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## **'ADULT EDUCATORS' IDENTITY FORMATION FOR ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP THROUGH A BIOGRAPHICAL LEARNING PERSPECTIVE**

**ABSTRACT:** This paper, drawing from the narratives of two adult educators teaching at the 'Odysseus' solidarity school in Greece, aims to explore how their identities – as active citizens with a social justice orientation – have been constructed, and how these have shaped their educational practice for citizenship education. Informed by the discourse on critical active citizenship, the study employs a biographical approach and a Bakhtinian dialogical analysis of the data, which are presented under two main themes: life experiences prior to 'Odysseus' and the impact of identity on educational practice for citizenship education. The findings reveal that prior life experiences, the influence of relatives and friends, ideology, and participation in actions leaning towards social justice, have led to the formation of an identity oriented towards active citizenship. As a result, the educators, inspired by the principles of critical active citizenship, have created 'contexts of questioning' for their students that provoke critical thinking and action among learners. These contexts are necessary for students to break their silence, advocate for their rights through praxis, become emancipated, and transform society.

**KEYWORDS:** adult educators, identity formation, critical active citizenship, social justice, biographical perspective, 'contexts of questioning'.

### **Introduction**

The primary aim of this study is to explore the identity formation of adult educators at the 'Odysseus' Solidarity School, unveiling how their roles as active citizens and social justice advocates shape their teaching methods and influence citizenship education. It is guided by two main research questions: First, what integral life experiences and influences have built an adult educator's identity centered on active citizenship and social justice? Second, how has this formed identity affected their educational strategies and methods in the context of citizenship education?

The study addresses the lack of in-depth biographical research in this area (Dollarhide et al., 2016), both in Greece and internationally, and provides a unique and valuable perspective that contributes to the existing literature on identity formation (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Holeman, 2007; Caldwell & Vera, 2010; Dollarhide et al., 2016). Additionally, this research examines the identity formation of activist adult educators and its subsequent impact on their educational practice for citizenship education, as

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educators' practices are closely intertwined with the development of learners' citizenship (Lucio-Villegas & Fragoso, 2016; Holmes, 2020). In pursuing these goals, the study draws on the discourse on critical active citizenship and leverages the biographical narratives of two adult educators who promote active citizenship through their educational practice at 'Odysseus' Solidarity School, established for migrants, refugees, repatriated individuals, and locals who wish to learn new languages.

Hence, the research reported here aims to contribute to the theoretical discourse on identity formation among adult educators, particularly those inclined toward social justice. By examining the intersection of an educator's identity with their pedagogical approach, this work aspires to enhance our understanding of how critical pedagogy and active citizenship can be integrated into educational practices for societal betterment. Throughout this paper, a steadfast focus on the stated aims and research questions is maintained, ensuring that the findings and the discussion are tightly aligned with the objectives outlined in the introduction.

In what follows, the key terms and conceptual framework of the study are articulated, followed by a discourse on the life experiences through the lens of biographical learning. Subsequently, the research context and methodology are delineated, including participant selection and vignette construction. The data are analyzed in a dialogical format, informed by Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981; 1984) concept of dialogism and the method of *métissage* (Barkoglou & Gravani, 2020: 129), which facilitates a nuanced comprehension of identity formation and its reverberations on educational practice through a substantive, dialogical presentation of the educators' narratives. The paper concludes with a discussion that reflects on the posited questions and deliberates on the implications of the research findings.

### **Keys terms and conceptual framework**

The research is grounded in two main terms: *identity formation* and *active citizenship*. As for the former, it is widely accepted that identity formation is a complex process that is closely linked to social interactions (Woodward, 2004) and involves various factors such as cultural norms, and personal experiences (Barabasch & Merrill, 2014). Erik Erikson (1959) described identity as a dynamic process between the self and community. Consequently, it is constructed and performed, rather than being an essential and possessed trait. Additionally, given that individuals are part of a social context, identity formation cannot be studied in isolation from the social context in which it is developed, shaped, and projected (Wenger, 1998). For this reason, in the current study, the process of identity formation is examined within the context of social, educational, and familial influences that have contributed to its development.

