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## Adult education and the nation-state: A systematic review of literature

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# **ADULT EDUCATION AND THE STATE: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this literature review, I analyze how the concept of the state is defined and used in empirical adult education research articles. Findings are in three themes of 1) systems of governance in adult education, 2) governmentality and contention, and 3) research challenging whether the state boundaries are blurred in the adult education literature. I discuss implications of the findings in comparison to theoretical approaches toward the state in adult education.

Keywords: state theory, literature review, system, governance, governmentality, globalization

## **INTRODUCTION**

Despite the discourses on individualized forms of lifelong learning, adult education is still a key mechanism to find ways to address social problems such as economic inequality, erosion of democratic institutions, and sustainability for humans and the environment. In addressing these social problems that involve multiple actors and contexts, the state is one of the key components (Mulaj, 2019). Reflective of this aspect, the state has been one of the main units of analysis for adult education research and practice. One can often find reports or studies on adult education practices in a specific country that aim to address social problems (e.g., Cilasun, Demir-Şeker, Dincer, & Tekin-Koru, 2018; Ngozwana, 2017).

Scholars have engaged in extensive discussions on theories of the state in relation to education in general, as well as specifically in the field of adult education. Although theoretical discussions on the state in relation to adult education have deepened, many authors who have written empirical studies in adult education have not been as explicit with their definitions of the state. This leads to the research question for this paper: "How is the concept of the state utilized and defined in empirical studies that discuss the state in relation to adult education?" Through this process, I seek to understand the characteristics of the state as it relates to adult education.

## **THEORETICAL DISCUSSIONS ON THE STATE IN ADULT EDUCATION**

There have been theoretical discussions on the definitions of the state in relation to adult education. On the one hand, the state can be understood according to how it is internally organized and how it makes room for adult education. For example, Jarvis (1993) outlined various facets of how the state operates, including policies, bureaucracy, democratic citizenship, and the legal system for the rights of citizens, where each focus could lead to varying engagement of the state in adult education activities. Moreover, adult education scholars have often referred to Gramsci to analyze the state. By locating the civil society as part of the state as Gramsci did, entities such as political parties can be recognized as key spaces for adult education (Holst, 2002). These policy-making processes are also related to various actors other than the state, such as international organizations such as UNESCO or social movements with which the state increasingly seeks to establish "partnerships" (Torres, 2011).

On the other hand, the concept of the state itself is challenged from several fronts, including postcolonial and globalization theories. Postcolonial theories have opened up discussions on diaspora, migration, and transnationalism where the focus is on new approaches towards the "minimal self" rather than the citizen which had been associated with the state (Premnath, 2003). From this perspective, scholars have studied anti-colonial movements that critique the state because of its relation to imperial and capitalist hegemony (Kapoor, 2011). Globalization scholars have also debated whether the concept of the state holds up in the face of the proliferation of global neoliberalism: neoliberals have argued that the role of the state has decreased with the advent of international organizations and multinational corporations (e.g., Horman & Marshall, 1994; Ohmae, 1990) whereas socialists critique that there has been an overemphasis on globalization as a qualitatively 'new' phenomena (e.g., Allman, 2001; Weiss, 1998; Went, 2000).

In sum, theoretical approaches towards the state that have been discussed in adult education can be categorized into two levels of 1) defining the state's relations with its internal structures, and 2) understanding whether the concept of the state is suitable in the current context.

## **METHODOLOGY**

While considering the theoretical approaches to the state in education, this research paper conducts a systematic literature review on empirical research articles that discuss the state in relation to adult education.

Data: Four academic journals published in English were initially selected for this purpose to understand international discussions on this topic: *Adult Education Quarterly* (AEQ), *International Journal of Lifelong Education* (IJLE), *Convergence*, and *the Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education* (CJSAE). Within these journals, articles were selected and filtered by the researcher based on whether they contain keywords related to the state (nation-state, government, federal, policy) in their abstracts and I read through the selected articles to filter that mention the state only marginally. As a result, 30 articles from AEQ, 145 articles from IJLE, 48 articles from *Convergence*, and 20 articles from CJSAE. In order to highlight relatively recent manifestations of the state, I seek to analyze 30 years, from 1990 to 2019. The time frame of the analysis in the current proceeding paper is limited to 20 years, from 1990 to 2010. I plan to review articles published until 2019 as I develop this research into further publication in the future.

Analytic strategy: I used reflexive thematic analysis, which includes the researcher actively engaging in the data in order to identify themes as analytic outputs (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Reflexive thematic analysis is distinguished from those that focus on reliability that assume themes as inputs, and also from codebook approaches (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019). I initially started with reading and summarizing the articles and additionally documented how each article engaged with specific aspects of the state, which became codes such as funding, law, policy, accreditation, framing of problems, unit of analysis, etc. After coding all the data, I perused through the codes to identify patterns and organize codes into themes.

## **FINDINGS**

I identified three main themes: 1) systems of governance in adult education, 2) governmentality and contention, and 3) research challenging whether the state boundaries are blurred in the adult education literature.

