delineation of a broad working definition. In the current research, vulnerable adult learners are considered to be those who dropped out of the educational system early (i.e. before completing their secondary education and becoming certified). In addition to being low skilled, they usually hold a low work position, are characterised by sensitive life stories (they may be immigrants or single parents) and often are social service recipients.

The notion of ‘empowerment’ has been used in the rhetoric of different scientific fields and especially of the educational discipline (Wildemeersch & Olesen, 2012). The work of Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988) in the field of community psychology has proved seminal for the systematisation of a theory of empowerment. Rappaport (1985) provides a broad definition of how empowerment can be manifested: ‘Empowerment is a sense of control over one’s life with respect to personality, cognition and motivation’ (p. 17).

In the field of education, ‘empowerment’ has raised discussions on the alleged individualistic philosophical underpinnings of the term and its connections with the more critically oriented notion of emancipation (Fielding, 1996; Inglis, 1997). Despite theoretical discussions, both terms remain open constructs and, in any case, connected to the special conditions of the population and the context under study. Recognising this limitation, the research presented has chosen to
surmount the dichotomy between the concepts of empowerment and emancipation by adopting a holistic approach and by using the two terms interchangeably. Within this framework, empowerment was investigated using three main dimensional pillars: the cognitive, psychological and sociopolitical. The main research questions addressed in the study are the following:

(1) To what extent have the adult learners attending the particular SCS been empowered and at which levels?
(2) Through which mechanisms have vulnerable adult learners been empowered?
(3) Which obstacles hinder the process of their empowerment?

Research framework

As the notion of empowerment is very abstract and difficult to put down conceptually, some indicators of learners’ empowerment demanded identification to guide the research procedure. A three-level research framework was adopted, elaborating theories from the fields of education, psychology and sociology.

Education

Change is the most essential potential of learning, and learning – as a process or an outcome – is intrinsically empowering. In the research, empowerment in the field of education has been investigated through four focusing lenses: basic skills, literacy, transformative theory and critical adult education.

Basic skills are considered to be a critical achievement of the successful learner, worker and citizen (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). This rhetoric is echoed in the discourses of international organisations (OECD, EU) which influence educational policies worldwide. Although there is strong criticism against the rhetoric which inevitably connects education with the labour market (Borg & Mayo, 2008), at the same time there exists a plethora of studies which provide evidence that deficiency in basic skills in adult life can negatively affect a person’s wage earning potential and his/her position in the labour market (Kritikos & Ching, 2005).

Another aspect of empowerment can be drawn from Mezirow’s (1991) theory of transformative learning, according to which learning or education is a process through which learners alter their meaning perspectives so that they become broadened and more inclusive. Transformative learning captures the essence of the learning process as essentially a process of fundamental change, and it is connected to the need for coping with contemporary challenges that individuals face as adults, such as the increase in average life expectancy, the technological advancements and the ongoing changes to social and working conditions (Mezirow, 1991).

Critical adult education theory provides useful insights into the notion of empowerment, especially when it is applied to marginalised populations. It evolves around the idea that education cannot be considered as a neutral praxis, but rather that it is political per se (Apple, 2004) and, as such, politically relevant and important. Theorists advocating this standpoint deem education’s ultimate goal to be the creation of emancipated and active citizens who are ready to take action towards social transformation (Freire, 2000; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007).

Psychology

Positive psychology focuses on those positive personality traits or attributes which allow persons to thrive (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Within this framework, the ideological background of positive psychology was found to be particularly suitable to enrich the notion of empowerment of vulnerable adults. Two tailored concepts were used to connect the research framework to psychology, specifically ‘resilience’ and ‘self-efficacy’. The former, according to
Herrman et al. (2011), is a person’s ability to absorb high levels of destructiveness from adversities. The latter is perceived by Bandura (1997) as the ‘belief in one’s capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments’ (p. 3). A person’s belief in her/his level of self-efficacy was shown to influence her or his academic outcomes and, furthermore, life satisfaction (Caprara, Vecchione, Alessandri, Gerbino, & Barbaranelli, 2011).

