

# Institutional Entrepreneurship in Adult Basic Education. Recent Theoretical Developments and Empirical Analyses

JAKOB BICKEBÖLLER, DÖRTHE HERBRECHTER & MICHAEL SCHEMMANN

## Abstract

Using the neo-institutionalist concept of the *institutional entrepreneur*, this article examines the process of institutionalization in the field of adult literacy and basic education, which is in a process of structural development. The aim of the analysis is to identify relevant actors at the *regional level* of basic education and to reconstruct the *projects* in which they are involved. Another focus is on the applied *skills* that actors use to drive the process of institutionalization. The article is based on a *secondary analysis* of an interview-based study with experts from the field of basic education. The findings point to a field characterized by fragility, in which actors engage in diverse projects. Depending on the form of the project, different skills become relevant.

**Keywords:** Institutional Entrepreneur; neo-institutionalism; Adult basic education; Institutionalization; Constellation of actors

## Abstract

Der Beitrag betrachtet mithilfe des neo-institutionalistischen Konzepts des *Institutional Entrepreneurs* den Prozess der Institutionalisierung im sich in der Strukturentwicklung befindenden Feld der Alphabetisierung und Grundbildung Erwachsener. Ziel der Analyse ist die Identifikation relevanter Akteure auf der *regionalen Ebene* der Grundbildung sowie die Rekonstruktion der *Projekte*, in denen sie involviert sind. Ein weiterer Fokus liegt auf den angewendeten *Skills*, mit denen die Akteure den Prozess der Institutionalisierung vorantreiben. Der Beitrag basiert auf einer *Sekundäranalyse* einer interviewbasierten Studie mit Expertinnen und Experten aus dem Feld der Grundbildung. Die Befunde weisen auf ein von Fragilität geprägtes Feld hin, in dem sich die Akteure in diversen Projekten zusammenfinden und engagieren. Je nach Form des Projekts werden unterschiedliche Skills relevant.

**Keywords:** Institutional Entrepreneur; Neo-Institutionalismus; Grundbildung; Institutionalisierung; Akteurkonstellation

## 1 Introduction

Even though adult basic education has been on the adult education policy agenda for decades it is still considered a fragile part of adult education. Thus, adult basic education programs and seminars are not as institutionalized as programs and seminars offered in realms like languages or health. A study carried out by Loreit, Schemmann and Herbrechter (2014) shows that it is particularly the public adult education providers who guarantee the seminars offered.

However, a number of political initiatives both on the international and on the national level have been launched within the last years to increase the attention paid to adult basic education (Koller, Klinkhammer & Schemmann 2020). Starting in 2000, the World Education Forum in Dakar integrated the efforts around literacy and adult basic education into the “Education for All”-initiative (UNESCO 2000). One of the goals was to establish basic adult education for all as a right (Lenhart 2018, 14). What is more, in 2003 UNESCO launched the “United Nations Literacy Decade” (UNESCO 2003) to grant more attention for literacy and adult basic education.

On the national level of German education policy, the topic also received a lot of political attention. In 2006, the federal government established a funding scheme for more than 100 literacy and adult basic education projects. From 2012 to 2016, Germany ran a so-called National Strategy for Literacy and Adult Basic Education. Finally, in 2016 the “AlphaDekade 2016–2026” (BMBF & KMK 2016) was launched aiming at the reduction of functional literacy in Germany. Within this “AlphaDekade” various projects are being funded from both adult basic education practice as well as adult basic education research. Within the federal initiative one strand of funding is dedicated to research only. Consequently, it does not come as a surprise that research outcomes and findings increased during these last years and that the knowledge base extended, especially as regards the institutionalization of adult basic education.

As such, adult basic education policies were analyzed in a comparative way focusing on the interplay of policy, polity and politics in England, the Netherlands, Austria and Turkey (Knauber & Ioannidou 2016). The study covered processes of policy formulation as well as policy implementation.

Additionally, Euringer (2016) focused on the adult basic education understanding of public administrators in the German Laender. Her study made clear that the administrators’ definition of adult basic education does not only refer to universal goals such as participation or learning but also encompasses notions of responsibility and finances.

Koller, Arbeiter and Schemmann (2021) analyzed the fragile field of work-oriented adult basic education from both an educational governance as well as a neo-institutionalist perspective. The article analyzes different organizational and institutional structures, the involved actors and the coordination of action between those actors.