The concept of *active citizenship* emphasizes citizens' active participation and involvement in society. It also encompasses broader dimensions, including transnationality and social and cultural capital (Olson et al., 2015). The study examines adult educators' active citizenship as it has emerged from their narratives. Adult educators participate in social and political life, while also demonstrating respect for human rights and democracy. Active citizenship requires both respect for democratic principles and active participation of citizens in the social and political process, which ultimately leads to the development of civil society (Manca, Mascherini & Hoskins, 2009; Canivez, 2010). By encouraging citizens to engage in their communities and take an active role in shaping their societies, it also aims to strengthen democratic institutions and promote a more inclusive, just, and participatory society (Olson et al., 2015).

The conceptual framework of this study is informed by the discourse on *critical active citizenship*, particularly by the ideas developed by Joel Westheimer & Joseph Kahne (2004), Laura Johnson & Paul Morris (2010), and James A. Banks (2017). Diverse concepts of active citizenship are put forth by their ideas, such as minimal approaches that include actions that characterize someone as a 'good citizen' (e.g., paying bills, obeying the law); participatory citizenship, in which people actively engage in their communities by volunteering and assuming leadership positions (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004); and maximal approaches, where citizens prioritize social justice, challenge the structural elements that support injustices, and work to make society a better place (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Johnson & Morris, 2010). Banks (2017) refers to this type of citizenship as *transformative citizenship*, Johnson and Morris (2010) as *critical citizenship*, and Westheimer and Kahne (2004) as *justice-oriented citizenship*.

According to Johnson and Morris (2010), *critical citizenship education* "is based on the promotion of a common set of shared values" (Johnson & Morris, 2010: 77), such as critical thinking, tolerance, diversity, human rights, social justice, and democracy, to enable students to imagine a better society. In pursuit of *social justice-oriented citizenship*, individuals seek to address the underlying causes of social issues rather than merely providing temporary solutions. This approach aims to effectively resolve problems rather than perpetuate them, ultimately contributing to a more just society. Although each approach differs slightly, their common point is the connection of citizenship education with Critical Pedagogy (Holmes, 2020). This maximal approach is consistent with our understanding of critical active citizenship, which includes the critical analysis of society and aims at more social justice.

The conceptual framework adopted rests on the assertion that education should empower individuals to enact change, critically analyze social constructs, and advocate for justice and equity. It informs not only our understanding of what constitutes active citizenship but also shapes our research design and methodology. In the study,

we explore how individuals engaged in lifelong learning practices conceptualize and embody the principles of critical citizenship. The aim is to shed light on the ways in which identity is shaped by – and can shape – active engagement in social causes. Having discussed the main terms and conceptual framework, what follows is the presentation of the biographical approach adopted in the study.

### **Life experiences through a biographical learning perspective**

A qualitative research methodology that aligns with social constructivism and critical theory has been adopted for this research. In particular, since the research focuses on experiences, a biographical approach was chosen (Merrill & West, 2009). This can contribute to a deeper understanding of life experiences within specific environments while creating an egalitarian relationship between the researcher and the narrative actors, always within a specific historical, social, and cultural context (Creswell, 2012; Merrill, 2020).

The biographical approach is particularly useful as it recognizes that every individual conceives, interprets, and acts upon social realities and experiences in a unique, subjective way. The subjective perspective that individuals use to narrate their lives can reveal the depth and meaning they attribute to significant events (Merrill, 2019; 2020). Life stories are authentic narrations of individuals (Alheit, 1995; Merrill & West, 2009), and they help the researcher understand the actors' relationship with society, as the individual is always rooted in a specific historical, cultural, and social context (Lune & Berg, 2017).

Barbara Merrill and Linden West (2009) discuss the origins of the biographical method, which can be traced back to oral tradition stories and feminist research. They point out that this method is often used to give a voice to marginalized individuals who might otherwise be ignored (Merrill & West, 2009; Creswell, 2012), and to challenge mainstream assumptions with the goal of promoting a more socially just society. According to Merrill and West (2009), this method uniquely reveals the complexity and inequality of people's everyday lives, both individually and collectively. It helps to hear the voices of those who live in obscurity and serves as evidence of oppression, particularly in cases where oppressive regimes make it problematic or perilous to document oppression through quantitative research (Lune & Berg, 2017).

