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Coordination of Action in Adult Education Organizations

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Die Einleitung bietet einen Überblick über die Forschung zur Handlungskoordination in der Erwachsenenbildung. Das Konzept des diesjährigen Bandes und die Beiträge werden vorgestellt. Der Beitrag schließt mit einigen Bemerkungen des Herausgebers.

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von: Michael Schemmann

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Coordination of Action in Adult Education Organizations. An Introduction to the Topic

MICHAEL SCHEMMANN

Volume 47 of the International Yearbook of Adult Education is dedicated to researching the coordination of action in adult education organizations. Like no other segment of the educational system, adult education is characterized by its institutional heterogeneity. This can be seen at the level of education policy management and institutional framework conditions, for example in distributed legal responsibilities, diverse management impulses or in a large number of national, supra- or international and civil society actors (Schrader 2019). It is also characterized by a low level of regulation of professional requirements and access routes, so that professional positions can be achieved with different qualification profiles. At the organizational level, diverse forms of regulation can be seen in different funding structures, forms of financing, internal working and employment conditions or strategies for recruiting and developing staff. This institutional heterogeneity, which is realized in different forms at different levels, opens up scope for flexibility and innovation on the one hand, but on the other hand also entails specific requirements. At the level of adult education organizations, these are, for instance, reflected in the fact that they are dependent on successful coordination of action with a large number of individual and organized actors in order to sustainably enable adult learning both internally and in their interaction with their environment (Schemmann 2015). In addition, institutional heterogeneity implies specific arrangements such as the separation between teaching, which is predominantly provided on a part-time or freelance basis, and program planning and scheduling tasks. This division of labor additionally challenges the coordination of action within the organization (e. g. Autor:innengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung 2022).

In view of this situation, volume 47 of the International Yearbook of Adult Education focuses on questions of sustainable coordination and regulation in organized adult education. The aim is to take up questions of coordination of action for different actor constellations and levels of adult education. Such questions have so far been largely neglected in adult education research. With this volume, we want to contribute to this debate.

This introductory article will start off by briefly focusing on the research activities regarding the coordination of action in adult education organizations. Next, the concept of this year's volume and articles will be presented. The article will conclude with some remarks on our own account.

1 Researching Coordination of Action in Adult Education Organizations

Division of labor and coordination of action are distinct characteristics of organizations following Mintzberg (1979) and other social scientists. This holds particularly true for adult education organizations which provide the formal and non-formal adult learning offers. However, for adult education organizations, the division of labor implies coordinating actors within and outside the organizations. Both program planning staff and freelance teaching staff need to work together to plan and realize educational offers (Schemmann & Bonn 2023, 10).

Against this background, it is astonishing that hardly any studies refer to “coordination of action” in their terminology (*ibid.*, 11). It has been the recent popularity of the educational governance perspective that brought about studies referring to ‘coordination of action’ explicitly, since next to multi-level system, institution and actors it is one of the key concepts within the perspective (Altrichter 2015). Particularly within the field of adult basic education, research studies were presented which employed the educational governance perspective and the category of ‘coordination of action’ explicitly. We want to refer to two examples. Bickeböller (2022) analyzed the coordination of action within a regional network of adult basic education and pointed to the relevance of the involvement of political actors for a successful implementation of a network. Koller, Arbeiter and Schemmann (2021) also analyzed constellations of actors and coordination of action within the rather fragile field of adult basic education. They found that adult basic education can be understood as a differentiated multi-level system of varying density in which the actors coordinate their actions in different ways when securing or developing their performance.

