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Adapting adult education to today's society

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Abstract

In recent years, the Mercè Rodoreda Adult Education Centre has developed an educational model that has been recognized with the greatest award the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science can offer to adult education centres: the first place in the Miguel Hernández Prizes. This educational model is based on students' integral (personal, social, academic, labour and entrepreneurial) development. The award-winning educational model has taken into consideration students' needs, analysing such needs through a first study undertaken in the educational centre itself, and a later study which involved seven schools in the province of Alicante. This later study was conducted within the framework of the European Project CASE (Career Assistance and Spirit of Enterprise). The purpose of this article is to show the model previously described, as well as the results obtained from the final qualitative study methodology based on participant observation.

Keywords: Best practices, educational model, exchanges of experiences, experiences in adult education, skills.

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1. Introduction

In the introduction of the decree 220/1999, which regulates adult education in the Valencian Community, students' integral development is highlighted together with their social and labor integration. If we analyze the current socio-economic context, these approaches remain in force. As an example, let me just mention the unemployment rate in Spain, which shows a comparatively high value (25.9% in the first quarter of 2014) compared to other neighboring countries, and is especially significant among the younger population (55.5%), according to data published by the Spanish National Statistics Institute. The unemployment rate in adult schools in Alicante would reach approximately 62.9%, and thus justifies the development of a line of work that takes into account students' integration into the labor market. This line of work is usually ignored in many schools, as occurred previously in our school Mercè Rodoreda.

In addition to the difficulty of finding a job in the current economic crisis, we should take into account that students who attend adult schools to obtain the School Certificate have some special characteristics. Failure to complete their primary education - in combination with other personal, economic, social and cultural aggravating factors - determines a high probability of social and labor exclusion, which is further justification for the implementation of activities aimed at improving their personal and professional development.

2. Theoretical background

This article is an attempt to provide an overview of adult education from the perspective of recent studies on competence and its relationship with students' needs (personal, academic and employment). In this sense, Goleman (1998) believes that skills are more important than academic intelligence if students are to achieve better work and personal, academic and social welfare.

There are several definitions for the term 'competence'. For example, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development OECD (OECD, 2002) in their DeSeCo (Definition and Selection of Competences) project, defined competence as 'the ability to successfully respond to demands or carry out tasks related to cognitive and practical dimensions'. This definition considers that skills can be learned and are considered to be important for different areas of life, contributing to a fuller life and a more functional society. The Tuning project (González & Wagenaar, 2003) defines competences from three dimensions: knowledge and understanding, learning how to act and learning how to be. Palací and Moriano (2003) talk of competence as a code of observable behaviors which is dominated or mastered by some people better than by others, making these people more effective in certain work situations.

There are many studies which determine greater professional success for those university graduates with a better command of socio-emotional skills. This is why, universities, in the European Higher Education framework, prepare students to acquire skills, abilities and values, adopting a new methodology oriented to skill learning (Bologna Declaration, 1999). Such studies have been performed not only in universities but also in general education (Eurydice, 2002), and concluded that the definition of the eight core competences are included in the curricula of primary and secondary education, but not in adult education.

2.1. Description of the educational project

During the academic year 2013/14, the Mercè Rodoreda School considered the possibility of participating in a European Grundtvig Project, nowadays known as an Erasmus+ KA2 Project. Our school received several participation proposals; therefore it was essential to analyze the adequacy of these to respond to our students' needs. To this end, an initial study (May 2013) was carried out (a survey among the students in the second year of the second cycle of Secondary Education), allowing to decide both the project and to point out our students' need to be prepared for the world of work, a

point not previously considered by the school. Therefore, our school was committed to meeting the demands requested by students, as reflected in their survey, through general and specific objectives. The general objective of the project is our students' integral development (personal, social, academic, labor and enterprising), which facilitates their social and labor integration. The specific objectives are the following:

- Introduction of new competences (key and complementary) in the curriculum.
- Integrating Information and Communication Technologies into the curriculum.
- Extension of the English subject.
- Personal counseling for learners.
- Reinforcement of non-formal and informal learning.