The biographical method anchors the research in the formation and transformation of identity (Bron & Thunborg, 2017). It begins with an exploration of narratives that reflect on individuals' experiences, concentrating on how people form and transform various identities throughout their lives. Additionally, this method examines the

relationship between individuals' social backgrounds and their experiences of participation in different contexts (Thunborg & Bron, 2019).

The biographical method offers a unique lens through which to connect the personal and social dimensions, as people's explanations and interpretations of their actions can elucidate their interactions with society. Merrill (2020) has noted that individual lives can narrate collective stories, revealing issues of inequality related to class, gender, nationality, and education. This approach demonstrates how personal experiences can be transformed into political narratives, contributing to a broader understanding of societal issues (Wright, 1970). As Michael Rustin (1998) highlights, individuals' descriptions of their engagement with society offer a window into the interconnection of personal and societal dynamics, affirming the biographical method's significance in fostering a more equitable society.

Peter Alheit (2005) has emphasized that life stories are an integral part of our daily existence as they shape our individuality and allow us to comprehend our position within society through narratives. He asserts that life stories "constitute the individuality of the self" (Alheit, 2005: 202). This extensive application of life stories is a result of postmodernism's influence, which prompts people to participate in the ongoing evolution of their identities (Merrill & West, 2009).

David Miller (2001) suggests that the biographical method can enhance the researcher's social identity as they engage in dialogue with various 'selves' from the past, present, and future, lending the research a biographical nature. Characterized by West and Laura Formenti's allegory of 'fragments' (Formenti & West, 2018), the use of biography in research with its specifically 'hermeneutic technique' (Denzin & Lincoln eds., 2011) shapes researchers' social, historical, and cultural perspectives, as Merrill and West point out (2009).

The biographical research method focuses on the human experience and places significant importance on how individuals interpret their own experiences. It regards meaning and subjectivity as essential elements of people's identities (Merrill, 2019). Additionally, it provides researchers and adult educators with a profound understanding of the complexities of adult learning in a cooperative and egalitarian manner (Merrill, 2020).

In conclusion, it is apparent that this method is particularly well-suited for recording experiences, views, and opinions about the self from the study's participants. While this method may concentrate on the individual, it is important to note that the individual is integrated within a specific historical, cultural, and social context (Barabasch & Merrill, 2014). In a particular way, this method addresses inequality and oppression and aims to advance social justice. Therefore, biographical research is not

merely a neutral research method; it is also inherently political, as argued by feminist and critical researchers (Merrill, 2020).

### **Research context and process**

This paper draws on the life stories of two adult educators. It may be useful to offer a first general contextual understanding of the profile of adult educators in the country: there is a low degree of professionalization, with very little focus on their education and vocational training. They constitute a diverse group with a wide variety of qualifications and are typically employed based on their first-degree subject knowledge. The onus is on individuals to seek training in adult teaching and learning. The two adult educators in this study are no exception. They teach voluntarily at ‘Odysseus’ Solidarity School in Thessaloniki, Greece. This institution provides opportunities for migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and repatriated adults to learn new languages and acquire Greek citizenship. The school is more than just a language teaching and certification hub; it also encourages socialization, cultural exchange, articulation, and creativity. ‘Odysseus’ is entirely supported and operated by volunteers committed to the principles of social solidarity and justice, with the school’s main goal being to craft an environment where learners can develop a critical stance towards social inequality.

Our research methodology was precisely designed to yield a comprehensive, contextual understanding of the two adult educators’ identity formation. Data were collected in 2021 via biographical interviews over May and June. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who constituted a varied, yet pertinent cross-section of adult educators involved in citizenship education. The selection criteria included years of experience in education, demonstrated involvement in social justice initiatives, and a readiness to contemplate their personal and professional paths, making this method especially apt for an in-depth examination of identity formation processes.