However, while not explicitly referring to ‘coordination of action’ “various studies focus on coordinative practices, forms of cooperation and collaboration or patterns of interaction between different actors in adult education organizations and beyond” (Schemmann & Bonn 2023, 11). In their analysis of research studies somehow addressing the coordination of action in adult education organizations, Schemmann and Bonn (2023) identify three key findings. Firstly, they point to the finding that coordination of action is mostly researched in a bilateral constellation, e. g. administration staff and planning staff or teaching staff and planning staff are focused on. Secondly, they refer to a gap as regards the relation of organizations and forms of coordination of action:

“Though a considerable share of studies presented here points to the significance of the organizational context when analyzing coordination of action, there are barely any studies which explicitly link specific organizational structures and different organizational forms to certain mechanisms of coordination.” (Schemmann & Bonn 2023, 20)

And thirdly, they find that a number of studies give insights into how actions are coordinated and how they are aligned to fit the organizational objectives even though they do not address coordination of action explicitly (*ibid.*). Schemmann and Bonn (2023)

argue for a research program that considers the complexity of coordination of action in adult education organizations.

“Consequently, it needs to be considered that there are multiple forms of coordination of action simultaneously going on within an organization which are likely to produce interaction effects or even dysfunctionalities. Thus, coordination of action has to be viewed as multiple coordination of action and also requires multimethodical approaches.” (Schemmann & Bonn 2023, 21)

2 On the Concept and the Individual Contributions

When planning the content structure for volume 47 of the International Yearbook of Adult Education, we were driven by two central goals. On the one hand, we wanted to include only empirical contributions in order to broaden the empirical basis of the debate. On the other hand, we sought to vary the institutional context within and between the contributions.

In detail, volume 47 of the International Yearbook of Adult Education comprises the following articles:

The article “...well advised to look at what the federal state is doing...’ – An empirical analysis of constellations of actors and coordination of actions in Adult Education Centers” by Martina Engels employs the educational governance perspective and aims at analyzing processes of governance in adult education organizations. Following the key concepts of the educational governance perspective, the article focuses on relevant actors, the constellations of actors and the coordination of action within the actor constellations as well as the impact on the educational performance profiles. Methodically, Engels employs a maximum contrasted case comparison. The study is based on episodic interviews with managing and program planning staff of adult education centers. Analyzed by means of qualitative content analysis, the article reveals profiles of adult education centers as regards the relevant actors, coordination of action and performance profiles. The study is based on data collected within the project “Governance structures and pedagogical performance profiles in continuing education organizations” (GLOW) funded by the German Research Association.

Gwennaëlle Mulliez focuses on migrant self-organizations in her article “Die größte Herausforderung ist, alle zufrieden zu stellen’ – Mesodidaktische Handlungskoordination in Migrant:innenselbstorganisationen”. These organizations have not yet been at the center of interest in adult education research. Mulliez starts by stating that planning processes within adult education organizations are characterized by complex interdependencies which need diverse forms of coordination. Based on 17 semi-structured interviews which were analyzed by employing content analysis, the qualitative study explores actors and action-oriented interests in the context of program planning. The focus is on the internal perspective of employees in migrant self-organizations. The findings shed light on relevant actor constellations and task coordination within multiple interest constellations. In addition to the unique perspective on migrant sub-

jects and collectives as active actors in the multi-level system of adult education, the article provides several suggestions for analyzing interest-driven agency within coordination processes in adult education.

Eva Bonn's article "It has a lot to do with trust ...' – Mechanisms of Social Control in the Coordination of Action between Teaching and Planning Staff in Adult Education Organizations" focuses on the coordination of action between teaching and planning staff. Bonn understands this coordination of action as a pivotal process for providing adult learning. Theoretically, Bonn draws back on system theory, structuration theory and neo-institutionalism. She argues that trust and power are key mechanisms of social control in the context of the analyzed process of coordination. Based on 18 expert interviews with teaching and planning staff of adult education organizations, the article analyzes mechanisms of social control within this constellation of actors. The findings suggest a particular significance of personalized mechanisms of social control while institutional arrangements seem to play a minor role.