**Sociology**

From the field of sociology, two main concepts were used as aspects of empowerment: Bourdieu’s concepts of social and cultural capital. According to Bourdieu (1986), capital is revealed in three different forms: the economic and the more symbolic cultural and social capital. Economic capital is directly convertible into money in the form of financial or property ownership. Cultural capital is defined as a person’s mastery of the dominant culture and consists of different elements from material objects – such as books, pictures, instruments – to more abstract entities including taste, style and linguistic aptitudes. Social capital is defined as an asset consisting of ‘social networks, the reciprocities that arise from them, and the value of these for achieving mutual goals’ (Schuller, Baron & Field., 2000, p. 1).

Adult students of SCS are characterised as displaying weak levels of economic, cultural and social capital as they come predominantly from the lowest social classes. The enhancement of their cultural and social capital has been considered important in the ongoing process of their empowerment.

**Methodological considerations**

The research questions guiding the study focus on learners’ experiences to invest their empowerment with meaning. This inductive approach called for the adoption of the qualitative paradigm as the optimal method for comprehending and encompassing the meaning of human experience (Merriam, 1998) through the collection of in-depth and detailed data (Patton, 2002).

Particularly, the study adopted a pluralistic methodological approach combining different methodologies (Frost et al., 2010) to deepen the understanding of the phenomenon of empowerment. This *bricolage* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) of methodologies consisted of the use of hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1990) in the research design phase, setting the research questions and developing the research tools and critical discourse analysis (CDA) in the phase of data analysis (Fairclough, 1995). Data analysis was guided by Fairclough’s (1995) three-dimensional model of CDA, according to which discourse can be analysed as text, as discourse practice and as social practice.

**Research tools**

In-depth semi-structured interviews were one of the two main tools for data collection. They were carried out over a two-month period, May–June 2014.

The development of a *reflective diary* was the second main tool incorporated in the research methodology. The use of a diary ‘allows access to […] ongoing everyday behaviour in a relatively unobtrusive manner, which allows the immediacy of the experience to be captured, and also provides accounts of phenomena over time’ (Symon, 2004, p. 98).

*Document analysis* is ‘a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating [printed] documents’ (Bowen, 2009, p. 27) of various types. The documents under analysis were various learners’ texts, institutional archives and legislative documents. The use of document analysis contributed particularly to deeper exploration within the research context.
Sample and data collection

Participants in the study were selected according to the purposeful sampling method (Patton, 2002). Twelve adult learners were selected, 2 from each of the six grades of the programme – six women and six men. During the process of data analysis, four educators were selected to participate in the interviews to deepen the investigation of the research’s context.

In the first phase of data collection, the participants were asked to fill in the reflective diary for a period of 4 weeks. The diary was unstructured and the participants were asked to write down all their experiences, feelings and thoughts in everyday life that, in their opinion, were ascribed to the positive effects of the school programme on their lives. During the second data collection phase, all 12 participants were interviewed in sessions that lasted from 45 to 150 min approximately.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed the process of inductive coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) as the study was not grounded on a priori hypotheses and was data driven (Creswell, 2007). During this process, data from the interviews and the reflective journals were co-examined using within- and cross-case analysis. Based on multiple readings of the data, repeated patterns were identified leading to the development of different themes under which data were categorised. Illustrative interview and journal quotations were selected to elucidate the range of participants’ experiences on every theme.

In parallel, the analysis was conducted within the framework of Fairclough’s three-dimensional model. Therefore, the analysis commenced with the coding procedure in each of the three levels of Fairclough’s model following a spiral process (Creswell, 2007). For example, many participants mentioned the desire born from their experience in the programme to expand their education beyond secondary level. They expressed this wishfulness in a disguised way using repetitively the metaphor ‘to go further on’. This quotation was categorised under the theme ‘Empowerment as a broadening of goals’. In the frame of Fairclough’s model, this quotation is connected to the level of text analysis.

Validity and reliability

Triangulation is being used lately as a strategy to achieve validity and reliability in qualitative research. In the current study, triangulation was achieved in the four ways proposed by Patton (1999): by using different data collection methods, namely interviews, reflective journals and document analysis; by using different data sources (learners and educators); by adopting analyst triangulation, as the analysis of the data was handed for comments to two persons who, as insiders, had good knowledge of the context; and by embracing different perspectives to analyse the data, as the study incorporated various theories from the field of Education, Psychology and Sociology.

To further ensure data reliability, the role of the researcher was discussed extensively in the study. The researcher was considered as part of the context, and her role and possible biases were exposed and made explicit during context analysis. Additionally, the multilevel triangulation sought to obtain the highest possible level of validity, although in the framework of hermeneutic phenomenology adopted, researcher’s interpretations are acceptable (van Manen, 1990).