Rigorous ethical standards were observed in the application of this study. Participants were apprised of the research’s aims and their life stories’ centrality before initiating interviews. Consent forms, outlining the study’s objectives, methods, potential risks, and advantages, were furnished and signed, thereby ensuring informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained with strict adherence through the employment of pseudonyms and the redaction of personal data in the collected accounts. Educators had the liberty to select interview venues that afforded them the greatest comfort. Recordings of interviews were executed with high-quality equipment to guarantee unambiguous audio, which was crucial for precise transcription.

Our operational definitions of ‘active citizenship’ and ‘social justice advocacy’ steered the data collection process. While specific questions were not posed, this allowed

educators to narrate their experiences and reflections freely. Within the context of the solidarity school, active citizenship was associated with actions and attitudes fostering democratic engagement, critical reflection, and active participation in civic life. Social justice advocacy was linked to educator practices and philosophies aiming to challenge and redress inequalities within society and the educational system.

The analysis employed a tripartite approach, starting with data reduction – filtering and summarizing the narrative data – followed by data display, which organized the information methodically. Subsequently, thematic interpretation took place, with researchers delving into the interview data to identify overarching themes. This step involved coding the data, guided by established methodologies such as Linda Evans' (2002) categorization process and Bakhtin's (1981; 1984) concepts of dialogism, which augmented the narrative analysis.

A cornerstone of our methodology was the ethical management of data, from secure storage to restricted access, ensuring the protection of participant information. Following the interviews, transcripts were returned to the educators for review, providing an opportunity to request changes to any sections they felt were inaccurately represented. Before publication, participants had the chance to review the final drafts, confirming that their viewpoints were authentically portrayed.

This transparent method not only upheld the highest ethical standards but also enhanced the credibility of our findings. By including participants in the data verification process, we affirmed that their identities and experiences were portrayed with the highest level of precision.

### **The participants' vignettes**

In the study examining the identity formation of adult educators involved in citizenship education at Odysseus' Solidarity School, vignettes were utilized to present findings, with the aim of capturing the intricate nuances of experience and context. These narrative constructions are strategically crafted to distill complex phenomena into accessible, relatable, and ethically responsible accounts that resonate with readers, both within and beyond the academic sphere. By offering vivid depictions of real-life situations, vignettes enhance the thematic richness of the data, underscoring elements such as civic engagement, democratic participation, and educational equity. This approach not only reflects the educators' lived experiences but also provides clarity and depth that shed light on the intersecting dimensions of their professional practices and personal identities (Erfanian et al., 2020).

The inclusion of vignettes in the analysis transcends simple description; it fosters engagement, prompting a critical and insightful discourse that links theoretical ideas with

empirical observations. They engender an interactive narrative space where researchers and readers can jointly explore the complexities of adult educators' experiences. These poignant vignettes also function as pedagogical devices, encouraging reflection and application in educational contexts, thereby underscoring the practical significance of our study's results on teaching practices and advocacy for social justice. Employing this methodological tool ensures that the voices of practitioners at the forefront of citizenship education are heard distinctly, portraying their efforts and adversities with the respect and prominence they merit (Erfanian et al., 2020).

### **John**

John is a man in his 40s who was born and grew up in a small town in the prefecture of Thessaloniki. He has a degree in Literature from the University of Ioannina and has been teaching the Greek language in secondary education since 2004. From his teenage years, John has taken on positions of responsibility, such as managing the municipal library of his hometown and overseeing radar management in the navy a few years later. He has held a position of responsibility at the Odysseus Solidarity School since 2009, and in 2019, he was elected as a municipal councillor in the municipality of Thessaloniki.

A passionate reader, John reads about 50-60 books per year and has been writing articles and book reviews for 'Marginalia' online magazine since 2017. He has contributed to two collectively edited volumes on democracy and migration. He is actively involved in political action and identifies himself as a "man of the movements" and a "radical leftist". John has participated in numerous demonstrations relevant to the education sector and society at large, including anti-war protests and the Indignant Citizens Movement.

His role at Odysseus introduced him to anti-racist movements in Thessaloniki, leading him to become a member of the 'Anti-racist Initiative'. He served as a municipal councillor for sixteen months. John envisions a better society marked by social justice and equality and strives to contribute toward this goal through his professional work. He believes in the emancipatory power of education and its capacity to empower those oppressed by the ruling classes.