### ***Systems of Governance in Adult Education***

A large body of the literature comprises of attempts to outline the overall system of adult education within a state (e.g., Jacobsen, 1994; Kawanobe, Yamada, Tanaka, & Kajita, 1995; Kulich, 1995; Kumar, 2004; Maruatona, 2006; Park, 2002; Payne, 2006). Contrary to how some globalization scholars have challenged the state as a unit of analysis (e.g., Horman & Marshall, 1994; Ohmae, 1990), empirical approaches have paid continuous attention to the state, especially in relation to building a system of governance for adult education. However, what is characteristic of the state in adult education systems compared to formal education systems is that it does not assume the role of the sole or main provider of education. Adult education does not have a shared curriculum as in formal education. Moreover, providers of adult education range from community centers, NGOs, to higher education institutions. Building a system amidst these variances means that the state works through measures such as funding (Benavot, Huang, & Cervero, 1993; Hering, 1997), accreditation and recognition of learning outcomes (Dyke, 1996), or bureaucracies (English & Irving, 2008). These measures lay the groundwork for state policies to 'nudge' various agencies in a certain direction while gradually weaving them into a more cohesive system, making the state an 'enabler' rather than a provider (Walker, 2008). Whereas Duman and Wilson's (1996) point that certain agendas of government officials can lead to abrupt changes in the adult education system shows discrepancies existing between the concepts of the government versus the state, a majority of articles have shown a tendency to use the two concepts interchangeably. Establishing a state system often leads to a shared prioritizing of certain values such as 'foundational skills' or 'transition to workplace' (Chapman, Gaff, Toomey, & Aspin, 2005) or to a relative negligence toward directions such as radical adult education (Park, 2002). Thus, what is observed through systems of governance in adult education are the inherently political, but widely accepted, interpretations toward the definition of adult education within the boundary of each state.

Contrary to Jarvis's (1993) approach where he called for a politics of adult education by analyzing the state, it appears that authors writing articles on systems of adult education rarely identify political ideologies. However, I argue that this tendency is tied to the specific way that the state operates in the contemporary era: the mechanisms that the state uses are extremely volatile and can be tailored for multiple purposes. An important theme which shows this tendency is 'decentralization.' With the state assuming the role as an 'enabler' of adult education in various countries, it is no wonder that decentralization has become an important topic in discussions around adult education systems (e.g., Hawley, Sommers, & Meléndez, 2005; Polder, 2001; Rivera, 1997; Sawchuk, 2007). Yet, its political implications are multi-faceted. On the one extreme, decentralization can involve the government, NGOs, and private actors working together to devise participatory approaches to overcome remnants from colonial histories (Gboku & Modise, 2008). On the other extreme, it can also be a part of neoliberal forces of individualizing the responsibilities of learning rather than addressing structural issues underlying material conditions (Walker, 2008). The volatile purposes of mechanisms that the state uses, such as decentralization, heightens the benefits of

understanding the political dynamics and areas of contention behind a seemingly similar approach by the state.

### ***Governmentality and Contention***

The concept of governmentality captures how systematic measures such as funding or bureaucracy are not only externally imposed, but unwittingly enforced by the very actors involved in adult education. Foucault (1991) conceptualized governmentality to explain the process of governing that is aligned with the self-governing of individuals even at the localized levels. The fact that the concept describes *how* power is exercised even to each individual level fits well with increasingly decentralized tendencies in the system. Whereas approaches toward systems of adult education have continued from the 1990s to the 2000s, a focus on governmentality emerges in the literature in the 2000s. Most representative cases of governmentality are where states shifted away from providing welfare by individualizing the responsibilities of welfare through learning (Glastra, Hake, & Schedler, 2004; Sandlin, 2004; Walker, 2008). It can also operate through state-level regulations on what constitutes scientific research in adult education (St. Pierre, 2006), bureaucratic requirements (English & Irving, 2008), qualification frameworks (Boshier, 2001), as well as official discourses for adult education throughout the country to maintain competitiveness in the global economy (Lee & Young, 2003) or for local development (Loureiro & Cristóvão, 2010). Governmentality is enforced by rationalizing and framing adult education for specific purposes.

However, I find that the relatively flexible and wide range of adult education can make governmentality less of an all-encompassing regime of power, and more of an area of contention. Decentralized approaches may, on the one hand, enforce governmentality, while on the other hand, make spaces for contention against such attempts. For example, Sawchuk (2007) documents how the government started using advanced technologies so that information can be managed through a help desk system that is not under public control and outsourced to private companies. Contrary to being subsumed under this design, the workers found ways to work around it and built localized knowledge so as not to completely lose their control. Another example includes a citizen group in the United States which constructed their own "fugitive knowledge" about how environmental hazards were impacting the community to argue against "official knowledge" promulgated by the state agency (Hill, 2004). These examples show the ways in which attempts were made by the state to frame procedures or contents toward a certain direction did not 'persuade' the individuals to internalize them but actually resulted in the individuals contesting them. Some scholars also highlight how researchers and practitioners involved in adult education recontextualize or resist rationalized discourses by the state rather than merely reproducing them (English & Irving, 2008; Loureiro & Cristóvão, 2010).

