

Transcript of ENHANCE Podcast Episode: From the ground up

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Georg Pirker: I think these were two very promising initiatives, and it would be important to further support them, also because how many European policymakers regularly come into exchange with adult learners from different backgrounds?

Aoife Coyne: Across Europe, many organizations are working in education to create spaces where people can share their experiences and concerns. Yet the link between these everyday experiences and the decisions made at policy level is not always clear. Understanding how this connection is built and what helps or limits it is an important part of strengthening participation in adult learning. To explore this, I'm joined by Georg Pirker from the DARE Network, an organization active in citizenship and human rights education. Georg offers a practical view of how learning environments can support participation, how civil society helps carry learner perspectives into policy discussions, and what conditions make these processes more meaningful. This is the ENHANCE Podcast, a series which focuses on learner voice participation and inclusion in adult education. I'm Aoife, Communications Officer at SOLIDAR. This series is part of the ENHANCE Project, a project co-funded by the European Union which works to support democratic practices in education and to strengthen the role of learners in shaping their learning environments. Here's my conversation with Georg. So, thank you for joining me today. To start, I can hand it over to you and ask you to introduce yourself.

Georg Pirker: Yes, I'm Georg Pirker. I'm here today for the DARE Network, which is Democracy and Human Rights Education in Europe. It's an NGO that is active in citizenship education in all educational fields, formal and non-formal education, but also in the different sectors, comprising youth, adult learning, and higher education. We try to facilitate, on the one hand, the discussion among the different members about this big question of what makes good education, what makes good citizenship education, and what makes good human rights education. And there is ultimately, of course, always this connection to the fact that we are a European network, and the focus is on European policies and policymaking, as one of the key fields where also adult learning rotates around, since in a lot of countries there is not such a strongly established individual system of adult learning, but it is a bit dispersed across various sectors. DARE itself is a small organization because we are run more or less voluntarily by different member organizations. So they form an association. It has an elected board, and it has some people - me and a colleague currently, we are based in Germany - and we run, in a way, the office of the network in the background, but it is very member-driven.



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Aoife Coyne: Great, thank you. So the ENHANCE project explores how to integrate and center their learner voice in policy making. In your view, what are some of the ways that policy makers can work with civil society to involve civil society in participatory processes and to ensure that learner voices, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, are heard in policy making?

Georg Pirker: I think it affects different levels of policymaking and education because, on the one hand, if we think from the level of the learners, it is really people who are locally in any learning environments, be it further education and training, be it free adult learning opportunities, in the different structures - like in Nordic countries more structured, in the South probably connected to universities or to popular education. One important finding I see is that often it is local policymaking which is also responsible for the setup of organizations, for support, and for supporting the setup of premises. Then you have local and national policies on adult learning, very often related not only to the core of classical, formally oriented learning, but also to the wider field, as in the German Volkshochschulen system, where you have further education, job-related training, and different fields. One key feature in the field of citizenship is really bringing these local realities of people to policymaking where it affects them. We then see very different approaches, from learning cycles as we have them in Scandinavian countries, to community work by organizations that operate in specific neighborhoods or districts where people are facing certain challenges. Often, of course, these are economic and financial challenges, resulting in a range of intersectional difficulties. Of course, it is nothing new when it comes to political representation. Often the people who represent, the higher you go to the national or European level, are also, in terms of their work background and job profiles, not the average learner. Some still are. I remember that in the European Parliament there have always been some people who also came from the adult learning field in a certain way, but I would say the local level is quite connected to the challenges, as well as to support and empowerment, providing spaces as such. This is super important because people often do not have spaces where they can interact, where they can define the problem, where they can define the challenge, and where they can approach a solution. In that sense, the role of people in these educational fields and of these educational providers is also to connect to representatives, be it municipal representatives or someone who can influence or take decisions. I think this is interesting since it is not classical education, but something that is also connecting and responding in a more community-related way.

Aoife Coyne: Thank you so much. So there I think you touched on a lot of examples from the local and the national level. Could you tell us a bit more about how we can ensure that the learner voice is represented at the EU level?