### **Maria**

Maria is a woman in her 40s, married, and the mother of a young girl attending primary school. She has been a Greek language teacher in secondary education in Thessaloniki since 2008. Born in a provincial city in Northern Greece, Maria's childhood and adolescence were spent in an environment devoid of cultural activities, limiting her intellectual and artistic stimulation. She was educated within an exam-centered system where her teachers did not present alternative ways of thinking beyond the curriculum.



Upon entering the Faculty of Philosophy at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Maria encountered new ideas, including those of Marx, which she found intriguing. In her third year, she noticed a poster in the faculty library advertising the Erasmus program, which prompted her to apply. This led her to Florence for six months, a stay she extended by four months, until the pressure from her parents to complete her university diploma brought her back to Greece.

Her experience in Florence was fulfilling; she took joy in her roles as a saleswoman and waitress, despite them being unrelated to her studies. In 2016, Maria moved to Germany with her two-year-old daughter to teach Greek in schools for expatriates. She returned to Greece in 2017 and later relocated to Cyprus for two years due to her husband's job, before ultimately settling in Thessaloniki.

While in Cyprus, Maria began a doctorate in Adult Education, which she has since completed. Through her doctoral research, she became acquainted with the Odysseus Solidarity School and, a year later, chose to teach there voluntarily, committed to the school's mission. Her goal was to foster a learning environment where students could cultivate and enact a critical stance toward social inequality.

### **A dialogic presentation of the analysis of the narratives**

In what follows, a space is created for a plasmatic dialogue and exchange between John's and Maria's narrative constructions, viewed through the researchers' lens. The dialogical analysis of these two narratives provides a valuable means to delve deeper into how the participants' significant experiences have informed their identity development. Presented under the common themes that emerged from the analysis are excerpts from the educators' narratives which encompass experiences prior to their involvement with Odysseus and the influence of their identities on educational practices in citizenship education. Instead of compartmentalizing themes into discrete units, the coded themes are critically examined in the context of the participants' overall life stories. These themes are perceived as reflections of the biographers' narratives that interact with their identities, offering a holistic understanding of their experiences (Barkoglou & Gravani, 2020).

#### ***Experiences prior to 'Odysseus'***

Life experiences prior to their involvement with Odysseus played a significant role in shaping the identity, perspectives, and social positioning of the two educators – active democratic citizens – participating in the study. Research has underscored the profound impact that parents, relatives, and significant others can have on children's behavior, especially regarding acts of altruism. Childhood experiences are particularly

influential in determining an individual's propensity to become actively engaged in society (Holeman, 2007), a theme that is also apparent in the current research study.

In his biographical narrative, John stated that his thinking was heavily influenced by left-wing ideology. During his teenage years, he spent time with a group of leftist university students who had reopened a municipal library in a suburb of Thessaloniki. Engaging with them in political and social discussions significantly impacted John. This exposure to left-wing ideology and culture was "enlightening", in his words:

**John:** "In high school, I had an enlightening experience... I befriended some older university students... They reopened the municipal library... They were people with social concerns... people who stood out with their ideas, opinions, and ideology... They transformed the Library into a space where thought-provoking conversations took place".

It is clear from John's narrative that his political beliefs profoundly shaped his actions. He consistently connected his stories to his political stance, highlighting the role of politics in shaping human behavior. His family's ideological views, the left-wing music he listened to in his youth, and the political discussions at family gatherings all contributed to his ideological development.

**John:** "At family gatherings, my parents and relatives always discussed socio-political issues... I often argued with my father, who had a right-wing perspective. Once, he shouted at me angrily, questioning, 'Where did you learn all these communist ideas?'"

Bert Klandermans (2013) recognizes ideological motivations in individuals' active participation whenever a cause aligns with their values and beliefs. This means that they ascribe political meaning to the social problems they confront. For John, his ideological motivations have been molded by his upbringing and life experiences. He grew up listening to left-wing music, despite his father's right-wing leanings. During his teenage years, he spent time with university students who held social concerns and left-wing views. Later, as a university student himself, he engaged with left-wing factions, which steeped him in leftist ideology and philosophy; these have influenced his political identity.