And finally, Schemmann (2020) analyzed the institutionalization of work-oriented adult basic education particularly focusing on the institutionalization within

companies. The study identified six factors, which support the successful institutionalization in companies. One central finding in both the study by Koller, Arbeiter and Schemmann (2021) as well as in Schemmann (2020) makes it clear that institutionalization of adult basic education involves a special actor, a so-called institutional entrepreneur, who brings together various actors in new constellations. In general, institutional entrepreneurship refers to "... the activities of actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones" (Maguire, Hardy & Lawrence 2004, 657). Consequently, institutional entrepreneurs are the actors that change of institutions can be ascribed to.

In sum, while we have research findings in a multilevel perspective covering the national level, the level of the German Laender and the level of the companies, there is a lack of findings regarding the regional level. We know little about the role of the actors and their strategies as regards the institutionalization of adult basic education on this level.

Our article intends to provide knowledge on this regional level and analyzes actors and the coordination of actors. However, we want to focus particularly on this special actor responsible for the successful institutionalization by employing the neo-institutionalist concept of the institutional entrepreneur. Thus, we will concentrate on the institutional entrepreneurs, the field and the projects they engage in as well as the activities and skills needed to propagate new organizational forms and institutions.

The research questions can be put as follows: How can the field of adult basic education be characterized on the regional level? What kinds of projects do institutional entrepreneurs in adult basic education engage in? What kinds of skills are needed to be successful?

As indicated above, the article will employ neo-institutionalism and in particular the concept of institutional entrepreneurship as a theoretical framing (2). Methodologically, the article is based on a guided-interview study with stakeholders in regional contexts. Following our research questions we carried out a secondary analysis of the data (3). The findings will cover our results regarding the field characterization, the projects as well as the skills of institutional entrepreneurs (4). The findings will also be discussed against the background of the theoretical framing (5), and subsequently, conclusions will be drawn (6).

## **2 Neo-Institutionalism and Institutional Entrepreneurship – Theoretical Foundations and Development**

Currently, neo-institutional theory is considered one of the most outstanding and dynamic theoretical approaches in the study of organizations (Alvesson & Spicer 2019). Following the classical account, neo-institutionalism goes back to the papers of Meyer and Rowan (1977), Zucker (1977) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983). One of the core ideas is the understanding of organizations and their development in view of their

institutional environment. This institutionalized environment is conceptualized by the term organizational field which is understood as a set of organizations which "... constitute an area of institutional life; key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products" (DiMaggio & Powell 1983, 148 f). What is more, it is assumed that organizations adopt new structures and practices not for reasons of efficacy but rather of legitimacy (Alvesson & Spicer 2019, 200).

Another key concept is that of the institution understood as taken for granted "... cultured-cognitive, normative and regulative elements that ... provide stability and meaning to social life" (Scott 1999, 48). For a long time, the studies presented focused on the stabilizing effect of institutions as well as on how the generated isomorphisms were established within the organizations of a particular organizational field. But recently, neo-institutionalist theory and research has also started focusing on the change of institutions. Key concepts in this respect are institutional entrepreneurship and institutional work (Herbrechter & Schemmann 2019).

The concept of institutional entrepreneurship, as it was developed within neo-institutionalist theory, is at the center of the theoretical framework for this study.

The concept is closely associated with DiMaggio who already pointed out in a critical paper in 1988 that neo-institutionalist theory also needs to address the creation, development and change of institutions. Thus, he promoted the consideration of actors in neo-institutionalist theory and focused on institutional entrepreneurs: "New institutions arise when organized actors with sufficient resources (institutional entrepreneurs) see in them an opportunity to realize interests that they value high" (DiMaggio 1988, 14).

Perkmann and Spicer (2007) made an important contribution to the conceptual development of institutional entrepreneurship. They took the diffusion of organizational forms, once accepted as legitimate, as a starting point and stated that this happens due to the work of institutional entrepreneurs. They indicated that even though a number of studies focused on the characteristics of institutional entrepreneurship, "... there is a significant degree of uncertainty about what exactly institutional entrepreneurs do when they propagate new organizational forms" (Perkmann & Spicer 2007, 1101). In particular, Perkmann and Spicer (2007) single out that there is lack of clarity as regards the projects institutional entrepreneurs engage in, the skills they need as well as the way the fields they act in are shaped.

As regards the field, Perkmann and Spicer (2007) point out that institutional entrepreneurship is influenced by the field context. In particular, the degree of institutionalization has an impact. The more institutionalized, understood as stable sets of norms, rules and cognitive schemas, the less the chance for change. However, the fact that there is evidence of successful action of entrepreneurs within institutionalized fields indicates "... the existence of differing strategies of institutional entrepreneurship that have so far remained unexplored" (Perkmann & Spicer 2007, 1104).

