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THE SOCIAL POSITIONS OF ESTONIAN EDUCATORS BEFORE AND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

ABSTRACT: The context of adult and youth education has become more diverse. The COVID-19 pandemic affected changes in practice and had a particular impact on the social positions of educators. This paper presents the findings from qualitative exploratory research that aims to explore and understand the social positions of educators. The paper presents key findings based on research questions: what are the social positions of educators before and during the COVID-19 in Estonia? This research applied the theoretical concept of positioning. Empirical data was collected in two stages using five focus groups and six individual semi-structured interviews with educators from non-formal learning settings. Data was analysed using thematic analysis and portrayal methods. Four positions and four interrelated modes of the social positions of educators were explored. Social positions appeared in educators' values, beliefs, professional activities, dialogue, and reflections. The most valuable position for educators during the COVID-19 pandemic time was the position of being an equal partner which is the main basic interactive positioning mode for developing and maintaining social positions.

KEYWORDS: social positions, modes of positioning, adult and youth educators, non-formal learning, COVID-19.

Introduction

The contexts of adult and youth education with heterogeneous groups of educators, especially in non-formal learning contexts, are highly diverse. This continuously creates new perspectives and challenges for educators and has an impact on their professional context, teaching practices, identity and positions (Bierema, 2011; Gouthro, 2019). The health crisis in 2020 related to the COVID-19 pandemic affected the professional context and status, roles and social positions of all professionals including educators working in adult and youth education (Piliri & Gravani, 2023; Smythe, Wilbur & Hunter, 2021). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on non-formal education has been widely discussed, but its full extent has yet to be empirically determined. This applies not only to learners and their participation patterns in non-formal adult education (Kalenda, Kočvarová & Boeren, 2023: 682) but also to educators working in non-formal learning

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environments. The pandemic disrupted learning for both groups, requiring educators to adapt to new circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the landscape of education and learning (Kaleda, Kočvarová & Boeren, 2023). Participation in non-formal education decreased. The pandemic, the related lockdown, and physical distancing forced a digitalisation of education and training, forced educators to explore and use new approaches to teaching and learning support and experiment with new ways of communication and interaction. Therefore, educators faced multiple challenges in adapting to new situations in these crisis times. The situation was the same in most European countries (Boeren, Roumell & Roessger, 2020; Käßlinger & Lichte, 2020; Kalenda, Kočvarová & Boeren, 2023; Piliri & Gravani, 2023).

Our research took place in the Estonian educational system and focused on the social positions of Estonian adult and youth educators working in non-formal education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Non-formal education in Estonia covers non-formal learning opportunities for both young people and adults, including continuing education (ICF, Praxis, Tallinna Ülikooli ja Civitta Eesti, 2022). Recent international and national educational strategies (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2020; Ministry of Education and Research, Republic of Estonia) included non-formal education and learning as one of the focus areas in lifelong learning. Therefore, we invited adult and youth educators from different non-formal learning contexts to participate in our research. Just as adult education is diverse, the definition of what is an educator also varies (Giannoukos et al., 2015). According to the theory of Andragogy, an adult educator is someone who teaches, supports and/or facilitates the learning process and/or education of adults (Märja, Jõgi & Lõhmus, 2021).

In this paper, we mainly refer to educators who are teaching adults and young people by supporting their learning process in the non-formal learning context. For instance, in work-based learning settings and youth work environments like youth centres, camps, cultural programs and hobby schools during their leisure time. The content of youth work can vary from teaching and leisure activities to structured non-formal learning programmes and meaningful organised conversations and group work. In some countries, youth work targets vulnerable youth, and in some countries, it is more universal, *i.e.* for every young person (Banks, 2010; Williamson, 2017). In Estonia, youth work is for every young person between 7–26 years. Educators working within youth work can be called youth workers, cultural animators, social pedagogues, social and youth educators and youth leaders (Schizzeroto & Gasperoni, 2001). In our research we refer to them as youth educators. Adult educators are signposted into an educational methodology that is somewhat different from that of youth educators. It is expected that adult educators should teach and educate. However, the needs of youth are similar to those of adults, and adult educators also need to support the social and

personal needs of adults alongside their learning and educational needs. In our paper, we use the term educator, which in the Estonian context is used more in the context of informal and non-formal learning. Therefore, in our study, we chose to listen, understand and honour the voices and positions of youth and adult educators who are working in non-formal learning contexts. Their voices were silenced and ironically excluded in the field of education in Estonia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The voices of school teachers were more important, because of the priorities of Estonian educational policy.

Our study is partly related to a qualitative study entitled *Meanings of non-formal learning from the perspectives of practice and practitioners 2019-2020*¹ (Karu et al., 2019) which focused on the meanings and practice of non-formal learning. Our research goes beyond by examining the social positions of educators in Estonia before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our paper presents key findings based on the research question: what were the social positions of educators before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in Estonia? We focus on educators in non-formal learning contexts through the theoretical lens of positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990; 1999). By doing so, we aim to explore and understand the social positions of educators in the COVID-19 pandemic in Estonia and provide new insights into the pandemic's impact on educators in non-formal adult and youth education, an area that has not been extensively explored.

We start our paper with an introduction providing a short overview of the background and theoretical and methodological frames of the research, followed by a presentation and discussion of findings and conclusions. We will present and discuss positions and modes of social positioning among educators, and to conclude, we will highlight the four interrelated social positions and modes of positioning of educators in non-formal learning settings.

Research background – youth work and adult education in Estonia

Estonia, a country with a population of 1.3 million people, has a similar history to the other Baltic States: occupation by the Soviet Union and rapid changes after regaining independence in 1991. Before the Soviet occupation, the view of adult education and youth work in Estonia was similar to the view in Nordic countries as part of the non-formal education and social-cultural process. During the Soviet era, adult education and youth work were influenced ideologically and remained at a standstill for almost fifty years. Many of the specific types of adult education and youth work practised before the Soviet occupation, such as study circles and folk schools for adults, youth

¹ The research was funded by the Research Fund of the School of Educational Sciences, Tallinn University, Estonia.

organisations and camps for youth, were carried on but moulded to suit the communist ideology and message.