In order to accomplish the project objectives, it has been necessary not only to involve all teachers, but also to engage external professionals, whose contribution has been crucial. In this regard, the project has opened the educational and social context making it accessible to our students. The coordination of the European Project Grundtvig, in which our school has taken part, has provided the necessary support and resources to achieve it.

The European Project Grundtvig CASE (Career Assistance and Spirit of Enterprise) is the most significant element of the School-based Educational Project described in this article. Career Assistance and Spirit of Enterprise (CASE) is a Grundtvig learning partnership, which involves nine organizations from the following countries: Spain, Austria, France, Portugal, Lithuania, Romania, Turkey and Italy (2). Its main objective is career counseling and guidance for young people to facilitate their transition from school to the world of work, and from unemployment (or inappropriate jobs) to employment, according to their expectations and skills.

Following the firm commitment of the CFPA Mercè Rodoreda to help their students, the Occupational Observatories of two universities in the province of Alicante were contacted. The result of this contact was a very fruitful Exchange of Experiences, including the work of the UMH (University Miguel Hernandez) of Elche to introduce complementary competences into the academic curriculum. In Spanish universities, this orientation is determined by the adaptation of university studies to the European Higher Education framework, while in the CFPA Rodoreda this goal arose from the need to provide training tailored to students' needs. Although both groups of students were different in terms of educational level, both groups should integrate their students into the labor market in the short and medium-term. However, this goal was more difficult for students in adult schools due to their lower educational level, which would require greater involvement of the public administration in adult education. It certainly required stronger administrative support to include and fully develop complementary skills within the academic curriculum.

The experience of the UMH in the introduction of complementary skills into the curriculum is not an isolated experience; this has also been performed in other universities. Besides being subject to a European recommendation, several studies that reinforce the positive effects of the development of these complementary skills have been done. For example, regarding the introduction of labor skills, Plací and Moriano (2003) observed a greater fluidity in the structure of intellect in information processing and human adaptability. Furthermore, Rodríguez-Trujillo (1999) emphasizes the value of skills as an adaptive element to the new labor market, characterized by a high level of flexibility and change, and a greater demand for individual skills.

Most of these studies have been conducted at university level and professional level, thus a specific study is also necessary in adult schools. To meet this need, a second study (May 2014) was carried out with students from seven adult schools in the province of Alicante. This tested group could provide accurate information about the need of including complementary skills within the school curriculum.

3. Methods

The first research (May 2013) was carried out on the basis of a statistical study conducted in our school CFPA Mercè Rodoreda. A survey was sent to a total of 107 students and 87 of them replied. The verification of obtained data was initially done by a later quantitative study (May 2014) among seven centers for adult education in the province of Alicante. The schools are spread geographically around the province, where a total of 250 students were surveyed. The data obtained represents a maximum value of a sampling error of 6%, yielding a 95% confidence level.

The centers in the sample were: CFPA Beniassent (Concentaina), CFPA Orihuela, CFPA Giner (Alicante), CFPA Joan Lluís Vives (Ibi), L'illa dels CFPA Garrofers (Novelda), CFPA Rodoreda (Elche), CFPA Ramón Ortega (Denia). All of them accepted the conditions and the terms of the survey, which was ethically designed.

The second study (May 2014) took into account not only complementary skills tested in the previous study (May 2013), but also added those complementary skills developed by students from universities such as UMH, DEUSTO, CAMBRIDGE or UNED, and others recommended by Reflex studies (ANECA, 2007), EU-Converge, AQU, Transend, Cheers, etc. Although the competences proposed in these studies focus primarily on college students, they have also been used for this study, due to the lack of related adult training studies.