Referring to the projects the institutional entrepreneurs engage in, Perkmann and Spicer (2007) differentiate between interactional, technical and cultural projects.

As regards interactional projects, political strategies such as network building or co-operation are of importance. “They engage in coalition building, bargaining and incentivizing other actors to gather support for their project, thereby mobilizing and leveraging resources for their operations” (Perkmann & Spicer 2007, 1103).

In contrast to this, technical projects understand institutional entrepreneurs as engaged in ‘theorization’ and finding abstract categories. As an example, a study by Greenwood et al (2002) on the transformation of Canadian accounting firms is referred to. “This change was precipitated by a professional association identifying pressing problems, offering abstract solutions and providing moral justifications” (Perkmann & Spicer 2007, 1103).

Finally, cultural projects imply the framing of institutions so they connect to popular debates and discourses and thus gain in acceptance of wider audiences. Often the connection is made to discourses on “... efficiency, scientific analysis, rationality and impartiality” (ibid.).

Regarding skills, Perkmann and Spicer differentiate between political analytical and cultural skills. Political skills refer to the ability to network, bargain or mediate differing interests as well as to reflect on settled proceedings and to conceive of alternative aims (Perkmann & Spicer 2007, 1103 f). However, this also “... involves the use of analytical skills, such as developing abstract models of an institution” (Perkmann & Spicer 2007, 1104). Similar to cultural projects, cultural skills refer to framing issues by abstract values as well as creating shared identities (ibid.).

Based on their study, Perkmann and Spicer (2007) develop a chart, which summarizes the relations between projects, activities, skills and outcome (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Projects and Skills in Institutional Entrepreneurship (Source: Perkmann & Spicer [2007, 1117])

Project	Activities	Skills	Outcome
Interactional	Networking Resource mobilization Organization building	Political	Innovative organizational form
Technical	Studying Analyzing Designing	Analytical	Theorization of organizational form
Cultural	Framing Propagating Advising Teaching	Cultural	Diffusion of organizational form

In the following, we will employ this theoretical approach as an analytical heuristics for approaching adult basic education networks. We will focus on the field of adult basic education and how institutional entrepreneurs engage with the field. We then shed some light on what types of projects institutional entrepreneurs undertake in

establishing adult basic education networks. And finally, we will take a closer look at the skills institutional entrepreneurs need to accomplish their tasks in adult basic education.

### 3 Methodical Approach

As indicated above, we carried out a secondary analysis of data collected in a research project aiming at identifying governance regimes and forms of coordination of action in adult basic education. In the following, we will characterize the design of this ‘main’ study before outlining the setup of the secondary analysis.

The secondary analysis is based on the data of a *multiple case study*. Within this study *guided interviews* were conducted with *experts from adult basic education*. Yin (2009) identifies four different types of case studies, which differ in structure (see p. 46). A case is considered to be embedded if it comprises several objects of analysis (here: adult education centers, three associations, social work association, political actor). Within an embedded multiple case study design, analyses can be conducted with respect to the individual case as well as across cases. As part of the multiple case study, a total of 12 interviews were conducted in the context of two cases. These twelve interviews are the basis for our secondary analysis.

The basic condition for the selection of the interviewed experts is their activity in the investigated field (literacy and adult basic education). The interviewees are considered functionaries within their field of action because they have a special responsibility and “privileged access to information about groups of people or decision-making processes” (Meuser & Nagel 1991, 443). Thus, adult education program and project managers, management staff of three organizations and one actor from the field of education policy were interviewed. As defined in the interview guideline, the activities of the interviewees within the field, organizational structures of the network at the regional level, financing conditions and the cooperation with other actors were addressed.

The material was analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz 2018). In the light of educational governance, the focus of the main analysis was on the constellations of actors that can be found, the cooperation and the forms of coordination of action as well as the range of adult educational offers. The category system used for this purpose was created in a multi-step procedure combining deductive and inductive category formation (Kuckartz 2018, 100). To check the category system, the intercoder reliability was calculated (Krippendorff 2004), which can be classified as satisfactory at 0.65.

As regards our secondary analysis of the data, the categories ‘*actor constellation*’, ‘*forms of action coordination*’ and ‘*structural field conditions*’ were re-analyzed against the background of the concept of institutional entrepreneurship (Perkmann & Spicer 2007). We formed deductive subcategories and coded the selected data. The focus lies on the characterization of the field, the different forms of projects (*interactional, techni-*

*cal* and *cultural*) and the skills (*social, cultural, political* and *analytical*) that the actors use. The results are presented and discussed in the following. As all the interviews and the coding were carried out in German, the quotations in the presentations of the findings were translated into English by the authors.