Data are discussed below according to the three levels of Fairclough’s model, namely: discourse practices, text and social practices.

Discourse practices

CDA, including Fairclough’s model, has been criticised repeatedly for not granting proper attention to the context in which discourses are contextualised (Blommaert, 2005; van Dijk, 2009). For the current research, Blommaert’s (2005) theory regarding context analysis has been
utilised. According to this, critical analysis of the context – and not only of the discourse – is an essential tool for the researcher who intends to analyse the social structures under which discourse practices are formed. Three main elements of the context were considered: the educational programme, the learners and the teachers.

The educational programme

The State-run SCS under study is one of the five operating on the island. It runs within the framework of a highly centralised educational system. From the analysis of the available documents (i.e. circulars, written communications with officials, etc.), it was revealed that the authorised bodies responsible for educational policies had been found unresponsive to the calls of the school for desired reforms regarding the curriculum, the learning materials and teachers’ training. At the same time, a critical review of the communication documents between the school and the Ministry of Education and Culture indicated unwillingness on the part of the recognised authorities to provide the prerequisites for the development of an educational programme capable of meeting specified learners’ needs.

Despite the many systemic and structural inadequacies of the programme, learners’ perceptions and attitudes towards it were positive. This paradox can be attributed to learners’ low expectations which often lead to low standards and more favourable evaluations. In this context, although they referred to the official policies as being ignorant, they supported the programme as such in a way that disclosed a strong gratitude towards this second chance, no matter the quality. The absence of negative evaluations can be also accredited to an uncritical acceptance of the social stereotype that school is good under any conditions.

The learners

The SCS learners in the study came from low socio-economic background and left school early. All of them were either working in low-wage earning positions or were unemployed. Regarding their decision to drop out from the educational system, the learners seem to reproduce in their discourse the pattern of the dominant rhetoric, according to which early school leaving is a result of the learner’s inability or failure to learn.

In their discourses, one can easily identify the social and psychological burden they bear as a result of their low levels of educational achievement. The disempowering effects of early school leaving are apparent in the discourse of a 60-year-old learner:

One day, when I had to fill a form for the local council, I had to put ‘no’ in the question whether I hold a school leaving diploma…. I felt worthless…when I returned home I told my wife, that, as soon as our children finish with their education, I will go back to school. (L2)

A 38-year-old woman, divorced mother of two, refers to her experiences after dropping out: ‘I lost my girlfriends; I went to work straightaway. I spent all my life in a factory. Work, home, work, home […] and my father was taking my salary. He wouldn’t let me go out with my girlfriends’ (L5).

The teachers

Teachers working within the SCS were allocated from the Ministry-approved Secondary Education teaching pool. They had no specialisation in adult education, and they had received no systematic training before or during their placement in the SCS.

In their discourses, it is evident that they reproduce the dominant stereotypes about the learners. Hence, they characterise them as people with low learning skills and low chances to overcome their deficiencies. A teacher commented:
They are losers; the majority of them [...] are coming mainly to get a diploma. They don’t have any particular goals; they don’t care about anything [...] It’s a bit difficult for them to change due to their mentality, culture, the society in general, the way they’ve grown up, their family. There is zero chance to improve. (T2)

Another teacher justified his interpretation about learners’ feelings of inferiority on the grounds of their educational status. He also pointed out that the educators need to put extra effort in order to help them overcome this view, something that obviously is not always achievable.

I can see that they need to be treated with particular sensitivity and understanding. I believe that due to the fact that they come to a second chance school [...] they feel somehow inferior. They face some difficulties but as human beings they are not inferior; unfortunately they feel like that. [...] A great effort is needed on behalf of the educators to help them put these feelings aside. (T1)

Someone else projected a pessimistic and conservative opinion, which in fact invalidates his own role as an educator in this programme and the wider philosophical background of adult and particularly SCE. He argued: ‘You cannot change a person at his thirties’. (T2)

Findings also revealed that teachers prioritise their role as a counsellor over that of a facilitator of learning. One of them argued:

Up to now, I see that knowledge is not so important [...] I advise them on how to live their lives, as human beings. I can offer much more on that part; when it comes to knowledge [...] I say, [it] is better to gain from me the sense of benevolence, to become good citizens. I mostly help them to realize their aim in life, being useful to their society. (T3)

This perspective discloses once again the teaching staff’s belief that this group of learners is unable to learn: thus, the instructors feel they can assist them mainly by guiding them. Most teachers used a discourse emphasising the ‘deficient’ skills, achievements and life opportunities of the learners. No reference was made by them to the potential responsibilities of the educational system, or to the learners’ socio-economic background, or to themselves as educators, revealing an uncritical, correspondent-insensitive outlook.