**John:** "...I successfully entered the University of Ioannina, the School of Philosophy and Philology... There, I encountered more politicized ideas... I soon joined the left-wing political movement, the 'United Independent Left Movement.' It was during this time that my politicization and exposure to left-wing ideology occurred... I started reading a lot of literature... I think that... my political identity has been shaped more by literary readings than by classic leftist texts..."

Furthermore, as a teacher, he has been actively involved in left-wing collectives, protests, and marches as a trade unionist. He has also been a long-standing member of the "Anti-Racist Initiative".

**John:** "...When I was appointed to the school, I became part of the educational left-wing group 'Interventions'... It led to even further politicization... In 2009, I participated in the major strike with other teachers. Through 'Interventions', and perhaps more so through 'Odysseus', I became familiar with the city's anti-racist movements... I joined the 'Anti-Racist Initiative'... 'Odysseus' consistently supports anti-racist festivals... In 2011, amidst the economic crisis, I got involved with the 'Indignant Citizens Movement' here in Thessaloniki and took an active role in demonstrations. Since then, a period of intense mobilization began, especially between 2014 and 2015.

Winnifred R. Louis et al. (2016) emphasize that identity formation can be influenced by various factors such as political ideology, affiliations with certain groups, and societal engagement. In the case at hand, it is clear that the individual's identity was developed through interactions with Leftists during his youth, his Left-wing ideologies, and his active societal engagement.

**John:** "...I have always thought that everyone should do something to help society... Especially the Left should work harder to bring about social change".

Similar to John's biographical narrative, Maria's story makes it clear that her upbringing and family significantly influenced her aspiration to develop the identity of an active citizen. This aligns with findings by Colette T. Dollarhide et al. (2016), who also highlights the importance of these factors. Maria recounted two childhood instances when her parents and grandmother selflessly provided help to those in need for years, without seeking recognition or reward.

**Maria:** "I always remember my grandmother helping her elderly godmother by visiting her every afternoon for years to clean her house and bring her food, without being asked and without compensation".

Additionally, her parents served as good role models by assisting a young abandoned boy and instructing Maria and her siblings to be respectful, non-discriminatory, and just.

**Maria:** "In our neighborhood, there was a boy abandoned by his parents, left with his grandmother... the grandmother wasn't very well and couldn't take care of him properly. He grew up thanks to the care of the village people... Often, we hosted this boy at my parents' house because he was my brother's friend. My parents used to send him money for many years...even after he became an adult".

It has been suggested that adult experiences play a crucial role in developing an identity characterized by active participation (Schuman, Corning & Schwartz, 2012). Susan B. Hyatt (1996) also notes that these experiences can lead to becoming an 'accidental activist'. Maria, for instance, was inspired by the volunteers who assisted her father during his illness. While she wanted to join the volunteer team at that time, her participation was declined due to her emotional involvement. This experience reinforced her commitment to support others selflessly.

**Maria:** "...Since then, I think I've always had these words subconsciously in my mind... and I've always tried to help others free of charge to repay the kindness".

In conclusion, the narratives of John and Maria demonstrate that the influence of family, friends, education, and ideology contributes to their active engagement in promoting a more just society and fostering a social justice-oriented identity. These stories confirm research by Jennifer C. Caldwell and Elizabeth M. Vera (2010) and Dollarhide et al. (2016) on the development of an identity geared toward active citizenship for social justice.

### ***Impact of identity on educational practice for citizenship education***

In both narratives, the impact of the participants' identities on their educational practices for citizenship education has been highlighted. Informed by Freirean ideas and critical pedagogy, the participants believe that learners should engage fully in actions. They encourage students, through organizations like 'Odysseus', to break their silence, fight for their rights through praxis, become emancipated, and transform society. According to Peter Mayo (2013) and Maria Olson et al. (2015), one of the most effective ways to learn about democracy is to experience it through active participation in school. The educators' discourses reveal that they act as change agents by empowering learners' active involvement in school.

John has held a position of responsibility in 'Odysseus' for years and has organized the school as a socio-political space that provides opportunities for active citizenship experiences.