## 4 Findings on the Field, Projects and Skills of Institutional Entrepreneurs

The following section presents the findings of the re-analysis of the expert interviews based on our formulated research interest. The focus lies on the analysis of the field (4.1) as well as on the projects and the skills, which will be presented in one subchapter and related to each other (4.2).

### 4.1 Characterization of the Field

Before analyzing the projects and skills that institutional entrepreneurs use to advance the institutionalization, this section focuses on the characterization of the field of literacy and adult basic education. It can be stated that the field is characterized by fragility and constant change as regards funding, thematic orientation and the actors' self-concepts.

Considering the significance of adult basic education in the context of policy there is an extreme disparity between political significance within the talk and the actual political action.

The political actors interviewed describe the important position that adult basic education holds in the current political debate. The topic seems to be omnipresent and is addressed in almost every speech of politicians. However, this relevance is not reflected in the actors' actual political actions.

“When you see what really happens there, you are a bit disappointed that everyone knows how important this topic is and how crucial it is for a career or for participation in society. And yet, a lot of things are still being realized through project funding” (I05\_Pos. 4).

The marginal role that adult basic education plays in policy action is also reflected within educational funding. Especially as regards project funding, the topic occupies a marginalized place compared to e. g. early childhood education or elementary school education. While it is relatively easy to tap funding in these areas, this is not the case in adult basic education. Here, “if we are lucky, every three years a call for tenders is published on the federal level [...], which you should then also win” (I01\_Pos. 22). At the same time, one interviewee addresses that attracting funding is becoming increasingly difficult because “the field is also evolving” (I01\_Pos. 22). While the number of actors increases, the funding pots remain on the same level. The result is “competition at the level of funds” (I07\_Pos. 18). All in all, funding of adult basic education is perceived as rather fragile by the interviewees.

Currently, developed funding lines are also considered to have such fragile aspects. For example, as part of the amendment to the Continuing Education Law in North Rhine-Westphalia in January 2022, the government created the option for adult education organizations to carry out outreach education work. However, the financial resources for this work are not designed for the long term, which counteracts both content and demand of this work. The organization of one interviewee thus finds itself in the situation of “building a structure that may [...] come to nothing two years later because the question of financing has not been resolved” (I11\_Pos. 40).

The increasing professionalization on the part of educational practice is thus countered by a stagnation of funding in fragile and temporary structures. Actors must therefore “always start over again, thinking about the same things” (I07\_Pos. 16).

## 4.2 Projects and Skills

The previous section showed that the field of adult basic education is rather fragile and still in a state of emergence. The focus now is on the analysis of projects in which institutional entrepreneurs engage in for supporting the institutionalization of the field. It becomes clear that the interviewees are engaged in *interactional* as well as *technical* and *cultural projects*. In addition, it is of interest which different skills can be identified within the projects and constellations of actors. Depending on the project, *cultural*, *analytical* or *political skills* become important.

### 4.2.1 Interactional Projects

The actors are engaged in *interactional* projects for the development of adult basic education offers or formats for public relations and sensitization. The consolidation of referral and network structures is another focus of *interactional projects*. While new connections are forged in the context of joint service development and public relations, efforts in referral and network structures aim to intensify and consolidate existing relations.

The collaborative development of adult basic education course offers has the advantage that the actors can benefit from the different resources and skills of the partners involved. These constellations become particularly relevant in the context of life-oriented adult basic education. In this area, one organization in particular cooperates with social work actors. These actors have “access to target groups that we would like to address” (I01\_Pos. 28). An interviewee describes the relationships between partners in this area as “barter transactions” (I01\_Pos. 75). The resources that his organization brings to the barter are *political skills* that he can use to successfully represent the goals of the organization to funders. Secondly, the organization has numerous contacts with teaching staff in the field of adult basic education. In turn, the organization can benefit from organizations in the neighborhood, which can establish diverse access to potential participants. By “matching” (I01\_Pos. 28) the respective resources, offers can finally come about and be carried out. Accordingly, success depends on everyone pulling in the same direction: “There are very good opportunities to say that we are all on each other’s side and can manage this together” (I12\_Pos. 27).