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Georg Pirker: There is also the classical civic education field, where you work on certain topics that affect society—themes and issues such as climate change and employment—that have a huge political connection, and where the bigger frameworks of European educational policies, European employment policies, and European transformation policies are affected, if we look at digitalization and things like this. But often, for individual learners, really making their way to European policymakers is a challenge. On the other hand, I see in a lot of programs by educational providers in the adult field this classical idea of a trip to Brussels, where you meet your local representative in the Parliament, where you can talk to them, where you get to learn about European institutions. This should not be underestimated because it is also a way of bringing average people's issues to the policy level. Even just seeing what it means to work in Brussels, seeing what it means to be a politician, should not be underestimated. It can also have quite an empowering effect for people who face a lot of exclusion or who are in vulnerable conditions. Through the help of an educational organization or any adult learning provider, they can make it there because there are organized trips and travels that often work in this field of civics, approaching democracy issues. I think these initiatives are quite common and should not be underestimated. It is not only about visits by voters or supporters of parliamentarians, but about ordinary people being able to go there. This is often not so much connected to the core European learning, education, training, and adult learning policies, but it is still a very important moment for people to understand and somehow participate in them. I think these are the two main issues. If it is about really influencing policymaking and coming into exchange with stakeholders on the European or national political level as learner representatives, there is this huge challenge of how to involve learners in the governing structures of educational organizations.

Aoife Coyne: And would you have a specific example in mind of how to involve learners in the governing structures of educational organizations?

Georg Pirker: My example would be from the youth field where we have the Council of Europe quality label youth centers, that's kind of a specific EDCHR learning structure – Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights - where youth centers that are also doing non-formal educational programs undergo a quality label procedure with the Council of Europe and one of the award criteria is to have young people represented in the governing board of the educational organizations. So, they have learners' voices, because young people are also learners, and they are in the steering constituencies of the organizations that are responsible for learning. I think also in several adult learning fields, there are these learners' councils or learners' representatives. However, I think it can be quite a challenge to go from being a simple language class attendant or course participant to seeing the value in contributing to a learners' board or these kinds of constituencies. I do not think it is so easy, since it requires a lot of time,



but also a lot of understanding of why it is important to involve these people, which goes far beyond pedagogy, following learners' interests, or putting their experiences at heart. From the political perspective, I think it is of crucial importance that there are organizations which, in a certain way, also represent the experiences of the learning fields, including the learners. Specifically, when it comes to adult learning policy and education and training policies at the European level, these processes are complex. Knowing where to intervene or where lobby happens. Even for people in organizations like SOLIDAR or the Lifelong Learning Platform, it requires a lot of effort, understanding, and staying informed, being up to date, and knowing at what moment to enter processes and dialogues. I see these organizations as crucial because they also provide a certain advocacy for learners. To my understanding, they somehow act as intermediaries.

Aoife Coyne: So you mentioned there the challenges associated with involving learners in policy making processes and particular at the EU level. Could you expand a bit on what these challenges are and how civil society can work with policy makers to overcome them and to support learners to be meaningfully engaged in policy making?

Georg Pirker: One thing is to have a really steady commitment to involvement and consultation. An example I can provide, again rather from the youth field, is the European Youth Dialogues. You have these structured interactions between young people, connected over a period of around half a year to the priorities of the Council presidencies, focusing on the youth goals and ensuring a very structured involvement in policymaking processes, following up on issues that matter to young people. But young people are also adults because, if we look into the youth field, for example from 18 onwards to 27, these are young adults. I think there we can see quite a good example of how people's issues can be generalized and fed into the European Union policy process. There is also this vision of working in a way that allows the learner to somehow move upwards and participate more actively. I think the youth dialogue processes provide quite a good example of how this can be set up, even in relation to very complex policymaking questions, and how European Union Commissioners can also be held accountable for demands and issues that come up from the people participating in the process. The other challenge is representativity and to what extent single voices are actually representative. Often, I think we probably have better Eurostat data than direct involvement of people. But then you need people and organizations that are capable of working with data on adult learning and on issues such as people's living conditions, and that can transmit this into policymaking processes.

