



BECOMING AN ADULT EDUCATOR: BIOGRAPHICAL PATHWAYS OF SOCIAL WORKERS AT THE INTERSECTION OF SOCIAL WORK WITH GROUPS AND ADULT EDUCATION

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Abstract

This study explores the biographical pathways through which social workers whose education and professional experience include Social Work with Groups enter and develop professionally in Adult Education. It examines how prior experience of working with groups, experiential learning, training, and certification contribute to the development of adult educator competence, and how participants make sense of the relationship between the two fields within their professional identities. The study used a sequential, two-phase qualitative design. The first phase comprised two focus groups with social workers with and without certification of adult educators' educational competence by the National Organisation for the Certification of Qualifications and Vocational Guidance (EOPPEP). The second comprised 40 biographical narrative interviews with certified social workers, divided into two groups according to their period of certification. The findings show that adult educator competence develops through non-linear biographical and professional trajectories and that certification serves different functions depending on its position within a professional biography. In some cases, it systematises and formally recognises knowledge and skills developed previously; in others, it contributes to the initial pedagogical structuring of the educator role. Experiential learning emerges as a key point of intersection between Social Work with Groups and Adult Education, while convergence between the two fields does not erase their distinct professional purposes and boundaries. Their relationship is

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incorporated into professional identity through synthesis, complementary expansion, or bounded convergence.

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1. Introduction

Despite growing interest in lifelong learning and the professional development of adult educators, less attention has been paid to how professionals with an established disciplinary and professional background enter Adult Education and reinterpret their prior knowledge and experience in relation to a new educational role. This question is particularly relevant to social workers, whose education and experience in Social Work with Groups include knowledge and practices that overlap with core principles and processes of Adult Education, while the two fields remain distinct. Entering Adult Education therefore involves more than assuming an additional professional role or obtaining certification. It raises questions about how prior knowledge and experience are reinterpreted within a new field of practice and how the relationship between the two professional fields becomes integrated into professional trajectories and identities.

The aim of this study is to investigate the biographical pathways through which social workers whose education and professional experience include Social Work with Groups enter and develop professionally in Adult Education. More specifically, the study examines how prior experience of working with groups, experiential learning, training, and certification contribute to the development of adult educator competence, and how participants make sense of the relationship between the two fields within their professional trajectories and identities.

2. Main research question

- How do social workers' biographical pathways into Adult Education develop, and how do they make sense of the relationship between Adult Education and their prior education and experience in Social Work with Groups?

2.1 Research subquestions

- 1) How are social workers' prior education and experience in Social Work with Groups related to the development of their competence as adult educators?
- 2) What roles do experiential learning, education, and certification play in different pathways into Adult Education and subsequent professional development within the field?
- 3) How do social workers make sense of the relationship between Social Work with Groups and Adult Education, and how is this relationship integrated into their professional identity?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Professional development and the adult educator role

The professional development of adult educators extends beyond initial training or the acquisition of specific teaching skills; it is an ongoing process of learning and professional growth (Kedraka, 2017; Ioannou, 2023). The heterogeneity of Adult Education, the variety of settings in which educational work takes place, and the changing demands of the role make continuing professional development necessary, although training opportunities and qualification requirements vary across European countries (Ioannou, 2023, 2024). Employment conditions and professional uncertainty also shape participation in continuing education, linking individual professional development to the wider employment context (Werner & Martin, 2023).

In Greece, the development of the adult educator role has been closely connected with training, the institutional development of the field, and certification (Kokkos et al., 2014; Kedraka, 2017). Kokkos et al. (2014) challenge approaches that reduce the development of professional competence to the certification of discrete skills and instead emphasise an educator who is able to reflect critically on practice and facilitate meaningful learning processes. Kedraka (2017) similarly presents professional development as a process that continues throughout working life and encompasses lifelong learning, inquiry, reflection, and self-evaluation. The continuing importance of education after certification is also evident in the study by Valkanos et al. (2010) on certified adult educators, while Anthopoulou et al. (2017) relate professional development to skills, education, further training, and certification.

Professional development also involves the ongoing construction and reconfiguration of professional identity. Recent Greek research indicates that adult educators' identities are reshaped over the course of their careers in relation to personal and professional characteristics and to the social, historical, and cultural contexts in which the role is enacted (Kefala & Platsidou, 2024). Motivation, self-efficacy, a sense of responsibility, and professional commitment are among the dimensions involved in this process (Kefala & Platsidou, 2024). From a biographical perspective, experiences that precede entry into Adult Education may likewise shape both identity formation and educational practice (Koutoulidou & Gravani, 2024).

Adult educators' professional development can therefore be understood as an evolving process in which education and continuing learning, professional and biographical experience, reflection, and professional identity are interwoven (Kokkos et al., 2014; Kedraka, 2017; Ioannou, 2023; Koutoulidou & Gravani, 2024). This perspective is especially relevant to professionals who enter Adult Education after developing knowledge, experience, and professional frames of reference in another field, because it draws attention to how an earlier professional trajectory becomes connected with a new educational role (Ioannou, 2023; Koutoulidou & Gravani, 2024).