In order to maintain links to the cooperating partners in the city districts, the organization benefits from another actor. City district coordinators established by the council are strongly connected with the organizations in their area. They function as “a link between providers or activists and the council” (I02\_Pos. 34). Thanks to them, the organization gets contacts and access to networks within the city districts at whose meetings it introduces itself and presents “what possibilities we have to cooperate” (I04\_Pos. 16). These collaborations may also aim to jointly plan promotional events to raise awareness. In order to make itself known in a city district, for example, the organization organized a “pumpkin contest” (I02\_Pos. 30) as part of a neighborhood festival. The seedlings were distributed to the people in the spring and eaten together at another festival in the fall. In this way, the organization was able to draw attention to itself and its offerings: “But through this offer, so to speak, we made ourselves known and could then also offer language courses, [...] which were accepted actually” (I02\_Pos. 32).

In addition to advertising specific basic education offers, the content of public relations activities can also be of a sensitizing nature. Here, cooperation is worthwhile for the actors because they can draw on each other’s networks and accordingly generate broader attention. For example, in the case of a jointly developed event, the contacts of one of the actors involved make it possible to “bring political actors on board” (I07\_Pos. 24). Accordingly, *political skills* can also enable access to fields or groups of people to be sensitized.

Public events can also be used to maintain and strengthen existing relationships. First, these relationships can take the form of referential structures. In this case, the goal of the *interactional project* is to place “low-literate individuals who would like to learn to read and write better in courses near them” (I07\_Pos. 4). If these contacts are maintained regularly, “you are actually a permanent fixture, so many people simply know your number” (I12\_Pos. 31). Secondly, relationship management can refer to already existing networks. In this case, the goal of the *interactional project* is to establish formats for exchange of information. The actors inform each other about “new developments in the field and studies, research results, publications” (I11\_Pos. 24). The primary idea is not the development of adult basic education offers, but the mutual benefit from the field knowledge of the participants. Two actors located in particular regional proximity have each appointed a “permanent contact person” (I06\_Pos. 14) for this purpose in order to perpetuate the connection and underline its relevance.

#### 4.2.2 Technical Projects

In the context of *technical projects*, the actors generate new knowledge or verify assumptions about cause-effect relationships. The actors’ interest in knowledge refers either to structure-related questions of adult basic education, new possibilities of recruiting participants or to the development of teaching materials and methods.

*Technical projects* of a structural nature can, for example, address the question of how adult basic education can be anchored within regional educational offerings. One project in the context of life-oriented adult basic education was concerned with the

question of how “literacy and basic education services can be established in socio-spatial structures” (I01\_Pos. 16). The project partners involved were an association, an adult education center and the local university. While the association and the adult education center developed and implemented adult basic education programs, the university provided scientific support. The added value that the university was able to bring to the project was its *analytical skill*, through which new insights could be generated with regard to future adult basic education offers and their continuation. Using these *analytical skills* is a fundamental part of the association’s self-image. The goal is “to generate knowledge through projects, to try things out [...] or also to test new structures” (I01\_Pos. 18). Consequently, the development of the field is an everyday part of the interviewee’s work.

The association carries out similar projects in work-oriented adult basic education. Here, scientific support for the offerings is provided by a research institute. However, the central focus in this area is on “branch targeting” (I02\_Pos. 52). The actors pursue the hypothesis that there are particularly suitable sectors in which “adult basic education can be established quickly” (I02\_Pos. 52). In addition to branch targeting, a second focus is on strategies that can be used to attract businesses to basic education programs. In this area, “many strategies have now been identified, and there have also been some initial successes” (I01\_Pos. 59).

In addition to projects that focus on the structural framework of basic education, *technical projects* can also aim to gain insights into new strategies for recruiting participants. A research and development project in the field of basic political education is dedicated to the question of how low-literate people can obtain information in easy language via an app. In a further step, it is analyzed how to “get low literalized people to learn [...] or support learning” (I09\_Pos. 2) via the app. The *analytical skill* in this case is again brought in by a university that offers “very good technical solutions to look in a research context, which ways do we still have to go” (I09\_Pos. 16).

When participants have been successfully recruited for adult basic education courses, questions from *technical projects* relate to the further development of course materials and the didactics applied. The goal of one project was to develop a “starter kit” (I04\_Pos. 28) for volunteer course leaders. The starter kit contained general information as well as materials for native or second language German speakers. In addition, the field has become increasingly digitized, opening up opportunities for participants to learn online. In this area, “new apps have come along, new categories, and that’s quite a good development” (I06\_Pos. 35). For *technical projects* related to teaching and learning, teachers’ *analytical skills* become relevant in the form of practical and experiential knowledge.