I argue that the fact that governmentality operates through rationalizing certain directions makes room for contention in fields such as adult education where the purposes of education are debated and the systems and procedures have not been as centralized. Furthermore, I propose that this characteristic of the state in adult education makes it an appealing topic to analyze through a Gramscian approach. While research articles reviewed in this paper have shown the construction of localized knowledge against official discourses, the extent to which localized knowledge does or does not transform discourses by the state has not been clearly articulated. Whether and how the resistance against governmentality can build up to a "war

of position" in a Gramscian (Gramsci, 2000) sense will be a useful analytic framework, but has yet to be explored in the journal articles reviewed for this paper.

### ***Are State Boundaries Blurred?***

Globalization as a context can blur the boundaries as many more people move, migrate, and interact with each other across state borders. Yet, states do not remain non-responsive to such phenomenon. Attempts to assimilate migrants or refugees in the name of 'multiculturalism' have existed since the 1980s. Barriers such as language and stereotypes as well as mainstream education institutions being favored for funding instead of community-based organizations which work with these populations show that educational approaches work to enforce a certain boundary despite the physical boundaries being blurred (Milburn, 1996). It often leads to such education being biased towards the economy and the workforce and less on helping migrants and refugees build ties and social capital (Morrice, 2007). Even for immigrants with high-level qualifications, countries rarely move beyond being 'tolerant' to immigrants as credentials and experiences from abroad are not recognized (Andersson & Guo, 2009). Using Foucault's concepts from governmentality, these approaches work through technologies of self as immigrants seek to supplement their learning and show a willingness to adjust to the state requirements (Han, Starkey, & Green, 2010) as well as through technologies of power through examinations and requirements (Andersson & Guo, 2009). Thus, while globalization as a context can blur physical boundaries, state boundaries are rearticulated and enforced through notions of 'citizenship.'

Of course, there is an increasing tendency for certain adult education practices or policies to take place across the state boundaries. Historical cases include folk high schools inspiring Eastern Europe and Baltic states to undertake similar approaches in each country (Kulich, 2002), or UK-Germany binary relations for adult education after WW1 (Friedenthal-Haase, 1993). NGOs and international organizations have facilitated this process, such as UNESCO and World Bank funding literacy education (Wickens & Sandlin, 2007), an international organization based in Germany working in Guinea for literacy education programs and national literacy surveys (Hildebrand & Hinzen, 2004), or an interstate coordinating committee for adult education in Eastern Europe (Malitikov & van de Coevering, 2002). However, these approaches do not bypass the state as a whole. Rather, they operate through the state showing variations as a policy is implemented across several countries (e.g., Kulich, 2002) as well as funding sources in international organizations colluding with neocolonialism tied to Euro-centered values (e.g., Wickens & Sandlin, 2007).

Even in conflict or post-conflict areas where the physical boundary of the state has been challenged, adult education agendas can be tied to state-related agendas. Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2008) document how Palestinian women living in Occupied Palestinian Territories seek to engage in educational opportunities as part of them building a nation together while Israeli authorities actively seek to repress such activities. Whereas this case shows an example where there are conflicts around the state, adult education is also a debated topic in post-conflict areas. Alvi-Aziz (2008) discusses women's education in post-Taliban Afghanistan and criticizes the lack of emphasis by the state and NGO agencies to reflect the needs of women in educational practices. These examples show that, even where actual functions of the state have been challenged, adult education can be a part of efforts to build the state rather than blurring the state as a whole. Overall, the blurring of state boundaries through globalization, NGOs/international organizations, and conflicts does not necessarily result in

state boundaries blurred in adult education. Rather, actual practices show that adult education reconstructs, contextualizes, or operates through states.

## DISCUSSION

I will discuss the implications of empirical studies as they relate to the two categories identified in the theoretical literature: 1) defining state's relations and its internal structures, and 2) understanding whether the concept of the state is suitable in the current context.

Empirical studies show a wide range of implications on how the state operates. Many studies elaborate on mechanisms specified by Jarvis (1993) such as policies, bureaucracy, citizenship, and the legal system. While these mechanisms can be described in a 'neutral' way, comparing various research articles show that certain values are prioritized through these mechanisms and thus are inherently political. I argue that this is tied to the volatility of certain mechanisms, such as decentralization, to be utilized for varying purposes. The framing of adult education for specific purposes is tied to the concept of governmentality where people self-internalize these purposes. People resisting against these 'rationales' makes adult education a possible site of contention, whereby I find that a Gramscian framework will be valuable in analyzing the phenomena.

Even though the concept of the state has been debated by postcolonial and globalization scholars in the theoretical literature, the state as a unit of analysis still remains evident in empirical studies analyzed in this review. State boundaries are rearticulated through notions of 'citizenship', which have been critiqued by many scholars. International organizations and NGOs, related to the expansion of globalization, tend to work through the state rather than bypassing it. Contrary to theoretical approaches that have doubted whether the state is a viable concept, I find that the state still remains a main unit of analysis and that adult education is involved in rearticulating the concept of the state even when it is challenged.

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