As a further alternative, folk universities for adults and hobby schools for youngsters emerged, which added some value to adult education and youth work in Estonia during the Soviet era. Folk universities, adult education centres, informal learning courses for adults and hobby schools, which still exist today alongside formal adult education and youth centres, are places for pursuing specific interests and have different programmes and curricula for different learning interests and hobbies together with a rather structured learning process. However, attending informal courses or hobby schools, for instance, was and is voluntary, which is why today they are categorised as educational establishments in the field of youth work (Rannala & Allekand, 2018). Although youth work is very context-specific, an examination of the codes of ethics of youth work around the world shows similar principles and values: youth work is empowering, based on a confidential and caring relationship, and is a participative, educational, expressive, reflective and inclusive practice in safe environments. Youth work is a relational practice and is mainly based on non-formal and informal learning: its starting point is where young people are and making connections and building trust is essential; therefore, people working with youth are the main resource for the practice (Kiilakoski & Kivijärvi, 2015; Sercombe, 2018).

The Adult Education Act (Riigi Teataja, 2015) and Professional Qualification Standards (AoEAEA) provide the legal bases for the field of adult education and adult educators in Estonia. The profession of adult educator in Estonia has been recognised and regulated by the Professional Qualification Standards since 2004. Professional qualification in this context is defined as an additional partial qualification and applying for the qualification is voluntary for adult educators. Youth work in Estonia is framed legally within the Youth Work Act (Riigi Teataja, 2010) and has been supported by the Occupational Standard of Youth Workers (Educational Professional Council, 2017) since 2006, as well as higher education programmes at universities and different training options outside academia – these possibilities are voluntary and it is possible to enter a job as a youth worker without prior qualification. There is also an active network – the Estonian Association of Youth Workers. Altogether there are over 7,000 youth workers, the majority of them working as hobby educators in hobby schools and others as youth workers in youth centres and youth organisations (Käger et al., 2017). As scholars have pointed out, the terms teacher and educator are used in different countries for different contexts and with different meanings (Cieslak et al., 2017: 155). According to the definition in the Adult Education Act, adult educators are specialists who support adult learning, directing comprehension and attitudes and supporting the self-development of adult learners in adult general education, job-related and continuing professional

training, informal learning, and popular education courses (Jõgi & Gross, 2009: 232). There is some overlap in the meaning of the terms adult educator and youth educator, but they are related to somewhat different activities and roles.

Theoretical framework

Below, we will provide an overview of the theoretical framework of the research. Previous studies have investigated different conceptions and various aspects of the practice of educators using different methodologies and theoretical frameworks (Fejes & Köpsén, 2012; Andersson et al., 2013; Gouthro, 2019; Jõgi, Gravani & Zarifis, 2020). Some studies focus on professionalisation (Murphy, 2015; Steiner, 2015); professional identity and roles (Bierema, 2010; Gutheil & Hof, 2011); roles and gender positioning (Adams & Harré, 2001; Wortham & Gadsden, 2006); self-positioning (Ligorio & Pugliese, 2004), and enacted professionalism and positions (Ruus, 2005; Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2014). There is a study with the particular focus on professional status of adult educators during the COVID-19 time (Piliri & Gravani, 2023). Also, there are several studies with the focus on different actors' relations in education. For instance, Sonia Martins Felix and Ali Sikunder (2023) used positioning theory in their study, which allowed them to analyse how different actors in education strategically relate to each other to achieve certain actions as achievable and certain actions as classified as irrelevant. There are some studies related to the position of educators in political and social contexts (Wilson & Cervero, 2001; Sork & Käßlinger, 2019). However, there is a significant gap in the existing literature, as the social positions of educators working in non-formal adult learning settings have been largely overlooked.

The concept of positioning

Positioning theory and the terms '*position*', '*social position*', '*positioning*' and '*modes of positioning*' form the theoretical framework of our research. The term *position* has the meaning of something that can be occupied or entered into, or by which one can position oneself in a particular situation or context (Lawson, 2022: 5). In Lawson's social position theory, the term *position* is employed in an implicit reference to a demarcated whole of some sort, in terms of which a position is relationally constituted. The term *position* has the connotation of something that can become occupied or be entered into (Lawson, 2022: 5). According to Pierre Bourdieu, 'social positions' describe social status and are communicated to others through interaction, different symbols, aspirations, choices, and values. Bourdieu argued that social space is created through the combination of various social actors engaged in social practices, their points of view

and their positions. Bourdieu understands the social space as a space of positions and position-takings (Bourdieu, 2003).

In the Dialogical Self theory, the term '*positioning*' has been used to capture the dynamics involved in a conception of the self. Positioning is emergent in the dialogical self (Kullasepp, 2008). Different forms of positioning might reveal different forms or manifestations of the dialogical self (Raggatt, 2007). In terms of the Dialogical Self model, being a professional creates 'I-positions' which are always linked with roles, concrete tasks and/or relationships. Roles are frames for positions. Transition into new contexts or roles becomes the source for redefining themselves (Kullasepp, 2008: 24). '*Positioning*' is understood by Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré as the discursive construction of personal stories (Davies & Harré, 1990).

We have applied the main statements from Bourdieu's field theory (Bourdieu, 2003) and position theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; 1999; Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999; Martin & Gillespie, 2013; Van Langenhove, 2021) as an analytical frame for analysing the social positions of educators. Previously, position theory (PT) has been applied in social psychology and sociology and in recent years it has been used in social linguistics and education. Mary McVee, Maria Baldassarre and Nancy Bailey analysed more than 200 studies in educational research which used positioning theory mainly in the teacher education context (McVee, Baldassarre & Bailey, 2004).

As for adult and youth education, position theory has not been widely utilised. This gap motivated us to apply it in our research. One critique of PT has been that it has not relied upon empirical analysis of communication and professional practice, also there is a lack of clarity as to how PT has been applied across the different disciplines (McVee et al., 2018: 392). Therefore, our research focused on educators who are actively engaged in their professional practices within non-formal learning settings. Reet Valgmaa and Erle Nõmm explained that for Estonian society, non-formal learning and especially its cultural aspect has an important function in civil society – counterbalancing the other functions of the economic order, political developments, and dominant social patterns (Valgmaa & Nõmm, 2008). The field of non-formal learning can be viewed as a practice and/or praxis taking place in the social space. The social space brings forth relations that shape and determine the different roles and social positions of educators.