For me, this is a kind of bridging tool, and therefore civil society organizations are obviously needed. Of course, there is educational science, adult learning research, and work in certain



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academic fields, but you also need organizations that are able to transmit this knowledge, break it down to ground realities, and at the same time connect it to the policy level. Often these can seem like quite easy things, but a change in European VET law adoption can have a huge impact on large learning fields in the adult learning sector because certain activities may no longer be subsidized in the same way at the local level, or policies and regulations may change. The effect on learners can therefore be very significant. That is why you need civil society organizations that have their feet on the ground and their heads in the policymaking process. We also often have a very job-market-related view of policymaking and of what adult learning is supposed to serve first. But specifically from the field of democratic involvement of young people, I think this issue needs to be taken seriously. Young adults are voters, and given the challenges we face in all our European societies, in our democratic systems, and even in the European Parliament, voters matter. I am deeply convinced that there is a strong case to be made for as many democratic learning opportunities for adults as possible, within a lifelong approach. People should be supported so that they can interact with one another about political issues, ask questions, define political interests, and become subjects of political processes in a meaningful way. This is not only about skilling someone up with the next competency, but about a fundamental provision of crucial importance. Specifically, if we look at European policy development and adult learning policy development, we are facing key transitions such as digitalization, climate catastrophe, and deep social questions of inequality in education, access to education, and access to decent living conditions. These are connected policy questions that also need to be discussed by people themselves. I therefore think adult learning plays a crucial role. I think that on the political level there is quite a strong commitment, but this also means taking responsibility for rolling out structures and seriously addressing the difficulty of creating access for learners to the policymaking level. Without the transmitting function of NGOs that can channel needs, problems, and the difficulties arising for policymaking, especially in the field of citizenship and democracy, this becomes very difficult. At the moment, I fear that the anti-NGO campaigns coming from parts of the Parliament are actually counterproductive to what is needed for European policy development.

Aoife Coyne: We wholeheartedly agree, of course. And you mentioned a bit there about the link between education and particularly citizenship education and people's ability to engage in policy making and the democratic process in general. Could you go a little bit deeper into this?

Georg Pirker: What I see is this deep and very clear connection between education, learning, and participation, or democratic participation. I think, on the one hand, looking into pedagogical work and the working field, the basic condition is really to take learner-centeredness seriously, and to understand that the learning environment is probably something unique. You can create



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a situation where people pursue their interests and are not only informed, but also participate in the process. In doing so, they develop a certain openness to diversity of opinions and diversity of situations. I attend an adult language learning course once a week, and it is one of the most thrilling moments of my week, all the people there come from totally different backgrounds. They work in different fields, some of them do not work, some are studying, and some are in quite important positions. But there they are all equal, and they pursue a common interest. Although the common interest is language learning, there are many other things being negotiated through the communication, through the topics, and through the way we interact with each other. I think this also speaks to what people do in the field of civics and adult learning. It is really about creating the conditions to explore issues in all their difficulties, with all the multiple experiences and perspectives people bring in. This is often a very unique experience for people because, in everyday life and in their social environments, they do not have these kinds of experiences. There is also something empowering in this. I also see many adult learning providers becoming agents that address issues that matter to people at the local level. What does it mean if there is no park, or if we only have a poor public sphere in our district? Then someone starts facilitating dialogue, bringing people together, visiting stakeholders with them, or organizing common activities. A lot of action becomes connected to this. People take initiatives, and often they also become politically active. They move from simply addressing an issue to experiencing, through a course or a learning environment, that they are not just informed or taught, but actually taken seriously. They gain agency over these issues and through that they organize themselves. I think this is a very important field because, when it comes to democracy, the most important experiences people gain are often related to issues that affect them directly in their environment, at the community level, in their district, city, or neighborhood. If you see that you engage and that there is some kind of response because issues are being addressed, discussed, or politically considered, then you realize that your voice matters. I take this very seriously. Of course, the more general and complex politics become, the more abstract they can seem to people. But that does not mean they are distant from everyday life experiences. If I think, for example, about the regulation of digital transformation, the only entity that can really regulate successfully at that level is the European Union. This means that European Union regulations have a direct impact on people's personal digital environment, their safety and rights. In that sense, this very abstract European policymaking is actually quite close to people's issues. The challenge for adult education is to make this connection visible, to connect people to the policy field. This participatory environment of adult learning, and this approach of working with people not in an ex cathedra way but by responding to their needs, seeing where they are, and taking them from there, is one of the core capacities of adult learning and adult learning organizations.



Aoife Coyne: So staying a little bit at the EU level, do you see anything specifically in place at EU level at the moment or anything more that could be done in order to support Member States and civil society in the member states to create participatory processes that include learner voices?