**John:** "...I remember an engaging course I taught about schooling in Greece in the past... Through analyzing Kazantzakis' 'New Pedagogy,' participants shared their schooling experiences. It was fascinating to hear the diverse perspectives of migrant students from around the world... with stories differing from corporal punishment to its absence. [...] What sets 'Odysseus' apart isn't just the educational component, or how the lesson is organized, but its role as a social space. The activities before and after classes – outdoor events, excursions, museum visits, meetings, parties, dance nights, Christmas celebrations – all contribute to bringing students closer..."

Maria views 'Odysseus' as a "community" comprised of immigrants, refugees, and locals who co-exist and cooperate peacefully.

**Maria:** "I see 'Odysseus' as a community where everyone co-exists and takes part in self-directed activities. It's a team... a community... where one supports the other. This engagement suggests some degree of change".

Both educators place importance on integrating students' personal experiences into the educational process. John selects course materials that encourage students to share

experiences and voice their opinions. Maria incorporates her adult students' personal experiences and interests as central to her teaching approach.

**John:** "Adults, more than anyone, come with a wealth of experiences that can't be ignored as if they were 'tabula rasa'..."

**Maria:** "...As I'm also involved in Adult Education, I've tried to apply the theories I've been learning. Mostly, I've worked to incorporate their personal experience during the lessons. I was very interested in having them transfer traditions and practices from their own countries. My goal has been to highlight and enhance the intercultural element in the classroom".

Furthermore, both educators encourage their learners to read and reflect on newspaper articles and literary texts to raise awareness of social issues. The courses they teach carry political and social significance, so personal experiences and opinions are highly valued. By doing this, they foster critical consciousness and urge learners to engage in critical thinking, reflection, and praxis to become agents of change. They also employ dialogue as a tool to develop thoughtful, active, and critical citizens. It is evident that both educators strive to foster the right conditions for critical thinking and dialogue, which lead to the development of emancipatory knowledge essential for active citizenship.

Maria has worked to transform learners into active citizens by "creating contexts of questioning" and discussing various public concerns that relate to their everyday lives throughout the course. As a result, her students may become more critically conscious, explore the underlying causes of social problems, and take action to help resolve them.

**Maria:** "...I provide them with local newspaper articles, and together we delve into issues that impact all of us. I remind them that even if some haven't obtained Greek citizenship yet, we are still all members of this society, and there are issues that affect everyone. For instance, one of my recent lessons centered on the construction of the subway in the city of Thessaloniki and the potential destruction of the cultural heritage beneath. My questions were: To what extent will this subway change our lives? Should we disregard the archaeological findings underground or not?...Are you concerned about this matter? You aren't Greek, and you may not feel it concerns your ancestors, but you live here now... I can assure you that my students presented very interesting perspectives on these questions..."

Maria's narrative also emphasized her desire to cultivate autonomous and critical thinkers, fostering students who form their own opinions on various matters. Moreover, she expressed her goal of nurturing citizens who possess social conscience, a sense of solidarity, and respect for diversity.

**Maria:** "[...] What interests me most – what I strive to provide as much as I can – are stimuli that provoke critical thought...something I perhaps lacked during my student

years [...] It's about learning how to think, to be creative and innovative...to feel that you're part of this world [...] Above all, I believe that it's crucial for my students to see themselves as active citizens”.

John, conversely, employs a text-based approach using ideologically charged texts to prompt learners to reflect on social issues and to foster independent, critical thinking skills. This method encourages learners to seek the root causes of social problems and to work towards solutions, thereby enabling them to become active members of society. John often tasks his migrant students with writing reports to articulate their views.

**John:** “...I utilize a text-based approach, which includes articles from press releases or the internet, songs, or literature. This helps me address both language and students’ communicative needs. I select ideologically charged texts because I believe they are provocative and assist students in expressing their viewpoints”.

As a result, his educational practices also carry social and political significance.

**John:** “...My classes have social implications. Since my own approach is politicized, I tend to steer discussions in that direction... And of course, learning extends beyond the classroom – we make social connections...often going out for meals, for instance...”