Both statistical studies were done using a web based platform ('www.ecuestafacil.com'). Although surveys were sent automatically to the email account of each student, they answered the survey in the classroom with the help of the teacher. This way of working was relevant in giving the survey the importance it deserved.

3.1. Statistical information

The population considered in the statistical study was 5,974 people. This figure corresponds to the number of students in the province of Alicante enrolled in public adult education and who aimed to obtain the certificate in secondary education, according to data obtained from the database 'Educabase' from the Spanish Ministry of Education for the academic year 2012-13, the latest data available at the time of this study. Although no data is available for the academic year 2013/14, it was found that the number of enrolments for that academic year is lower compared with the previous year, which would determine a lower value for the sample. The value calculated for the sample is 250 students, which will be more than what is necessary for the academic year 2013/14. All information related to the calculation of the value of the sample is developed in Appendix A.

3.2. Conclusions of the second study

Due to the high level of unemployment among students from the adult centers (62,9%) and their main objective (to change / improve / find work or set up a business), it can be concluded that training for employment issues should be an element to be developed seriously in a curriculum of adult education.

The results from the completed comprehensive survey suggest that training students for their professional (or entrepreneurial) development should be included in a curriculum of secondary education for adults, which confirms studies (mainly at university level) that recommend the inclusion of complementary skills in the academic curriculum. In this regard, students have a very high valuation of complementary skills compared to current subjects (except English), which make them the most suitable content for their professional development.

Moreover, certain key competences (such as competence of knowledge and interaction with the physical world, social and citizenship competence, cultural and artistic competence, etc.) have a very

low valuation, which would require a more thorough study on the subject before including them in a curriculum of adult education.

Another question which adult students answered was how an adult centre could help them to be more professionally prepared; their answers are shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Suggestions from adult students to help them at professional level

STUDENTS' SUGGESTIONS	ANSWERS (%)
Basic knowledge should be prepared more professionally within subjects	64,00%
Include courses within their school timetable	30,00%
Include in the curriculum a specific subject to develop professionally	41,00%
Courses out of school timetable	16,00%
Personal counseling	40,00%

Note that students could choose from a variety of possibilities, therefore the sum of all percentages is more than 100%.

In addition to this, it can be observed that students demand both a specific subject for professional (or entrepreneurial) development and a need for a personal consultation in these fields. Since there is already a specific subject (“World of work”) for labor contents, a possible solution would be to reform its content, which should be taught by specialized teachers with more time devoted to it. These specialized teachers could act as an advisor for professional development or entrepreneurship, serving efficiently and effectively students’ demands and needs.

The conclusions from the previous studies identified a number of actions developed in the school itself. The impact of the activities undertaken is assessed in the last phase of the research project through fieldwork based on a qualitative method: participant observation. The results of the work and the research findings are presented in the following chapter.

4. Results

The activities carried out are designed to achieve five specific pre-defined objectives of the educational project. They can be classified according to their contribution to any of them, although most of them cover several of these objectives at the same time. The most significant activities

undertaken to achieve each of the five aims are shown below.

4.1. Introduction of new competences (key and complementary) into the curriculum

The educational project has enabled the introduction of key competences and complementary competences (those different from key competences) directly in the subject “World of work”, and transversely in the remaining subjects. It is worth noting the effort made in subjects related to Science and Technology where there has been a significant shift. The following are some examples:

- In the subject of Mathematics, activities which allow students to develop their mathematical competence have been introduced. For instance, in one of the activities, students should design the building plan of the second floor of the school building, calculating the area of each room.
- Development of the competence “Learning to learn” in the subject of Natural Sciences. This competence is so important as it structures the contents taught in the subject. Its aim is to enable the learner to be the real protagonist of his or her learning.
- In the subject of Environmental Education, students should do a research assignment on their local flora and fauna.

The teachers of subjects related to the cultural and social field usually connect the contents they teach with trips and excursions planned by the school department.