### 4.2.3 Cultural Projects

The goal of *cultural projects* in our particular case is to connect the topic of adult basic education to broader norms and values. This brings the topic to broader attention. In the interviews, the actors report on *cultural projects* with which they intend to increase the importance of adult basic education on the structural level or on the part of poten-

tial cooperation partners. Adult basic education should thus become more integrated into the thinking of these actors. Part of this effort also involves changes in the narrowness or breadth of the concept of adult basic education ensuring connectivity with the objectives of potential collaborators or funders.

The significance of the narrowness and breadth of the concept of adult basic education becomes clear when actors believe that “pure literacy is not goal-oriented” (I05\_Pos. 10). Due to the negative experiences with school-based learning settings on the part of many participants, “the educational offers [...] should be linked to other skills and qualifications” (I05\_Pos. 10) building bridges to adult basic education. This broad understanding of adult basic education, which also includes political or health knowledge, has to be accepted and discussed within the field. The next step for the actors is to make funding instruments connectable to this understanding.

The target objects of *cultural projects* in this case are the funders and the funds at their disposal. The responsible ministry at the state level was persuaded through the intervention of an association to “open up certain funding instruments for further education [...] for the topic of literacy and adult basic education” (I01\_Pos. 53). The organization achieved this success due to “know-how” (I01\_Pos. 53). The projects that have been successfully implemented so far can function as leverage with which the organization can “prove that I’m not just blathering, but that the offerings actually work” (I01\_Pos. 53). One interviewee also demonstrates a high degree of *political skill* at this point as his practical knowledge and success give him an advantageous position in negotiating situations with powerful actors.

The association acts similarly in connection with the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, which it advises on the catalog of topics in life-oriented basic education. Due to these impulses, the catalog of life-oriented basic education has been expanded over the years. Through this expansion the association is “more connectable [...] to certain structures” (I01\_Pos. 53). The *political skill* of the association opens up the possibility to shape the structural framework in his favor.

Another objective of *cultural projects* is to anchor basic education in the mindset of the cooperation partners. The more basic education is accepted as a natural part of the education offered, the more opportunities for cooperation arise for the actors. In order to achieve this, the actors have to connect the topic to the values of the respective cooperation partners. In the area of work-oriented basic education the actors must “argue in the logic of the market economy” (I01\_Pos. 59) in order to be able to successfully place offers in the context of companies. An important factor is *cultural skill* with which the topic is integrated into the system of values and norms of the cooperation partners: “So you shouldn’t think that you’re part of [...] the corporate culture or the neighborhood culture but you have to be able to understand what these people are talking about” (I02\_Pos. 16).

Further opportunities arise for players when former employees take up important positions at cooperation partners. Former employees of I07 “are now working for adult education centers, for example, running them or working as department heads” (I07\_Pos. 20). New network or public relations activities are not necessary in this case

because the connections already exist and the relevance of the topic is already part of the mindset. I09 also reports of a former employee who now holds five different positions in the field of basic education – involvement in two networks; course instructor; honorary employee at an association; editor of a magazine (I09\_Pos. 18). Because of this former employee's various contacts, diverse opportunities for collaborations or networking contacts are opening up for I09.

## 5 Discussion

The findings provide new insights into how actors in the field of literacy and adult basic education are attempting to advance the field. It became clear that they engage in *interactional*, *technical*, and *cultural projects* to ensure their continued existence and success. Depending on the form of the project, different skills of the actors become relevant. Connecting the development of the field described by the actors to the type of projects they carry out, *interactional projects predominate* at the beginning of the engagement in the field before *technical* and finally *cultural projects* become significant.

At the beginning, *interactional projects* in particular are engaged in to make the offerings known and anchor them within the regional structures. Especially in the area of life-oriented adult basic education, where many offers are planned in cooperation with actors from social work, first contacts to the organizations in the city districts and new connections have to be established. In order to be able to place the first offers within the regional service structure, the connection of different resources within *interactional projects* is indispensable. In addition, those actors involved in the field must first get to know each other, build networks and develop a common understanding of their tasks and a common mindset. In this phase, *political skills* are of particular importance for the actors in order to reach participants and gain access to networks and collaborations. The institutional entrepreneurs have to mediate between the different interests, know the competences of the individual actors and be able to combine them.

Once the first reliable connections have been established, the actors have the time resources to advance the professionalization of the field through *technical projects*. The first successful offers act as a basis for identifying conditions for success. The reliable relationships give the actors the security to try out new approaches and to evaluate them with the help of scientific support. On the other hand, the professionalization efforts within the *technical projects* focus on strategies for recruiting participants and the didactic methods used in the courses. This raises the quality of the offerings to a higher level. In the context of *technical projects*, the primary focus is on actors with *analytical skills* who can draw conclusions and make assumptions about cause-effect relationships. Depending on the objective of the project, these can either be universities, research institutes or teaching staff.