Through discourse practices of intertextuality (Blommaert, 2005), the participants – both learners and teachers – reproduce already established discourses regarding school failure or success, the value of education and schooling and personal responsibility.

Text

According to Fairclough (1995), discourse as text involves descriptive language analysis of textual features under the categories of wording (vocabulary), grammar, cohesion and structure. The analysis focused mainly on the metaphors used by the participants in an effort to capture their deeper thoughts regarding empowerment or their felt lack of it. Critical analysis of metaphors used by the learners has indeed revealed certain patterns of metaphor usage which illuminate the processes of empowerment they experienced during their attendance in the educational programme. The examples below illustrate the major themes that emerged from the critical metaphor analysis.

Empowerment as a way of combating feelings of emotional emptiness

The participants repeatedly referred to the feelings of emotional emptiness and poverty they were experiencing prior their entrance to the SCS educational programme. They made use of metaphors through which they disclosed how their subsequent experiences helped them to combat this sense of emotional emptiness. A woman, mother of four children and grandmother of two said: ‘I used to experience a sense of emptiness inside. Now, because I experience a sense of fullness, I believe I can accomplish a lot more things’. (L5). Another learner, male, 60 years old, father of three, expressed similar feelings using the metaphor of the ‘filled emptiness’: ‘I honestly fell in love with the school, because it filled my days, it filled my nights’. (L3)
The metaphors used by the learners reflect an array of sentiments which intrinsically suggest a time dichotomy of the ‘before’ and the ‘now’. School experiences seem to be the turning point creating the dichotomy between a prior and a current life. The alteration in the way participants represent their lives is an indicator of their empowerment.

**Empowerment as a restoration of childhood**

Another pattern of metaphor use showed that an aspect of learners’ empowerment was related to the opportunity to return and restore their lost childhood through the experiences provided by the SCS. Most of the participants described dropping out from school as a traumatic experience which forced them into an adult-like life, either by an undesirable marriage or by an unwanted occupation.

The following learner commented on the way in which the new learning triggered positive feelings and became a source of youthfulness for her. Her psychological empowerment is exemplified in her renewed sense of youthfulness: ‘I experience learning new things as a teenager. I simply fly to the clouds because I’m at school. Although I’m 43-years-old, I feel like being 15’. (L7)

**Empowerment as a broadening of goals**

What followed early school leaving is described by the participants as a period of stagnation and inactivity. This is particularly clear in the following words: ‘If I had been able to finish school, I wouldn’t feel like I am living in a small hole, unable to come out of it’. (L6)

On the other hand, re-entering education is perceived as a period of change and growth accompanied by feelings of relief. It was remarkable that the majority of participants used the metaphor of a deadlocked person who gained the potential to move on in life. Characteristic is the following quote: ‘I came to the conclusion that I’m allowed to consider that I can move ahead, because now I can think. I start feeling that I can go further on’. (L11)

The above quote reveals a renewed sense of power that makes it possible for the participants to consider new choices and adopt more active strategies for developing their educational careers. The metaphor of ‘going further on’ refers to her desire to continue her education at a higher level, a choice that was not open to her before. The opening up of new spaces, both internally and as real-life paths, seems to have helped the learner to resolve feelings of marginalisation and of social inferiority.

**Empowerment as reinforcement of self-image**

In the analysis of the data at the level of text, the use of certain metaphors evidently demonstrated a positive alteration on how participants conceive their self-image and, eventually, construct their identity. Their view of self before their entrance into the SCS programme was associated with negative representations of self. These representations were obviously connected to the traumatic experiences of early school leaving and the accompanying social stigmata associated with low levels of educational achievement, which participants had internalised. The example of metaphor use that follows is characteristic: ‘I was feeling like a nothing, a non-existent...Now, I feel that I have gained knowledge and that, at last, I’m slowly climbing up the ladder’. (L1)