The head of the Scientific and Technological department belongs to the field of technology, a subject based on projects. This experience is put to good use by introducing a methodology that makes possible the development of competences in adult education in a very easy way. One of the new activities carried out is “The Kite Project” (Fig. 1), which follows the flipped classroom approach. Considering that most work is carried out at home, it is possible to spend more time in the classroom attending to diversity and providing personalized learning.



Figure 1. ‘The kite project’

4.2. Integration of information and communication technologies into the curriculum

The most notable and successful action in the introduction of ICTs into the curriculum has been the optional subject “Job-Oriented IT”. This subject develops the basic academic contents of the subject of IT and, at the same time, it helps our students access the labor market.

The subject of IT is based on very basic contents, since there are some students with no previous knowledge of this subject. In this respect, the subject would be collaborating on students’ digital literacy. What is more, as an advantage, the emotional bond among students allows them to optimize their learning thanks to the collaborative work. Thus, the improvement of lower-level learners becomes considerable, despite the short time available.

This subject has improved greatly, as the activities proposed by the European Project have been included. Attention should also be drawn to the latest developments regarding the creation of the digital identity, as well as the creation of the Curriculum Vitae (CV) using the Europass model as standard (at European and national level), which facilitates student mobility.

While the contents are developed, teachers act as a 'labor adviser', solving questions raised by students. In this regard, it is extremely valuable for the teacher to have had some work experience, apart from his or her teaching experience.

4.3. Extension of the English subject

English has been one of the subjects most requested by our students. The school has noted this need and has made a considerable effort to expand the educational offer in this language, by means of a wide range of educational proposals, which are formal, non-formal and informal.

On the occasion of our European partners' visit to Spain, our school organized a number of activities (working meetings, a visit to Santa Barbara Castle, MARQ, La fiesta Museum and The Arab Baths) addressed to both our students and the European partners. All of this had a double objective, on the one hand, to promote the project among students and, on the other hand, to allow them to improve their linguistic competence using English to communicate, creating a motivating learning environment, outside the classroom. The activities developed in the Grundtvig project required the participation of all members of the ‘Grundtvig Workgroup’, which is formed by teachers and students.



Figure 2. Grundtvig Workgroup member. Montpellier meeting attendance diploma.

4.4. Personal counseling for learners

Until now, centers for adult education have ignored any structured approaches regarding students' individual counseling. Presently, new trends and learners' demands make us devote more attention to this issue. Some of our most remarkable actions include the creation of 'The Five-Star Certificate', the development of a guide on professional counseling; the course related to labor orientation and also visits to the Miguel Hernández University and 'Educaemplea' (education and employment fair).

4.5. Reinforcement of non-formal and informal learning

For a long time, the school FPA Mercè Rodoreda has made a considerable effort to introduce informal educational proposals. Good evidence of this can be the fact that our school offers a wide variety of activities for all our students: a Cultural Week, workshops called 'I teach'; a 'Local Flora and Fauna' kick off day, the 'community dinner' at the end of the course, the closing event and school excursions.

All of these initiatives are key elements for informal learning and they are of an incalculable value for the development of social-emotional competences, which are so important in everyday life. Moreover, the new school management team has reinforced them increasing the participation and involvement of all the teaching staff.

In addition to this, some new practices have been introduced, such as workgroups concerning the European Project Grundtvig, the contest 'The Project's Logo' and the campaign 'Give them a chance', which gave greater visibility and consideration to people with disabilities.



Figure 3. Two of the participants in the campaign 'Give them a chance'

Furthermore, we have worked to promote an entrepreneurial culture. As a result of that, our work was awarded the "Focus Business 2014" prize (given by the Valencian Community through 'Emprenjove'), our school being one of the three finalists. Among the activities developed, some that stand out are: a simulation game to create your own business; some specific entrepreneurial training

courses ('Business Start-up'); and a contest in which the best entrepreneurial idea is awarded ('Business Contest').