The ongoing professionalization ultimately puts the actors in a position to make the topic of basic education connectable to the system of values and norms of powerful

actors by engaging in *cultural projects*. Successfully completed projects and practical knowledge can act as a pressure tool with which the actors can influence the structural conditions of the field. The goal of the effort here is to expand the scope of funding guidelines to include basic education. The focus is particularly on the *cultural* and *political skills* of the actors.

## 6 Conclusion

All in all, it can be pointed out that the field of adult basic education is characterized by fragility and constant change regarding its funding, thematic orientation and the actors' self-concepts. There is also a significant disparity between talk and action. Thus, adult basic education is considered an important field within the political debate. This is, however, not reflected by systematic funding and a stable policy concept.

What is more, the paper made clear that the employed perspective developed by Perkmann and Spicer (2007) proves to be fruitful when analyzing the processes and actors of institutionalization of adult basic education on the regional level. Differentiating the concept of institutional entrepreneurship into the field characterization, the analysis of the projects and the skills needed made a significant contribution to the debate on adult basic education in two ways. On the one hand, it helps analyzing the processes on the regional level and lightens up this so far less researched level. On the other hand, it introduces a theoretical perspective to the debate that will serve to be fruitful when applied to the other levels and the relevant actors, projects and skills. Thus, the perspective might also be helpful when analyzing the institutionalization of adult basic education e. g. on the level of companies.

In terms of transfer to the field of action the identified projects and more importantly the identified skills open up important perspectives since they are also useful for the professionalization of the staff and the design of further education and training programs.

## References

- Alvesson, M. & Spicer, A. (2019). Neo-Institutional Theory and Organization Studies: A Mid-Life Crisis? *Organization Studies*, 40 (2), 199–218.
- BMBF & KMK (2016). *Grundsatzpapier zur Nationalen Dekade für Alphabetisierung und Grundbildung 2016–2026. Den funktionalen Analphabetismus in Deutschland verringern und das Grundbildungsniveau erhöhen*. Available at: [https://www.alphadekade.de/files/01\\_Grundsatzpapier%20zur%20Nationalen%20Dekade%20Alphabetisierung%20und%20Grundbildung\\_final.pdf](https://www.alphadekade.de/files/01_Grundsatzpapier%20zur%20Nationalen%20Dekade%20Alphabetisierung%20und%20Grundbildung_final.pdf) (Access on: July 30<sup>th</sup> 2019).
- DiMaggio, P. (1988). "Interest and agency in institutional theory". In L. Zucker (Ed.) *Institutional patterns and organizations: Culture and environment* (pp. 3–21). Ballinger Publishing: Massachusetts.

- DiMaggio, P. J. & Powell, W. W. (1983). The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 147–160.
- Euringer, C. (2016). Grundbildung im Spannungsfeld bildungspolitischer Ein- und Abgrenzungsinteressen. *Zeitschrift für Weiterbildungsforschung*, 39 (2), 241–254.
- Greenwood, R., Suddaby, R. & Hinings, C. R. (2002). Theorizing change: the role of professional associations in the transformation of institutionalized fields. *Academy of Management Journal*, 45 (1), 58–80.
- Herbrechter, D. & Schemmann, M. (2019). Educational Governance und Neo-Institutionalismus in der Weiterbildungsforschung. In R. Langer & T. Brüsemeister (Eds.) *Handbuch Educational Governance Theorien* (pp. 181–199). Springer VS: Wiesbaden.
- Knauber, C. & Ioannidou, A. (2016). Politiken der Grundbildung im internationalen Vergleich. Von der Politikformulierung zur Implementierung. *Zeitschrift für Weiterbildungsforschung*, 39 (2), 131–148.
- Koller, J., Arbeiter, J. & Schemmann, M. (2021). „Da baut sich was auf, da ist jemand, der ist verlässlich da, der hat auch Geld“ – Akteurskonstellationen, Handlungskoordination und Leistungen in fragilen organisationalen Strukturen am Beispiel der arbeitsorientierten Grundbildung. *Zeitschrift für Weiterbildungsforschung*, 44 (1), 43–62. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40955-021-00179-2>
- Koller, J., Klinkhammer, D. & Schemmann, M. (2020). *Arbeitsorientierte Alphabetisierung und Grundbildung. Institutionalisierung, Professionalisierung und Effekte der Teilnahme*. Bielefeld: wbv.
- Krippendorff, K. (2004). Reliability in content analysis. Some common misconceptions and recommendations. *Human Communication Research*, 30 (3), 411–433.
- Kuckartz, U. (2018). *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Methoden, Praxis, Computerunterstützung*. Weinheim, Basel: Beltz Juventa.
- Lenhart, V. (2018). Erwachsenenbildung und Alphabetisierung in Entwicklungsländern. In R. Tippelt & A. von Hippel (Eds.). *Handbuch Erwachsenenbildung/Weiterbildung* (pp. 1321–1344). Springer VS: Wiesbaden.
- Maguire, S., Hardy, C. & Lawrence, T. (2004). Institutional Entrepreneurship in Emerging Fields. HIV/AIDS treatment advocacy in Canada. *Academy of Management Journal*, 47(5), 657–679.
- Meuser, M. & Nagel, U. (1991). ExpertInneninterviews – vielfach erprobt, wenig bedacht: ein Beitrag zur qualitativen Methodendiskussion. In D. Garz & K. Kraimer (Eds.). *Qualitativ-empirische Sozialforschung: Konzepte, Methoden, Analysen* (pp. 441–471). Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Meyer, J. W. & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology*, 83 (2), 340–363.
- Perkmann, M. & Spicer, A. (2007). ‚Healing the Scars of History‘: Projects, Skills and Field Strategies in Institutional Entrepreneurship. *Organization Studies*, 28 (07), 1101–1122.