Positioning theory

The theoretical concept of positioning is related to position theory (PT), which provides one of the analytic means for understanding social positions (Davies & Harré, 1990; 1999). Positioning theory can offer a potential analytical tool to understand how different actors position themselves within a social setting such as education (Felix

& Sikunder, 2023). *Position* is more static than *positioning*. While position is a rather static phenomenon, positioning can be defined as a more dynamic form of a social role (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999). It is the mechanism through which roles are accepted, affirmed, or denied (Davies & Harré, 1990).

Inspired by the views of Harré and Luk Van Langenhove (1999) and Bourdieu (2003), we define *position* as the beliefs and values and *positioning* as interaction, communication and role behaviour in a particular professional context.

PT helps to develop a deeper understanding of an individual's self and identity issues and explore how positioning or the practice of adopting positions shapes identities and in turn behaviour (Zelle, 2009: 2). PT frames approaches to examining the position and positioning relationships as dynamic and developing within and across time, events/episodes, and configurations of actors, social spaces, and social contexts (Green et al., 2020: 119).

In any given social context, numerous potential positions exist (McVee, 2011: 5). Social positions exist in social situations, sustain different orientations and perspectives, and can be relatively stable, consequential or relatively inconsequential, formal or informal (Gillespie & Martin, 2014). Social positions describe the social status (of practice) and are communicated to others through interaction, different symbols, choices and values (Bourdieu, 2003). Any field as a social space dictates behaviour and choice of position. Symbolic or actual positions, such as positions of power, for instance, can appear in any field (Bourdieu, 2003). According to position exchange theory, different positions can emerge in different social circumstances and relations (Martin & Gillespie, 2013).

Having taken up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines, and concepts that are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned (Davies & Harré, 1990: 46). Positions always have generic and specific situational aspects (Gillespie & Martin, 2014). For instance, reflexive positioning refers to how educators position themselves concerning learners and other professionals. Interactive positioning refers to when and how the educators position themselves in favour of or opposed to other agent positions and identity constructions (Davies & Harré, 1999).

A focus on positioning "opens up spaces for researchers to talk about the feelings, beliefs, motives, values, and actions that ultimately lead to real consequences for real people in the real world" (McVee, 2011: 15).

Various modes of positioning were identified by Harré and Van Langenhove: first order positioning, second order positioning, third order positioning, performative and accountive positioning, moral and personal positioning, self and *other* positioning, tacit

and intentional positioning (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999: 20). Based on PT (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré and Van Langenhove, 1991; Gillespie & Martin, 2014), McVee, Baldassarre and Bailey adapted previously identified positions and developed the following types of positioning: *self-other positioning* involves the positioning of both the self and the other. Self-other positions appear in social positions through different roles, which express how oneself and learners are understood and how oneself is constructed and positioned in relationships with others. Analysing roles will enable the discovery of modes of positioning related to role positioning. *Role-based positioning* refers to one's role as an educator or teacher and *static positioning* relates to beliefs that serve to reify a particular position and are articulated and adhered to over time. *Static positioning* could involve the repeated expression of particular ideas, beliefs, or values using this role as one way to position one's self (McVee, Baldassarre & Bailey, 2004). To summarise, we base our theoretical framework on the following considerations (Figure 1):

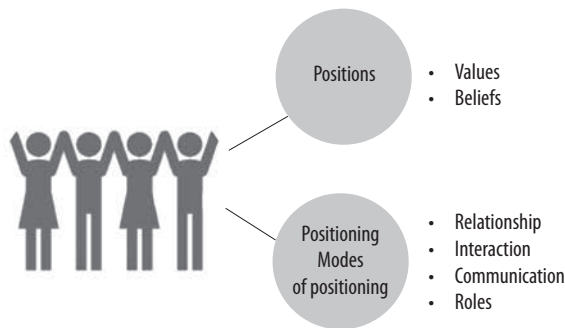


Figure 1. Theoretical framework
Source: own research.

- Any field, including adult and youth education as a social space, affects behavioural and positional choices;
- Positioning theory frames an analytical way of examining positions and positioning relationships to identify the positions and modes of positioning of educators across the empirical data;
- The position is the beliefs and values-based positioning in a particular professional context that individuals communicate to others through interaction;
- Social positions exist in social space, in different context and particularly in situations of change or crisis sustain different orientations, professional, personal, and future perspectives, roles, values, and beliefs;
- Social positions can be relatively stable, consequential or relatively inconsequential, formal or informal;

- Social positions have generic and specific situational/personal aspects and different modes;
- Positioning is the dynamic mechanism through which roles and social positions are assigned or denied based on relationship, communication and interactions;
- A non-formal learning context can be viewed as a professional practice and/or praxis taking place in the social space. The social space holds relations that shape and determine the different roles and social positions of educators. Roles are frames for positions.

Research design, data collection and sample groups

We used an exploratory research design to support the understanding of the phenomena (social positions) under analysis (Hunter, McCallum & Howes, 2019). Our qualitative exploratory research is positioned within the social constructivist paradigm, more specifically within the social constructionism approach (Gergen, 2009), as it looks from one side on how educators define and create their positions and professional roles. On the other side, it looks at the realities of practice constructed in interactions with others (Bourdieu, 2003; Gergen, 2009). The research process, data collection and analysis process consisted of two stages and was conducted before (2019-2020) and after the COVID-19 pandemic (2021-2022) as follow-up research (Figure 2).

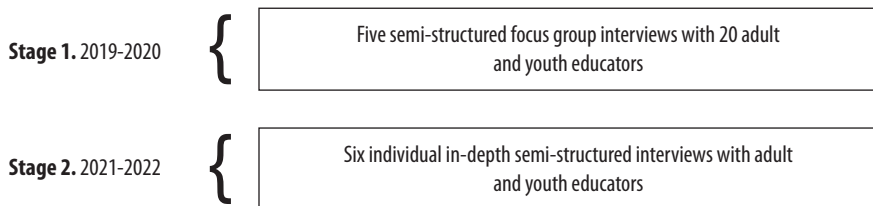


Figure 2. Research and data collection process
Source: own research.