2.2. Experiential learning, experience, and reflection

Experience is central to adult learning, yet having an experience does not in itself amount to learning (Kolb, 1984; Morris, 2020). In Kolb's (1984) account, learning occurs through the transformation of experience in a process that links concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. A more recent systematic review likewise identifies active engagement and critical reflection as crucial dimensions of experiential learning (Morris, 2020). Experiential learning, then, should not be equated either with mere participation in an activity or with the use of active and participatory techniques (Kolb, 1984; Morris, 2020).

Adults' prior experience constitutes an important learning resource, but its educational potential emerges through interpretation, processing, and reconsideration (Mezirow, 1991; Morris, 2020). Within transformative learning theory, critical reflection involves examining the assumptions and frames of reference through which experience is interpreted, thereby opening possibilities for their revision (Mezirow, 1991). Kedraka (2018) likewise links active participation and educational experience with critical reflection and the potential for transformative learning, while Tzovla and Kedraka (2023) emphasise reflective processing and continuity across the learning experience.

Contemporary approaches retain the connection between experience, reflection, and action while arguing that experiential learning must also respond to the complexity of contemporary learning environments and to the social and cultural conditions in which learning takes place (Dillard et al., 2024). From this perspective, experiential and participatory techniques are not ends in themselves; they are means of generating experiences that can subsequently be examined, reflected upon, and connected with further action (Kolb, 1984; Morris, 2020). Role-play or a group activity, therefore, does not by itself make a learning process experiential. What matters is how the experience generated through the activity becomes linked with reflection, meaning-making, and subsequent action (Kolb, 1984; Morris, 2020).

This distinction is particularly important for professionals who enter Adult Education having already developed ways of working grounded in relationships, group processes, and the exploration of experience. The central question is not simply whether earlier practices are transferred into a new educational field, but how prior experience is worked through and reinterpreted in relation to new learning purposes (Mezirow, 1991; Morris, 2020). Experiential learning therefore offers a framework for examining how earlier professional knowledge and practices acquire new meanings within the educator role without assuming that they are carried over unchanged from one professional field to another.

2.3. Education, certification, and adult educator competence

The education and certification of adult educators are linked to the institutional development of the field and to efforts to define the knowledge and competences required to perform the adult educator role (Kokkos et al., 2014; Mikulec, 2019; Ioannou, 2023). At the same time, the diversity of adult education roles and settings makes it

difficult to construct a single understanding of adult educator competence based solely on predefined sets of competences (Mikulec, 2019; Ioannou, 2023).

In Greece, certification has played an important role in the institutional development of the field (Kokkos et al., 2014). The current system for certifying the educational competence of adult educators in non-formal learning is administered by the National Organisation for the Certification of Qualifications and Vocational Guidance (EOPPEP). It provides different routes to certification depending on applicants' educational background and prior adult education teaching experience and includes both theoretical and practical assessment, with microteaching forming part of the practical component (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2023; Manoudi, 2024). Since 2014, certified educational competence has been a requirement for trainers participating in certain publicly funded non-formal learning programmes financed through national or European resources (Manoudi, 2024).

The institutional significance of certification does not, however, make it equivalent to adult educator competence as a whole. Kokkos et al. (2014) acknowledge its contribution to the institutional consolidation of the field while also highlighting the limitations of an approach centred on the formal certification of discrete skills. European research likewise points to substantial heterogeneity in the roles and competences of adult education professionals (Mikulec, 2019; Ioannou, 2023, 2024). Certification may therefore provide formal recognition of knowledge and competences without encompassing the broader process through which adult educator competence develops. This distinction is reinforced by research emphasising the continuing nature of professional development. Valkanos et al. (2010) show that certification does not eliminate the need for continuing education, while Anthopoulou et al. (2017) relate professional development to skills, education, further training, and certification. Ioannou (2023) similarly stresses the need for systematic professional development throughout the career. Adult educator competence can therefore be understood not as a fixed outcome of certification but as an evolving capacity shaped by education, experience, practice, and continuing learning (Kokkos et al., 2014; Mikulec, 2019; Ioannou, 2023).

The distinction between formal recognition and the development of adult educator competence is particularly relevant to professionals who enter Adult Education with an already established disciplinary and professional background. The heterogeneity of adult educators' pathways calls for attention to their pre-existing knowledge and experience and to the ways in which these are further developed and recognised within the new field (Mikulec, 2019; Ioannou, 2023). Certification can thus be examined not as a stand-alone indicator of adult educator competence, but in relation to the position it occupies within the educator's broader professional trajectory (Kokkos et al., 2014; Ioannou, 2023).

2.4. Biographical learning and professional identity

Professional learning is embedded in biographical trajectories: new knowledge and experiences acquire meaning in relation to what has come before and to how individuals understand their professional roles (Hof & Maier-Gutheil, 2011; Koutoulidou &

Gravani, 2024). Professional development therefore involves more than acquiring knowledge and skills; it also entails working through earlier experiences and making sense of one's professional trajectory.