**Empowerment as better life control**

One of the most well-known definitions of empowerment, suggested by Rappaport (1985), adopts the idea that empowerment involves one’s ability to take control of his/her life. This definition agrees with an aspect of the participants’ empowerment as demonstrated in their discourses. In their metaphors, they revealed a heightened sense of control over their behaviour, feelings and actions associated with the experiences and the knowledge they gained in the programme. Although the exact mechanisms through which this effect took place are not clarified, the participants refer to certain positive alterations in their behaviour. For example, a participant referred to the transformation of his behaviour and how it impacted on his family life: ‘I was like a
volcano shouting all the time; but now, these last two years, I have calmed down. […] My behaviour towards my wife and my son is better’. (L5)

Furthermore, the sense of control is demonstrated by the ability of the learner to make better and more conscious decisions about his life. He argued: ‘I used to go with the flow, in my work and in everything […] once here and once there. Now I’ve changed. I work in moderation. […] I’m evaluating things better than before’. (L5)

**Social practices**

The third level of Fairclough’s (1995) model of analysis is social practices. It demonstrates how discourse is connected to social structures and their possible preservation or transformation. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) argue that the incorporation of practice theory in CDA is important as practices ‘constitute a point of connection between “society” and people living their lives’ (p. 21).

In this research, the focus upon practices had a twofold aim: (a) to identify power relations and ideologies that enhance or inhibit learners’ empowerment and (b) to illustrate the ways in which individuals – not just as learners but also as social and political actors – integrate their experiences and the results of their education into real life. In the following section, the mechanisms of learners’ empowerment which were identified to function as social practices are presented.

**Literacy as empowerment**

Even though the particular SCS educational programme does not offer targeted language literacy courses, study participants made multiple references to the ways they feel empowered because of their enhanced literacy skills. At the same time, their narratives embodied examples of what Barton and Hamilton (2000) call ‘literacy events’, that is, direct connections between literacy skills and real-life events. For example, a participant referred to the way her improved language skills impacted her self-esteem:

> The school helped me a great deal in the way I express myself and speak. For example, regarding my job, where I deal with teachers: I always felt inferior. I knew I was tongue-tied [silent]. Now, I’m confident that I can cope very well and I’m able to engage in deeper conversation with them. (L3)

Another participant described in a journal record how the enrichment of his language skills facilitated a better understanding of a political debate:

> Tonight on TV I watched a political debate. The fact that I had enriched my vocabulary at school helps me to better understand this kind of conversation, which, I admit, I really liked and found interesting. (L7)

However, any improvement in learners’ literacy skills seems to have emerged as a side benefit of a general educational programme, which does not utilise any appropriate mechanisms in order to identify learners’ specific needs and to offer them a customised literacy course. Additionally, the scrutinisation of policy texts yielded the absences of any cohesive policy background under which the programme operates.

**Dimensions of vulnerable adult learners’ empowerment**

The notion of empowerment is inherently abstract, and its real-life uses are mediated mostly through human experience. This section offers a cross-case analysis of the data indicating common themes that emerged (Miles et al., 2014). The analysis outlines the outcomes of the research based on four dimensions connected to the research questions: mechanisms, levels and obstacles of vulnerable learners’ empowerment.
Mechanisms of empowerment

A common theme across the analysis was that learners’ participation in the programme creates value on its own right and irrespective of other gains in terms of knowledge or skills. Academic failure and school dropout are associated to the common phenomenon of self-stigmatisation (Solga, 2008). Holding the identity of ‘learner’ has been proven to counteract the stigma of academic failure which most of the participants had experienced. This outcome relocates the value of education from a neo-liberal instrumental standpoint onto a more humanistic perspective blunting the concern that, ‘it is increasingly difficult to make a public case for education for its own sake’ (Young & Muller, 2010, p. 4). Additionally, the role of being an adult student does not seem to cause any anxiety or create the need to be kept covert as Mayo (1994) assumes is the case in small societies. Rather, it is obvious that most of the participants use the identity of being a learner as a resource from which they benefit.