Regarding non-formal education, we have worked together with our Students' Association to respond to their needs. As a consequence of that work, our school offered two different workshops, which were warmly welcomed by our students: the Study Skills Workshop, which has enabled students to improve lifelong learning skills and habits, and the Craft Workshop, offered to promote the active participation of older people in lifelong learning. These workshops complement the non-formal education which our school had been offering so far through training courses, such as: foreign language courses (English, French and German), computer courses, painting courses, drama courses, singing classes etc.

At the end of the first year, the second study about the project took place, confirming the previously selected line of work and providing more detailed information about competence development. This research has been presented at conferences, where the quality of the work done is confirmed, while at the same time it is possible to establish fruitful contacts to work more deeply with the aim of introducing competences into the curriculum.

Additionally, the work undertaken has been positively assessed by CEFIRE (the Teacher Training Centre), and even presented in some of its workshops and seminars.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

As seen throughout this paper, all the initiatives described above have been directed towards improving the quality of adult education. These initiatives have followed a quality model, in accordance with our students' needs, and hence they have been tested during the two years that the project has lasted, allowing the adaptation of education and training services to the student profile. It is important to mention that it has been necessary to develop a Teacher Training Plan over the last few years, in order to achieve this adaptation.

Our research has shown a significant feature affecting our students: the work experience of many of them (75%). Their experience has been combined with their labor needs, in order to find a common point, building emotional ties that enhance collaborative work among learners. What is more, taking as a common starting point their previous experience, the result has been an easier access to contents, facilitating meaningful learning.

The European Project has allowed us to know and implement those best practices used by the different organizations that have participated in the project. That way, our school has been able to incorporate creative, divergent and open activities, where students have to put into practice different kinds of competences. Accordingly, the most notable innovation has been the introduction of complementary competences, which are the abilities most in demand by the students attending centers for adult education.

Integrating ICTs has had a very wide scope, including a variety of measures and activities. Students have been able to develop their capacity to analyze, use, produce and share their own information with the new digital media, finding ways of coping with the digital culture and society.

Reinforcement in the subject of English offered by our school involves teachers and students alike, not only with new courses but also with lifelong learning experiences. Teambuilding days with our European partners, or the proposal presented by EURES (the European job mobility agency) among other things, have successfully contributed to this aim.

In contrast, non-formal and informal learning are conceived as important elements in support of the integral development of our students (personal, social, academic, labor and enterprising). Finally, personal counseling has changed the teacher's role, one that is no longer a mere knowledge provider, but a guide who offers students different options to cater for their educational needs.

5.1. Future directions

During the academic year 2016/17, the project will continue with its third phase, since the project itself is a model of continuous improvement with regard to the school performance. As in the first and second phases, this model will follow the same general and specific objectives. The prize Miguel Hernández awarded to our school represents an acknowledgement and encouragement to confirm these aims, and to keep us in regular contact with other schools, increasing the collaboration and partnership that the project promotes.

APPENDIX A

The most common formula for sample, (Torres & Paz, 2014) size is: Where:

N: is the size of the population or universe (total number of potential respondents).

k: is a constant that depends on the level of confidence we assign.

e: is the desired sampling error, as an integer.

p: proportion of individuals possessing the characteristic in the population studied.

q: proportion of individuals who do not have that feature, i.e. is 1-p.

n: sample size.

In the current study, and taking the values of:

n = 250 surveys

k = 1.96. Confidence level of 95% [12]

N = 5974. population under study.

p = q = 0.5

The value of the sampling error, over one, would be 0.0606749. It means, 6% maximum.

If we increase the confidence level to 97.5% (k = 2.24), the value of the sampling error would be 6.9% max.

It has to be noted that the study was conducted in the last month of the academic year, when most of the students have dropped out. So this smaller number of students will determine, having chosen a sample of 250 students, an even lower sampling error.

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