Data collection and sample group

For the empirical data collection, we used two methods: the first stage – focus group interviews; and the second stage – in-depth semi-structured individual interviews. As there were major changes in the whole world starting in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and this also influenced how people learn and how professionals support learning processes, we found it important to proceed with the research to the second stage to understand whether the social positions of adult and youth educators had changed during the pandemic and how.

Focus group interviews

Data collection for the first stage was carried out during late autumn of 2019. During the first stage of the research we carried out five focus group interviews with 20 adult and youth educators working in different settings of non-formal learning. The focus group interview is traditionally seen as a dynamic social process where it is important to create an open and confidential situation for communication. We designed a focus group interview also with the aim to collect the data about the non-formal learning practice, professional context and roles of educators. In the focus groups, we as researchers acted as moderators and applied the less-structured approach, which is useful for exploratory research (Morgan, 1997: 12). The main questions for focus group interviews were related to non-formal learning contexts and the roles of educators. The focus group interviews started with a warm-up and proceeded to the main blocks of questions: the meanings of non-formal learning; the practice of non-formal learning; the roles of educator, environments and methods; and the perspectives of non-formal learning. All interviews had a final part for reflection.

Semi-structured interviews

Empirical data for the second stage was collected during the late summer and early autumn of 2021. Six in-depth semi-structured individual interviews with two adult and four youth educators were conducted via ZOOM video function, except for one interview which was conducted face to face. We started with the discussion around the results from Stage 1 (verification) and proceeded with the question blocks: how adult and youth educators identify themselves in their professional life; how they describe their social positions in light of the results from the first research stage; and how they describe their experiences of the practice during the COVID-19 period. All interviews were recorded as audio sessions and transcribed. To build rigour, the whole process of the research was carefully thought through from the research design phase and monitored during all stages of the research (*e.g.* including the triangulation of data, a saturation of data, external (between researchers) and internal verification (research stage 2) (Morse, 2018).

Data analysis

Through a qualitative analysis of the collected empirical data we explored and identified the social positions of educators and the modes of positions that shape their positioning.

The data analysis process took place during the two stages and was based on two methods of analysis: the thematic analysis (TA) method and the portrayal method

(Goodson, 2013). TA was used for analysing empirical data collected via focus groups (Braun & Clarke, 2012). One of the benefits of thematic analysis is its flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The TA aimed to explore the main themes from the data. Altogether 107 pages of transcribed texts from focus-group interviews were analysed manually. As an initial procedure, we reduced the data set and extracted those data that were relevant to the research question. A *theme* captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process was based on the coding strategy suggested by Virginia Braun & Victoria Clark (2012) and it includes six steps: 1) familiarising oneself with the data. The data from transcriptions was prepared for inductive and holistic analysis and was read carefully; 2) generating initial codes. The units of analysis were explored as segments for open coding; 3) searching for themes. The units provided the basis for a coding system and axial thematic coding was used; 4) reviewing themes. Initial thematic codes were generated; 5) defining and naming themes. Thematic codes were applied and analysed horizontally across the empirical material; 6) writing the analysis and producing a thematic map.

Semi-structured individual interviews were analysed using the portrayal method (Goodson, 2013). Altogether 79 pages of transcribed texts from the six in-depth interviews were analysed. The purpose of the analysis was to understand the positions, beliefs and values of educators through their narratives. Individual interviews were coded and pseudonyms were assigned: *Andreas (interview 1)*, and five women: *Maria (interview 2)*, *Helen (interview 3)*, *Eva (interview 4)*, *Madel (interview 5)*, and *Anne (interview 6)*. The portrayal stage of analysis consists of transcript analysis to develop thematic understandings. The portrayal method refines these general thematic analyses and presents them in the form of a detailed individual portrait (Goodson, 2013: 41). The analysis process was based on the next analytical procedures: reading through the transcripts in a slow, incremental manner; marking the main emergent themes on the transcript pages; identifying the major themes and employing some of these themes to construct individual portrayals (Goodson, 2013: 40-41). We used the portrayal method also as the method of presenting the results and wrote portraits using relevant datasets from the findings.

Sampling

The sampling strategy traditionally used in exploratory studies can be classed as purposeful (Hunter, McCallum & Howes, 2019). For the first stage the purposeful sampling method was chosen to find and recruit educators who would participate in the research, which aimed to understand how they construct, understand and practise non-formal

learning. The invitation to participate in the research was circulated through the Estonian Association of Adult Educators Andras (www.andras.ee) and several youth workers' organisations. Altogether 20 educators with experience of using non-formal learning in their everyday work responded from different parts of Estonia. Participation was informed and voluntary. Focus groups with youth workers and adult educators were held separately: three focus groups with adult educators from public and private organisations, coaches, adult educators, school directors and personnel specialists (AE1, AE2, AE3) and two focus groups took place with youth workers: youth workers from youth centres, educators from youth programmes, leaders of a professional association (YE1, YE2).

As with the second stage, the purposeful sampling method was used to find educators from different adult and youth education institutions, but the same participants who volunteered for the first stage of the research were not recruited as this stage was related to the validation of the findings (positions constructed) from the previous stage with other/new practitioners.

A purposeful sample group was formed from educators who voluntarily agreed to participate in the research and who had working experience during the COVID-19 pandemic and at least two years of previous professional experience to facilitate the comparison of their practice before and after the pandemic. This sample group consisted of six educators presented here by pseudonyms: one man, *Andreas*, and five women: *Maria*, *Helen*, *Eva*, *Madel*, and *Anne*. Their field of work is related to youth work and non-formal adult education with three to 20 years of professional experience.

Ethical considerations

We strictly followed The Code of Ethics of Estonian Scientists (International Council for Science, 2002) and the Estonian Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (Tallinn University, 2017) at all stages of our research. All participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research and their participation was voluntarily agreed upon. Informed written consent was given. Participants were reminded that they could stop the interview or the recording whenever needed, and also that they were free to step out of the research after the interview. All interviews were anonymised and in the individual interviews, pseudonyms were given. After the interviews were transcribed, the audio files were deleted. Extracts from the focus group interviews are identified here as adult educators with the number in the group (e.g. AE1), or youth educators with the number in the group (e.g. YE1). We coded individual interviews using pseudonyms and below, in the Findings section we present empirical examples of social positions as portraits with the names *Andreas*, *Maria*, *Helen*, *Eva*, *Madel*, and *Anne*.