A second mechanism was identified through the process of participants’ transformation of previous negative experiences. These were differentiated according to each participant’s life story. Some had unresolved traumatic experiences from their school years relating to academic failure, conflicting relations with their teachers or experienced marginalisation. Others’ negative experiences were a consequence of school dropout. These experiences had been the cause of life stagnation (Richardson, 2002). Although shortcomings in the educational programme did not create ideal conditions for learning, some of its aspects, such as opportunities for learners to participate in collective action, seem to promote their transformation. The opportunity given to the participants to gain positive experiences helped them to reconstruct their identities and adopt a more optimistic and positive attitude towards living. Consequently, this renewed ability to move forward in their lives created new goals, including the continuation of education or a change of occupation. These outcomes verify Rappaport’s (1987) definition of empowerment as better control of life.

The third mechanism of empowerment is connected with participants’ experiences of collectivity and the enhancement of their social capital. School life is a microsystem of society where complex relations are developed. Three categories of relations were identified in the learners’ discourses: relations with the educator, relations with classmates in the classroom and relations with schoolmates out of the classroom. The cartography of the educator–student relation unveils multifaceted and sometimes conflicting dimensions. Students emphasised, on the one hand, the emotional dimension of their relationship with the educator, delineating the importance of the emotional, psychological and counselling support offered to them. On the other hand, the educators’ discourse revealed the uncritical embracing of social stereotypes, which associate learners’ academic failure with irreversible personal shortcomings and cultural deficiencies. This pessimistic perspective constitutes a barrier to learners’ cognitive empowerment as the educators chose more to embrace the role of counsellors and less of facilitators of learning. This can be interpreted as a consequence of the lack of educators’ training.

From this analysis, two conclusions can be drawn. The first adds insights into the educators’ profile in the context of SCS, where his/her ability to create supportive relations and a safe environment for individuals are of pivotal importance (Jimoyiannis & Gravani, 2011). The second relates to the need for educators’ professionalisation to reach a better understanding of the learners, acknowledge the barriers arising from stereotypical thinking and develop the skills to better facilitate the learning of vulnerable adults.

The collective experiences of participants include also their relations with classmates in classroom and with schoolmates in small groups outside the classroom. Data verify that an adult learner’s class is an open space where hierarchical, power relations are developed (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1998) prioritising individuality against collectivity. Additionally, the traditional process of evaluation, testing and grading contributes negatively to this challenge. Those barriers were challenged when participants acted as members of smaller groups outside the context of the
traditional class, as in the instance of the theatrical group. They acknowledged the binding relations developed among the members. This outcome indicates how learners in this group benefited in terms of social capital when they coexist in more open, unstructured educational settings. The absence of a traditional grading system and the alternative form of learning that takes place in such contexts seem to empower learners’ collective experiences.

The fourth mechanism of empowerment is connected to learners’ enhancement of literacy skills. The participants seemed to improve their language and historical literacy skills in the programme. In both cases, they made direct connections between their new skills and the ways they make use of them in everyday life as social practices (Street, 2005). Lack of literacy skills suffered by this group of individuals seems to hinder their actions in all aspects of life. It was obvious that participants’ disempowerment was a result of their incapability of fully decoding all the discourses produced and disseminated in everyday life settings (Blommaert, 2005), which incapacity can consequently become a source or cause of social inequality (van Dijk, 2006). The findings unveil complex mechanisms of empowerment, according to which literacy skills become valuable resources which intersect with all levels of a person’s existence at the cognitive, psychological and sociopolitical level.

Levels of empowerment

At the cognitive level, participants were empowered primarily through their language and historical skill enhancement. The findings revealed a paradox: whereas SCS learners enjoyed reduced job opportunities in the labour market due to their low skill levels, the learners recognised as valuable those skills that are not directly connected to their economic empowerment. Learners seemed to prioritise their educational needs and gains using a personal, internal outlook or perspective according to which learning is acknowledged primarily as a means to personal and social well-being (Field, 2011). This perspective connects learning to the Aristotelian term of eudaimonia and less to the neoliberal economic set of imperatives as expressed in contemporary hegemonic educational discourses (Popović, 2014).

Accordingly, learning as a dimension of cognitive development intersects with all levels of human existence and becomes a means of empowerment at the psychological and the sociopolitical levels. At the psychological level, the notion of empowerment is reflected in the partial obviation of stereotypical patterns of thinking regarding how this group of people assigns meaning to their experiences as school dropouts. As McLaren (2003) explains, the contemporary hegemonic discourse regarding personal success imposes on subordinated groups the belief that their failure is related to personal inefficacy. A significant aspect that emerged was the reconstruction of personal identity on the basis of the participants’ new experiences which counteracted at least partially the adverse effects of their stigmatisation due to school dropout and other negative life experiences. The participants referred retrospectively to a renewed sense of optimistic and capable selfhood. This outcome indicates a normalisation process through which the participants transformed their non-compatible identities in terms of the standards set by the prevailing contemporary paradigm into a more compatible form (Foucault, 1977).