The article "Professional commitment of staff in continuing education – a professional characteristic compared across different working conditions" by Sara Reiter and Harm Kuper aims at analyzing the relation between organizational conditions and professional commitment. The article starts from the fact that staff in adult education organizations vary greatly as regards the contract situations, the organization of work as well as the qualifications they have. In view of these challenging circumstances for professionalization in adult education, the article focuses on professional commitment as an attitude-based component of professional competence and analyzes in how far it is related to employment status, activity profiles, and (academic) qualifications. Based on data from the *wb-personalmonitor*, this article provides desiderata for future research on professionalization in adult education and gives hints to personnel development in adult education organizations.

Next to the articles to the key subject section, this year's volume of the International Yearbook of Adult Education also includes one article in the section Miscellaneous. Civic and political education is at the center of the article by Thomas Theurer. He develops a suggestion for mapping the heterogeneous research field. Theurer begins his paper by arguing for a probabilistic typification in view of a broad corpus of publications. Based on a database of 287 publications published between 2011 and 2022, he then employs a structural topic model and differentiates seven approaches. The article analyzes distinctive terminologies as well as the relations between the approaches and thus offers an outline of dimensions along which the articles can be located within the research field. The article also identifies desiderata for future research.

The volume is further complemented by three reviews written by Marie Bickert, Julia Plechatsch and Tim Roor.

3 On our Own Account

Unfortunately, two distinguished colleagues, who were of major importance for the International Yearbook of Adult Education, passed away this spring. On March 22, 2024, Joachim H. Knoll, the founder and long-term editor of the International Yearbook died in Hamburg. Born in 1932, Joachim H. Knoll studied History, German Studies and Economy in Munich and Erlangen. After his PhD in 1956, he worked as a journalist for two years and after that joined the University of Hamburg. In 1964, he became a full professor at the University of Bochum and stayed there until his retirement in 1998.

One of Joachim H. Knoll's central scientific achievements is that he already turned to international and comparative questions in the constitutive phase of adult education science. From the end of the 1960s, studies were presented on the German-German comparison or on the importance of inter- and supranational organizations. Another cornerstone of his international orientation was the founding of the International Yearbook of Adult Education. In the first volume, published 1969, Joachim H. Knoll wrote in the foreword:

“I have felt again and again that in adult education and in the scientific institutions that deal with adult education there is a lack of cooperation, of international knowledge and of a discussion that leads to improvements, corrections or even self-assurance. [...] This yearbook would like to try to become a forum for an international debate, whereby a problem that is of particular interest or concern to science or practice should be the focus.”

All in all, Joachim H. Knoll edited 26 volumes of the International Yearbook of Adult Education. His contribution to the field of adult education and learning has been outstanding, especially in the quality of the research. He will be greatly missed.

On March 25, 2024, John Field, who served as a member of the editorial board of the International Yearbook of Adult Education from 1999 till 2012, passed away. Born in 1949, John held an initial degree in history and did his doctoral studies in Economy and Social History. Via Warwick and Bradford, John Field was appointed as a Professor of Continuing Education at Ulster University in 1994 and returned to Warwick University as a Professor for Lifelong Learning in 1998. In 2002, he moved to the University of Stirling as a Professor of Lifelong Learning and as Deputy Principal. John Field was an international scholar with an immense reputation. The record of his research and publications is more than impressive. He authored or edited 17 books and wrote about 100 journal articles as well as numerous book chapters. John Field was an advocate of social justice through learning and education and of international solidarity. He will be greatly missed, as well.

I would like to thank all authors of the contributions who prepared their manuscripts within the deadlines. What is more, I am also grateful to all reviewers of the articles and to the authors of the review section.

My personal thanks go to *Eva Bonn* who runs the editorial department of the International Yearbook of Adult Education. She constantly works on improving the quality of processes which guarantee the standard of the International Yearbook of Adult Education.

Volume 48 of the *International Yearbook of Adult Education* will focus on the topic "Social-Diagnostic Perspectives on Adult Education". We welcome contributions to the key subject of this volume as well as contributions to the sections Miscellaneous and Reviews.

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Author

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 adult education organizations and international-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
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0806-7632>