- Schemmann, M. (2020). Institutionalisierung arbeitsorientierter Grundbildung. Befunde zu Gelingensbedingungen. In J. Koller, D. Klinkhammer & M. Schemmann (Ed.) *Arbeitsorientierte Alphabetisierung und Grundbildung. Institutionalisierung, Professionalisierung und Effekte der Teilnahme* (pp. 103–114). Bielefeld: wbv.
- Schemmann, M., Herbrechter, D. & Loreit, F. (2014). Anbieterstruktur der hessischen Weiterbildung in räumlicher, organisationsstruktureller und thematischer Perspektive. In M. Schemmann & W. Seitter (Eds.). *Weiterbildung in Hessen. Eine mehrperspektivische Analyse* (pp. 47–82). Springer VS: Wiesbaden.
- Scott, R. W. (1999). *Institutions and Organizations*. London: Sage.
- UNESCO (2000). *The Dakar Framework for Action. Education for All: Meeting our collective commitments*. Paris: UNESCO. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000121147> (Access on: July 30th 2019).
- UNESCO (2003). *United Nations Literacy Decade 2003–2012*. Paris: UNESCO. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000153489> (Access on: June 22<sup>nd</sup> 2022).
- Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case Study Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Zucker, L. G. (1977). The role of institutionalization in cultural persistence. *American Sociological Review*, 42 (5), 726–743. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2094862>

## Authors

**Jakob Bickeböller, M. A.**, is a research associate at the Chair of Adult Education/ Continuing Education at the University of Cologne and a doctoral candidate in the NRW Research Network Basic Education and Literacy. His research interests include basic education, literacy and educational governance.

### Contact

Universität zu Köln  
Humanwissenschaftliche Fakultät  
Department Erziehungs- und Sozialwissenschaften  
Professur für Erwachsenenbildung/Weiterbildung  
Innere Kanalstraße 15  
50823 Köln  
Germany  
[Jakob.bickeboeller@uni-koeln.de](mailto:Jakob.bickeboeller@uni-koeln.de)  
<https://nrw-forschungsnetzwerk.uni-koeln.de>

**Jun.-Prof. Dr. Dörthe Herbrechter** is a junior professor of educational science with a focus on adult and continuing education at the Institute of Educational Science at Heidelberg University. Her research interests include questions of organization and leadership, cooperation within organizations and professionalism of staff in adult education organizations as well as the institutional structure of adult education.

**Contact**

Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg  
Institut für Bildungswissenschaft  
Juniorprofessur für Bildungswissenschaft  
mit dem Schwerpunkt Erwachsenen- und Weiterbildung  
Akademiestraße 3  
69117 Heidelberg  
Germany  
herbrechter@ibw.uni-heidelberg.de

**Prof. Dr. Michael Schemmann** is Professor of Adult and Continuing Education at the University of Cologne. His research interests concern structural developments in continuing education, research on organizations of adult education and internationally comparative adult education research.

**Contact**

University of Cologne  
Faculty of Human Sciences  
Department of Educational and Social Science  
Professorship for Adult and Continuing Education  
Innere Kanalstraße 15  
50823 Cologne  
Germany  
michael.schemmann@uni-koeln.de

ORCID-ID: 0000-0003-0806-7632