Findings

Below we discuss the findings from the two stages of the data analysis process. Based on analysis of empirical data from the first stage we identified three groups of themes: 1) non-formal learning: *non-formal learning, collaborative and dialogical learning, learner as human, doing together, support, engagement, cooperation; dialogue*; 2) educator: *creator, being in dialogue, being a human, being a partner, being a noticer, being a confident questioner; being a communicator and supporter*; 3) beliefs and values: *trust, dialogue, safe learning, involvement, cooperation, responsibility, well-being of learners*. Analysis from the second stage emphasised the main roles and similar positions, beliefs and values of educators: *being a human, being a partner; supporter of emotional security, empathy, dialogue, engagement, trust, safe learning, professional ethics*. Analysis showed that the choice of positions is influenced by the different notions of non-formal learning and the beliefs and values of the educators. As a result of the two-stage analysis of the data, we highlight four main positions – *noticer and creator, partner, supporter of the development and confident questioner* and four modes of positioning: *rational, emotional, interactive and reflexive modes* (Figure 3).

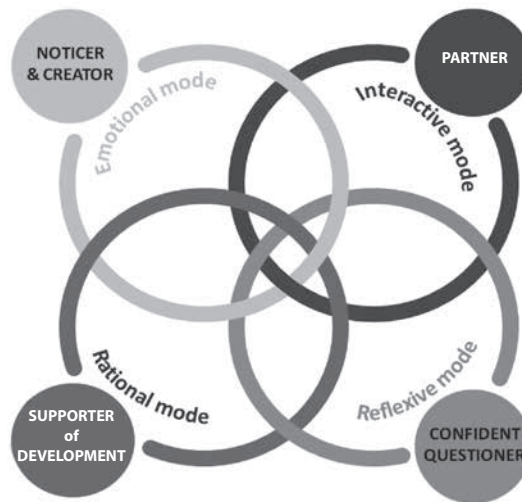


Figure 3. Positions and modes of positioning
Source: own research.

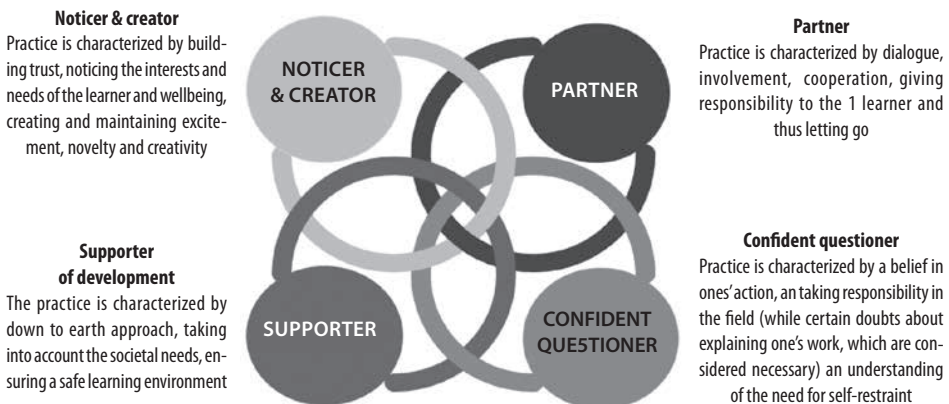
Positions and modes of positioning before the COVID-19 period

The first stage of the research showed that educators when positioning themselves in non-formal learning settings demonstrated strongly rational, reflexive, interactive and emotional modes, which are fluidly interlinked as well as connected to the four main

positions: *noticer and creator; partner; supporter of development; confident questioner* (Figure 3). The four main positions are role- and values-based and also maintain the self-other dimension.

The rational mode manifests attitudes and actions towards the society/community regarding their profession. The fluidity of the modes is best described by looking at *the emotional mode* of positioning: the emotional mode appears to be interlinked with the *interactive mode* as this was most evident in the connection to the learner. We stress the emotional mode separately, as it demonstrates the importance of certain professional values and principles mentioned above: relationship, trust and care. *The reflexive mode* contains meanings related to being aware of the learner's needs and their well-being, being conscious of personal and professional values, being aware of personal feelings and well-being. Also, questioning the educators' own professional practice emerges as one meaning that is related to the reflexive mode.

In the following, we present the thematic map (Figure 4) as the final result of the whole data analysis process and discuss the following positions of educators: noticer and creator, partner, supporter of development and confident questioner.



By PresentationGO

Figure 4. Final thematic map
Source: own research.

Noticer and Creator

Educators notice, support gently and step back when needed. They are usually not afraid of emotions, unexpected reactions, or even chaos. Educators strive to be human and pay attention to individuals and groups including group processes. By embodying

values of responsiveness and inclusivity, educators advocate for learner agency and empowerment, thereby contributing to the dynamic social field of education. This position emphasises the importance of attentiveness, collaboration, and empowerment in supporting the growth and aspirations of learners. The mode of this position is mainly emotional and also reflects the inner-dialogue of educators where the main focus is on the needs, dreams, emotions, fears and hopes of the learners.

It is essential to notice what young people are talking about...what they are secretly dreaming about, so that when they say 'we really want to try out this or that' you will create possibilities for them, or rather, with them, so they can make it a reality. (YE1)

The educator's approach is to address the emotional and psychological needs of learners, particularly those who have had negative experiences in formal education settings.

I have adults in my group who show no interest in learning because they have had bad experiences in school and their memories are so bad that they don't want to learn and in this kind of case non-formal learning becomes therapeutic in a way – it will take time though to overcome fears and start learning again... (AE3)

This demonstrates the educator's empathetic stance and commitment to creating a supportive learning environment, resonating with the emotional mode of positioning emphasised earlier. By acknowledging the therapeutic aspect of non-formal learning for individuals with past traumas, the educator positions themselves as sensitive to the emotional well-being of learners, which is integral to their practice.