In conclusion, in line with the definitions of critical citizenship education set forth by Westheimer & Kahne (2004), Johnson & Morris (2010), and Banks (2017), which advocate for fostering a commonality of values such as critical thinking, tolerance, diversity, human rights, social justice, and democracy to envision a better society, both participants in this study impart these principles and goals to their adult learners.

## **Discussion and concluding remarks**

The study aimed to examine, through a biographical approach, how adult educators, who are themselves active citizens, have constructed their identities and how these identities have influenced their educational practice. Previous research dating back to the 1960s by David L. Westby & Richard G. Braungart (1966) and Kenneth Keniston (1968) highlighted the role of experiences and the social environment in developing an identity characterized by active participation. This aligns with the findings of the present study, where the narratives of the adult educators underscore the pivotal role of personal experiences and influential individuals in their identity development. Specifically, the data confirmed that past experiences play a crucial role in shaping an identity oriented towards active citizenship for social justice (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Both interviewees involved in active civic participation emphasized the significance of their childhood experiences in making them active citizens. This also corroborates research by Heidi J. Holeman (2007), Caldwell & Vera (2010), and Dollarhide et al., (2016) on identity formation. They identified life experiences, friends, family, siblings,

ideology, and active involvement in actions that promote social justice as indicators of the development of a social-justice identity.

Additionally, in both narratives, it is clear that the educators' identities played a pivotal role in their educational practices for citizenship education. The methods implemented at the 'Odysseus' Solidarity School provided learners with opportunities to experience active citizenship, as suggested by researchers (Mayo, 2013; Olson et al., 2015) in their research about the role of the curriculum in promoting active citizenship. The 'Odysseus' curriculum is designed to promote active citizenship by providing learners with hands-on opportunities to engage in citizenship at school. Educators use a text-based approach to prepare learners to tackle societal issues. They organize festivals, exhibitions, educational trips, and run a theater group to help learners understand and appreciate various cultures, while treating them as members of a community – the community of the 'Odysseus Solidarity School. Through its educational offerings, 'Odysseus' aims to humanize society by teaching migrant students how to act democratically and effect changes in social and political contexts beyond their individual lives, as Paulo Freire (1994) advocated.

Currently, we are facing uncertain and unprecedented times marked by a variety of social, political, and economic challenges. Consequently, there is a growing need for active citizenship education that aims to develop active, critical, global citizens committed to human rights and social justice. Recent research, drawing on the principles of critical pedagogy, suggests that identity is socially constructed and continually evolving. It also underscores the significant role of adult educators in cultivating a more democratic, equitable, and just society.

This research advocates that identity is a constructivist concept. Identities are not fixed or predetermined traits; they develop at certain points in an individual's life and continue to evolve throughout their lifespan. The research emphasizes that identity is not innate but involves continual individual transformation. Life experiences are highlighted as playing a crucial role in the formation of identity. However, due to the complexity and importance of identity formation, further research in this area is essential.

Additionally, the adult educators involved in the current study did not address issues related to continuing education, professional development, and state support. This gap may reflect an implicit acknowledgment of the limited support for adult education provided by the Greek state, particularly in educating vulnerable adults. A more comprehensive investigation into this specific issue would be beneficial. Given the scarcity of research on this topic in both Greek and international contexts, it is critical to explore, in more detail and with a larger, more diverse sample, the impact of life experiences on educators' identity formation.

In summary, we view critical active citizenship education as an approach that engenders a robust commitment to creating a fair, equal, and inclusive society. This requires a profound understanding and analysis of real societal issues, leading to impactful civic engagement. While we acknowledge the challenges of achieving this form of active citizenship, our aim is to set high standards and to investigate and propose educational methods and strategies that foster the development of individuals as active citizens who advocate for social justice.

In concluding this paper, it should be noted that while the study reported here provides valuable insights into the identity formation of adult educators and their resultant pedagogical approaches, it is subject to certain limitations. The study's sample size and demographic composition may limit the generalizability of its findings. The narratives, which reflect individual experiences, are informative but cannot be assumed to represent all educators' experiences. Furthermore, the retrospective nature of biographical research may introduce recall bias. The interpretive nature of the data means that different researchers might arrive at different conclusions. Future research should aim to include a more diverse and larger sample size and should consider longitudinal designs to overcome these limitations.

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