At the sociopolitical level, the participants’ empowerment is reflected in the enrichment of their social capital through the establishment of a network of valuable relations with teachers and schoolmates. There was no significant alteration regarding participants’ political orientation and action. With reference to this outcome, there is no evidence that this particular programme can contribute to a broader social transformation as the participants’ empowerment seems to be restricted to the level of the individual. For Freire (Shor & Freire, 1987), empowerment is actually a social act, and thus, individual empowerment is not enough to transform the greater society. As such, empowerment does not seem to go beyond the individual level. Given these restricting terms, the renegotiation of the participants’ place in
society as a result of their empowerment is questioned. At the same time, the educational programme seems to operate more as another means of social reproduction instead of social transformation.

**Obstacles of empowerment**

The core obstacle preventing participants’ further empowerment is the absence of an adult learning culture that recognises, evaluates and serves the needs of this particular population. The operation of SCSs in Cyprus is heavily dependent on the traditional schooling culture which promotes a predefined curriculum, structured educational settings and a traditional evaluation system. This dimension contradicts the basic principles of designing educational programmes for adults (Altschuld & Witkin, 2000) and hinders participants’ further empowerment.

The critical role of the educator of adults in this educational context was also made explicit in a twofold way. On one hand, the learners acknowledge the important role of a supportive educator anchored in the context of a human relationship, although direct references to their actual role as educators are missing. On the other hand, the apparently uncritical stance of the educators towards the learners deducts the potential impact of this second-chance opportunity on learners’ further empowerment. This discussion leads to the emergence of a new, more radical profile of the educator of vulnerable adults as a means to bridge this paradox. This profile needs to combine a humanistic approach with a critical disposition against social order and particularly learners’ life trajectories.

Obstacles identified in the research are products of policy deficiencies in promoting an authentic and radical adult educational culture. This is probably a result of the late development of the adult education sector in Cyprus (Gravani & Ioannidou, 2014) possibly due to its restricted scale, its geographical location and its particular historical conditions. It can be also argued that the deficiency approach towards SCS adopted by the State, reflected in the absence of any corresponding policies regarding SCS, hinders the development of a suitable educational context for vulnerable adults.

Perhaps the greatest culprit of this situation is the fact that learners are treated as asocial beings given that their particular identities and biographical trajectories are being ignored. The programme itself is set up as if the provided education is also neutral. Despite the fact that the learners failed to interpret their experiences using a broader lens by recognising and reckoning in structural conditions, the constrains emanating from the way the programme operates are significant.

**Concluding remarks**

Summing up, this study tried to show that although empowerment is often an abstract notion in the current literature on adult education, its critical importance can be indirectly shown through the examination of the alterations in learners’ narratives, feelings and actions. The study was an attempt to contextualise the notion within the framework of SCE based on the assumption that vulnerable adults are a social group in need of becoming empowered. This attempt, although based on a small-scale case study, yielded theoretical and practical implications for the field of adult education.

Particularly, the empowerment of adults through education, especially those with low educational levels, was revealed to be an important factor for improving their lives at all levels, particularly on the personal, the familial and the social levels. The holistic approach to the phenomenon adopted by the research uncovered subtle aspects of empowerment which modern educational policies often ignore through focusing primarily on the empowerment of individuals in the labour market. This underlines the need for the development of educational programmes that go beyond the economy-oriented vision of a highly skilled labour force and pay particular
attention to a holistic view of learning and of human learners. Additionally, the research outcomes signify the important role of educators in the field of SCE, supplementing their profile with new insights, and unveiling the importance of their philosophical perspectives in the ways they use their teaching mandate. As with other research (San Martin & Calabrese, 2011), this effort reconfirmed the importance of the establishment of alternative educational settings which ensure non-competitive and safe environments for the learners. Moreover, the findings identified definite gaps in the existing policies that constrain the learners’ empowerment process and revealed the need for modernisation of the institution as a means for providing real and equal opportunities for all. Overall, these findings provide useful insights for policymakers and suggest essential and systematic reforms in order to optimise on the contribution to be made by SCS programmes.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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