Georg Pirker: I think there are several things. What I find quite interesting, if you think about what you asked before regarding vulnerable groups and people facing difficulties in accessing social rights, participation rights, or simply people who are more challenged within communities, is that adult learning has a huge role. If I think of the Basic Skills Action Plan, including citizenship as a basic skill, this is of course something different from reading and writing, but it refers to certain capacities that are important even before developing lifelong learning competences, because they are so basic and so important. I find it quite interesting that citizenship has made it into that field. Of course, it still needs to be negotiated what that means in practice; at the moment, it has more focus on school contexts, but I see a huge opening for many core adult learning policies, such as second-chance and upskilling policies, literacy policies, and all these areas that provide equal starting conditions for people to access society, debates, and rights. For a long time, I think we have been quite unaware of this. The notion of citizenship as a skill is particularly interesting because we could also ask what it means when 40, 50, sometimes even more percent of people vote for undemocratic parties. These are not only people with low literacy or low competencies; sometimes they are highly literate people with many skills. So what does that mean in relation to citizenship skills? This is definitely something different to measure and interpret than functional illiteracy. At the same time, including basic democratic participation skills and appreciating democratic decision-making, and defending that as a skill, is something we are only at the beginning of discussing. The Action Plan provides a lot of brain food in terms of how to set up structures and pedagogy, but also what this means for a broader understanding of lifelong learning, which is not limited to curricular testing in schools. There may also be strong connections to the VET field. In many countries and companies, there are important questions about democratic participation in the workplace - not only in terms of labor rights, but also in terms of how diverse and heterogeneous multinational groups of workers are. What does it mean when there is increasing racism or increasingly hostile mindsets? What does that mean for the capacity within an organization or company to work together? I see many efforts to address these questions where adult learning experience and citizenship education experience are needed. This becomes a transversal task, which is interesting for us at European level and for NGOs working in the field. At the same time, we need to ensure that, because it becomes transversal, it does not get lost and become too blurry. This is an important task for organizations like the Lifelong Learning Platform, EAEA, and others: to think about what this means on the ground, but also how to hold policymaking processes accountable. At the moment, we are at a crucial



moment, especially with the negotiation of the new financial framework and related policy aims. If these policies are meant to contribute to resilient and safe societies, there are many questions and issues that still need to be discussed and negotiated within the field of adult learning. There is still a lot of very important work ahead of us.

Aoife Coyne: Then to finish up and to reflect back, can you share an example of a policy process in which the learner voice had significant influence on the outcome? Or if you have multiple examples, we'd also be happy to hear them.

Georg Pirker: I think one of the really good examples for me is the older Grundtvig programme, where there was also prison education, which was a study-based and research-based decision by the European Commission to invest part of the programme funding into prison education. This had a huge impact all over Europe on a target group and a group of people who were really not fully on the radar, or who were always affected by very strong prejudices, because once in prison you are always an ex-prisoner. This raises the question of what it means to create, in prison, a path towards life stability and longer-term perspectives. There is a lot of very interesting pedagogy that has been developed, including theatre pedagogy, but also questions such as what elections mean in prison, and how prisoners can participate in democratic elections. There were many promising programs and activities, which unfortunately were discontinued as they are no longer a specific focus in the current Erasmus programme. They can still be done, but there is no longer a dedicated policy focus. I think this is sometimes the positive side of European-level policymaking: if you put an issue on the European agenda in a specific field, European Commissioners, with the help of European programs, can really make a difference on the local ground. The other thing is that in classical country programs, even the opportunity for learners to participate in mobilities was quite central. This is standard practice in the youth field, and also in higher education or VET, but it is not such a common feature in adult learning, where there is now a stronger focus on staff mobility instead. I think this is also a pity, because many promising initiatives have been taken up that are very enriching for people. Then, sometimes for budgetary reasons or because priorities change, they are reduced in the main programme. This is worrying, because it also reflects the EU's capacity to create pathways for learners to bring their experiences and issues to the European level. But if there are no programs that support this, then you end up with very diverse and unevenly developed adult learning systems across Member States, where mobility is either not on the agenda or only job-related. I think these were two very promising initiatives, and it would be important to further support them, also because how many European policymakers regularly come into exchange with adult learners from different backgrounds? But with rising social inequalities across Europe, this is becoming more and more challenging. We should not end up with the adult learning field becoming a kind of repair system for failed social policies.



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Aoife Coyne: Thank you very much, Georg, for joining me today and for sharing your insights. What you've just heard is the ENHANCE podcast, a series focused on learner voice, participation and inclusion in adult education. The ENHANCE project is co-funded by the European Union. If you're interested in learning more about SOLIDAR's work on education and lifelong learning, you can find our social media in the episode description or visit solidar.org.



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