Their practice is characterised by building trust, noticing the interests and needs of the learner and their well-being, creating and maintaining excitement, novelty and creativity.

Partner

Educators see themselves as partners who are in constant dialogue with their learners, so the main mode of the position is interactivity which appears in social relations with the learners and where the emotional aspect also plays an important role.

Non-formal learning for me is a dialogue, it's the simplest definition – dialogue. It's not a lecture, where only I talk, but I also listen and I want to know how people who are listening to me, react. (AE3)

In the partner position, the main values of the educators are trust, openness, and flexibility and the main task of the educators is to provide a suitable learning environment and opportunities for learning in the dialogue. The social process is valuable in itself, where the educator positions themselves in relation to learners as collaborators in the learning process.

The facilitator of the learning is more like a partner than a teacher looking from the top down – I'm not saying that every teacher is like this, but... we do those things together with the person. (YE2)

The educator perceives non-formal learning as a dynamic and interactive journey, resonating with the theoretical underpinnings of position theory. Emphasising dialogue, they underscore their role not as a mere lecturer but as a facilitator actively engaging in reciprocal exchange with learners. This concept aligns with interactive positioning, wherein educators position themselves as collaborative partners in dialogue with learners.

Their practice is characterised by dialogue, involvement, cooperation, giving responsibility to the learner and thus letting go of control over the learner.

Supporter of the development

Educators position themselves as cooperative, mostly self-confident, and sometimes critical. Self-confidence and criticism can come together: educators see the value they bring to society, but they feel a lack of social recognition in general. This position appears through the relations and benefits the work brings to society, realms created by the policies and relations towards actors in other fields.

The right to make decisions in the youth centres according to the local needs must remain, because local context is so different, for example, youth work in the city differs from youth work in a village.... and in my opinion, youth work cannot be narrowly framed, as it is so wide in content. (YE1)

Policies can direct but also limit activities –the activities 'ordered' by the policies can undermine the values described in the interactive position: for example, the value of the dialogical learning process. Educators expressed challenges encountered in implementing non-formal learning principles within a structured course on entrepreneurship. The frustration arises from the misalignment between the mandated curriculum, focused on crafting business plans, and the non-formal learning ethos, which prioritizes personalized, learner-centric methods tailored to individual backgrounds and needs.

It's not going well for me – I teach in non-formal learning, but when, for example, I have the course on entrepreneurship, it is usually filled with people sent by the Unemployment Insurance Fund and when there is a curriculum and an ambitious goal that at the end of the course they all have a good business plan. So, how am I supposed to use non-formal learning principles? I have to pay attention to the people and their needs and background. So, we struggle there together, which is definitely a characteristic of non-formal learning. But the groups of learners are very stimulating and they support each other in their development. (AE2)

The educator underscores the importance of being flexible and adaptable in addressing the varied needs and contexts present in youth work environments. This stance resonates with the supporter of the development position, which emphasises societal advantages and the ability to respond to policy limitations.

The practice in this position is characterised by a down to earth approach, for example, practical issues, such as ensuring a safe learning environment or securing funding for the activities. The practice takes or sometimes is forced to take into account societal needs and expectations, which may contradict the values and principles of non-formal learning.

Confident questioner

The educator's perspective reflects the role of facilitating self-directed learning, which aligns with the findings related to the confident questioner position. Professional principles of trust and self-directedness are fundamental to the confident questioner perspective. By advocating for a facilitative approach where educators empower learners to take ownership of their learning process, the educator positions themselves as confident questioners who trust in their learners' abilities. This highlights the reflexivity of the educator, as they critically reflect on their practice and embrace the idea of relinquishing control in the learning environment. This position appeared through relations to the profession of the educators, the professional identity, and perspectives of personal and collective professional growth. Self-trust, self-care, and self-directedness are discussed and the main professional value – trust (here also in one's own professional self) is stressed. The reflexive mode dominates in this position.

It's very clear to me, maybe because of the training I myself have attended lately, that as an educator you should be 'training from the back row' – meaning that you are not in front of the group, but somewhere in the back and you are orchestrating their self-learning [...] you are not dominant in the room and you may experience boredom even, but they are really learning and I think this is the place of development for educators – to have the courage to let go. (AE2)

Educators' positioning is shaped by their interactions with learners, colleagues, and broader social contexts, highlighting the relevance of these theoretical perspectives in understanding educational practices.

Their practice is characterised by a belief in one's actions, and taking responsibility for the development of the professional field, while at the same time, there are certain doubts about explaining one's work, although it is considered necessary.

Social positions of educators during the COVID-19 time. Portraits of Maria, Andreas, Helen, Eva, Madel, and Anne

In the second stage of the research, we wanted to know what are the social positions of educators and what are the changes in the positions during the COVID-19 crisis. The findings indicated that the same social positions appeared and were strongly

confirmed in educator's professional tasks, values, beliefs, dialogues and reflections of educators (Figure 5).

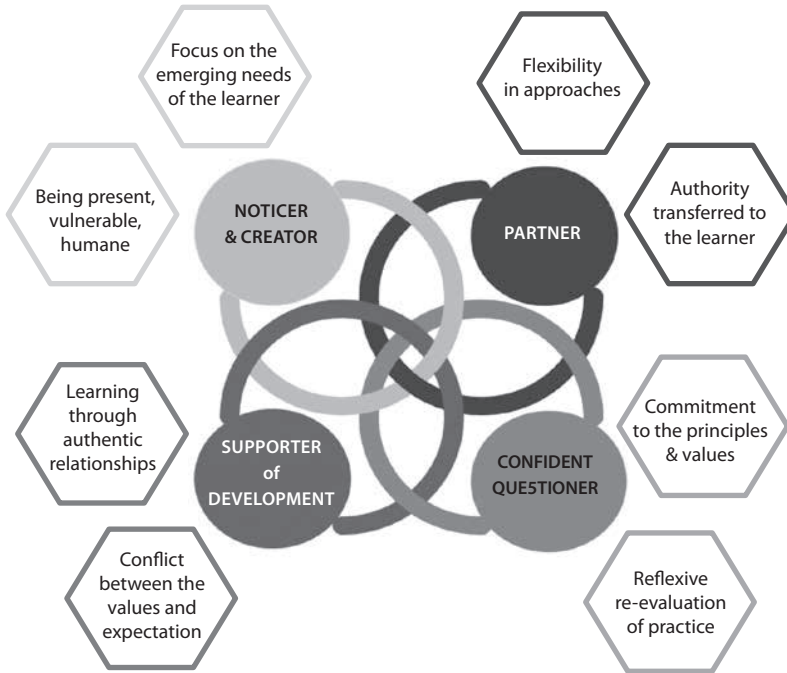


Figure 5. Manifestation of social positions
Source: own research.

Below we present the portraits of *Andreas, Maria, Helen, Eva, Madel and Anne* to illustrate their positions during COVID-19.

The analysis reveals that the most meaningful and essential position for *Andreas, Maria, Helen, Eva, Madel and Anne* is *being an equal partner in the learning process, being a human with a social mission*, and being an educator with professional values. *Partner position* was the main stance for developing identities and keeping social positions during the pandemic (*Madel*).

MADEL

Madel has been working as an adult educator for more than 20 years. The first and most important aspect of human contact was present in *Madel's* practice – *being a companion, an equal and an attentive partner for the learner in the learning process*.

Creating and maintaining relationships and an emotionally safe place is more substantial than the virtual tools or methods used. In the learning situation, dialogue and cooperation exist through involvement and engagement.

Madel identifies herself as a professional with a social mission, and therefore also acknowledges her responsibility for the field and her own well-being.

The position of partner is associated with the position of noticer and creator (Andreas and Eva) with a strong value of being a human. The main meanings of the partner position during the pandemic are related to quick adaptation, the ability to critically re-evaluate one's activities, flexibility in approaches and giving responsibility to learners in learning settings.

ANDREAS

Andreas found his calling in youth work over 5 years ago. Lockdown demanded quick adaptation and flexibility on the part of the youth worker, as well as a willingness to critically re-evaluate one's own activities, bringing to the fore the values and principles of youth work – entrusting young people with an active role in the implementation of activities.

The decisions and choices of a youth worker are guided by noticing and taking into account the needs of young people – to experience human contact and communication, togetherness and fun. The partner position is merged with the creator position, which at some level has been handed over to the young people themselves.

The position of a confident questioner is distinctly reflexive – Andreas asks critical questions about himself and about his practice and professional choices. This may be influenced by external pressures and expectations from others towards youth work that have raised questions about the professional identity and core values and principles of the youth worker.

The positions of being a partner, noticer and creator appeared in strong commitment, in the professional ethics of the educator, in trustable and close relationships with learners, in attention to learning and the learning needs of learners and flexibility of approaches (Eva, Maria).

EVA

Eva has been working in the open youth centre for over three years. The pandemic and the accompanying restrictions did not change the content of her work, only the channel of communication with young people changed. The focus was even more on the trusting relationship between the young person and the adult. The development and learning of the young person take place in everyday social situations through reflection and the example and behaviour of the youth worker.

The position of noticer is complemented by the role of partner, in which authenticity and equivalence are important – both the young and the youth worker are in the role of learner. The role of partner is intertwined with the position of supporter and facilitator of development – the youth worker sees and notices learning moments for young people when reflecting on situations, including those concerning her own life.

The confident questioner is primarily present through the feeling of responsibility towards young people and commitment as a professional, based on the values and nature of youth work even in precarious circumstances.

MARIA

Maria has 7 years of experience working in youth work as a hobby educator.

The initial confusion about organising one's work in the context of the crisis was quickly replaced by flexibility in methods and by adapting approaches to the needs of young people. Youth-centredness is a key principle in Maria's work. During the pandemic, in the facilitation of a learning process, the

focus switched from a subject-specific approach to noticing the emerging needs of a young person. Maria has the readiness and courage to step in the background and hand over space (also virtual space) to youngsters, sometimes just to interact with each other and share their feelings.

A strong commitment to the ethics of the profession is present – to do one's job well even if expectations from outside are not high or there is no clear awareness in the community about youth work and its opportunities and benefits.

The position of a supporter of development is associated with the position of a confident questioner. These positions were strongly confirmed during COVID-19 time (Helen, Anne) and appeared in readiness to support learners, in professional values, in a sense of mission and the importance of the foundation of the professional field. This position also appeared in supporting learning through authentic relationships and values of educators.

HELEN

Helen's pathway as a youth worker started as a young volunteer and youth leader, which led to working in the youth centre. The pandemic confirmed the importance of the foundation of youth work – in order to reach young people, use an environment and resources that are convenient and familiar to youth. In order to do so, a youth worker must be prepared to experiment and make mistakes, proceed from the situation and, if necessary, change his or her activities on an ongoing basis. In times of crisis, Helen was primarily driven by a professional sense of mission – to be there for young people, to offer support and understanding. At the same time, in the position of a confident questioner, there is a conflict with professional values and with the need to justify choices and make one's actions visible to the employer, as control and incomprehension about the content and activities of youth work are perceived.

The position of the supporter of the development integrates with the position of noticer-creator, when the learning moments arise primarily through open and authentic communication and the relationship with the youth worker.

The position of confident questioner is associated with the position of social partner and the position of supporter of the development of learners (Anne). Positions confirmed during the pandemic are based on the values of being a partner and acceptance of adult people as autonomous learners. Those positions appeared through a strong commitment to professional principles and values and interaction with the learners.

ANNE

Anne has been working as an adult educator for almost five years. Her journey was explorative and full of learning about herself and about the learners. She is currently studying adult education and writing a master's thesis. It is most meaningful for Anne to be a learning supporter and equal partner for her learners.

Variation of the learning environment and autonomy of the learners are the most visible values in her positioning as an educator. Building relationships and interacting with learners is important.

Being a listener and partner has become a significant position in the context of COVID-19. It is important to listen to learners and support their learning and adaptation.

Her positioning is interwoven throughout her whole story. She positioned herself as a social partner and supporter of the development of learners.

Different positions are intertwined in the practice and self-definition of adult and youth educators. However, the positions of Noticer, Creator, and Partner have become social and more prominent and central during the COVID-19 pandemic. These positions evolve and merge in various combinations within educators' practices, resembling a kaleidoscope that forms diverse patterns based on changing situations and learner needs. This dynamic combination demands courage, flexibility, and likely a clear value framework to navigate different positions and roles effectively.

Social positions interrelate, but contradictions can be seen, for example, between the sense of a professional mission and learner centredness versus societal expectations. Adult and youth educators see their practice as a value-driven practice – this has become even more crystallised during the pandemic.

Discussion

The findings yielded insights into the social positions and modes adopted by educators within non-formal learning contexts. We identified and presented four positions: noticer and creator, partner, supporter of the development, and confident questioner together with four modes of positioning: interactive, rational, reflexive, and emotional. The positions encompass a range of roles, values, beliefs, and assumptions that educators embody in their professional practice. The modes of positioning reflect the various ways in which educators engage with their positions and relationships within the non-formal learning context.

- The noticer and creator position emerged as a central aspect of educators' practice, characterised by an emotional mode that prioritised the needs, aspirations, and emotions of learners. Educators assumed the role of facilitators, crafting learning environments that nurtured creativity, trust, and compassion, showcasing dedication to tailored assistance and readiness to navigate the complexities of learners' journeys;
- In the partner position, educators situated themselves as co-creators engaged in dialogue with learners, emphasising interactive modes of engagement that valued trust, openness, and flexibility. This position highlights the significance of mutual relationships and participatory methodologies in learning, wherein educators surrendered control and embraced the collective duty of knowledge co-creation;
- The supporter of development position highlighted educators' involvement in larger societal landscapes and policy structures, as they managed the challenges arising from institutional mandates versus the principles of non-formal learning. Educators positioned themselves as advocates for context-driven decision-making

and responsive practices that addressed the diverse needs of communities, while also acknowledging the limitations imposed by external forces;

- The confident questioner position reflected educators' reflexivity and self-directedness, as they critically examined their roles and responsibilities within the field of non-formal education. Educators see themselves as agents of change who challenge traditional paradigms of teaching and learning models, embracing uncertainty and complexity as opportunities for growth and creativity.

The findings emphasise the dynamic and multifaceted nature of educators' positioning, which is influenced by personal and situational factors. Overall, the study sheds light on the diverse ways in which educators navigate their social positions and modes within non-formal learning contexts. Educators' different social positions and modes impact their approaches to learning, teaching and relationship-building. Through the different positions of engagement, educators contribute to the dynamic and evolving landscape of non-formal learning, shaping the experiences and trajectories of learners in meaningful ways.

Conclusion and implications for future research

We aimed to understand the social positions of educators and how the positions occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the main ideas of the field and positioning theories (Bourdieu, 2003; Davies & Harré, 1990; 1999) as an analytical frame for exploring and understanding the social positions of educators provided new perspectives for analysing positions and modes of positioning for educators in non-formal learning settings. The four main social positions of educators are formed and developed through professional experience and based on the values, beliefs and perceptions of the educators. The modes of positioning are role- and values-based and also include the self-other dimensions. There were no confusions or weakening of positions in the context of COVID-19, but rather positions were streamlined and strengthened. Two positions are particularly meaningful: being a partner and the positions of the noticer and creator, which crystallised even more and became in a way pre-conditions to fulfilling the position of supporting the development of the learners. Modes of positioning and the positions of the educators are coherent and displayed some similar patterns: for instance, the pattern of relations and interaction with the learners; the patterns of understanding adult learners and learning in non-formal learning settings. The educators also have common professional values and beliefs: trust, care, dialogical relationships.

The results from our research resonated with several previous studies (Vee, Brock & Glazier, 2011; Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2014; Green et al., 2020). For instance, in the study on the professionalism of teacher educators, positioning theory was combined

with the personal teaching interpretative frame of 12 educators. The results showed that each positioning constitutes a coherent pattern of normative beliefs and values about relations with learners and teaching practice (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2014: 125).

Even though a rational position is primarily visible and valued externally (by stakeholders, policymakers, *etc.*), in the non-formal learning setting, all positions are necessary from the practitioner's point of view. From a formal position in the educational field, where both adult education and youth work are related to the ideology of economic growth, interactive positions are not valued as much as rational ones. It is necessary that the social positions are recognised and endorsed in the field by institutions and stakeholders so that all the positions of practitioners have more opportunities for realisation.

The findings demonstrate that the pandemic strengthened the social aspects and value-based nature of adult education and youth work, with the interactive positions of educators being most prominent. By recognizing and understanding the diversity of social positions and modes present within the educational field, stakeholders can promote more inclusive and responsive practices that better meet the needs of learners and support their holistic development.

Using PT with dialogical or narrative analysis could provide a new perspective for exploring personal positions by applying the theoretical frame of Self-Other Positioning, Self-as-Other, Self-in-Other, Self-Opposed-to-Other, and Self-Aligned-with-Other (McVee, Baldassarre & Bailey, 2004: 285). According to the latest research (Rosenblad et al., 2020), adult and youth educators are key agents in developing learning opportunities for adults; therefore, their social positions, practice and values need to be one focal perspective for longitudinal research that helps us understand the social, psychological, personal and situational factors that impact the development of the positioning and social position of educators in non-formal learning settings. To strengthen research on the professional identity of educators in non-formal learning settings, positioning theory as a theoretical frame may bring new perspectives for analysing and supporting the professional identity and professionalism of adult and youth educators in the field of adult education and youth work.

We are fully aware of the limitations of our research and the findings of this study have to be seen in light of some limitations. For example, in the second stage of the study, we collected empirical data using ZOOM. This was unfamiliar and new for us and also for the interviewees and may have had some impact on the flow of the interviews. Other limitations were related to the interpretive method, where we used the portrayal method to present the results. As a result, we acknowledge that portraiture as a method of data presentation needs a more detailed explanations of the professional or personal context of the interviewee in future research.

Our research took place partly during the COVID-19 pandemic which was for us as researchers an unusual time with a huge number of ZOOM meetings, but it was also paradoxically a fruitful time for reflections, slow thinking and doing research in a particular way as we could not meet each other face to face. The whole process of our research including the writing of this paper allowed us to pay attention to and reflect upon our positions and modes of positioning as researchers and educators of adult and youth educators.

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