From a biographical and learning perspective, Hof and Maier-Gutheil (2011) identify different forms of professional learning across the life course and relate them to their institutional and social contexts. Milana and Søgaaard Lund (2009) similarly draw attention to different routes into Adult Education and to processes of professional identity formation. An earlier professional trajectory is therefore not a neutral background; it becomes part of how the educational role is interpreted and enacted.

Koutoulidou and Gravani (2024) likewise show how earlier life experiences and social influences contribute to the formation of adult educators' identities and are connected with their educational practice. Paulos and Cavaco (2023) highlight the heterogeneity of professional identity in relation to initial education, professional context, and employment trajectories. From a related biographical perspective, Orfanidou et al. (2025), in their study of health professionals, demonstrate the importance of making sense of lifelong learning experiences in the formation of professional identity.

Professional identity can thus be approached as an evolving process through which earlier and later experiences, knowledge, and professional roles become connected and reinterpreted over the course of a career (Hof & Maier-Gutheil, 2011; Milana & Søgaaard Lund, 2009; Koutoulidou & Gravani, 2024; Paulos & Cavaco, 2023). This perspective is particularly appropriate for examining professionals who enter Adult Education after having already formed a professional identity in another field.

2.5. The intersection of Social Work with Groups and Adult Education

Social Work with Groups and Adult Education are distinct in their professional contexts and specific purposes, yet they share important areas of affinity around the group, participation, interaction, and the use of experience (Gitterman & Shulman, 2005; IASWG, 2006; Warkentin, 2017). In Social Work with Groups, the group is a setting for relationships, interaction, mutual aid, and change, and professional practice depends on understanding group dynamics, relationships among members, and the group's development over time (IASWG, 2006; Toseland & Rivas, 2017). Mutual aid is especially important because it enables members' experiences, knowledge, and capacities to become resources for both individuals and the group as a whole (Gitterman & Shulman, 2005; IASWG, 2006).

The literature on Social Work with Groups also stresses the value of experiential and reflective learning in developing knowledge and skills for group work (Warkentin, 2017; Baird et al., 2024). Warkentin (2017) brings together didactic teaching, experiential participation, and reflection, using the group's own experience as a site of learning. Baird et al. (2024), similarly, show how group process and mutual aid can contribute to critical reflection in social work education.

In Adult Education, experience, active participation, and reflection are likewise central dimensions of learning (Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1991; Morris, 2020). Experience

becomes educationally meaningful through interpretation and processing, while active participation alone is insufficient to make a process experiential (Kolb, 1984; Morris, 2020). The group, experience, participation, interaction, and reflection therefore constitute significant points of intersection between the two fields (Warkentin, 2017; Morris, 2020).

This affinity should not be understood as equivalence. The two fields may converge not only in shared processes but also in orientations toward participation, empowerment, and social change (Freire, 2000; IASWG, 2006; UNESCO, 2016). In Adult Education, learning may be connected with critical thinking, active participation in social life, and, particularly within critical and emancipatory traditions, empowerment and social transformation (Freire, 2000; UNESCO, 2016). In Social Work with Groups, the group is both a context and a means of professional intervention through which, depending on the group's purpose and type, practitioners may seek mutual aid, support, empowerment, member development, and social change (Gitterman & Shulman, 2005; IASWG, 2006; Toseland & Rivas, 2017). The distinction between the two fields therefore lies not in the absence of shared processes or broad orientations, but in their different professional contexts, specific purposes, and the functions those processes serve within each field.

For social workers who also practise as adult educators, educational practice draws on an already developed body of knowledge and experience concerning groups and group processes (IASWG, 2006; Warkentin, 2017). This relationship implies neither a simple transfer of skills nor an automatic integration of the two fields. The analytical focus instead lies on how prior knowledge and experience are recognised, reinterpreted, and given new meaning within the educator role and across the professional trajectory (Hof & Maier-Gutheil, 2011; Koutoulidou & Gravani, 2024).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The study used a sequential, two-phase qualitative design in which findings from the first phase informed the more in-depth investigation undertaken in the second. Two focus groups were conducted initially with social workers active in Adult Education. Focus groups enabled the exploration of experiences and contrasting perspectives through participant interaction and helped identify issues requiring further investigation (Morgan, 1996, 2010). The first group comprised professionals without EOPPEP certification of adult educators' educational competence, whereas the second comprised certified professionals. Certification was used as a criterion for group composition and as a basis for comparison, not as an a priori indication of greater professional competence.

The focus groups explored participants' training and experience in group facilitation, their use of experiential practices, and their experience of distance education. Analysis identified issues warranting deeper biographical investigation: education and professional experience in Social Work with Groups, professional development in Adult

Education, the place of experiential practices within professional trajectories, and the ways participants made sense of the relationship between the two fields.

In the second phase, 40 biographical narrative interviews were conducted. The biographical narrative approach made it possible to examine the temporal dimensions of professional experience and the ways in which participants reconstruct and make sense of their trajectories by connecting different learning and professional experiences (Tsiolis, 2006, 2010, 2014; Rosenthal, 2013). The inquiry therefore extended beyond participants' views of Social Work with Groups and Adult Education to the place these experiences occupy within their overall professional biographies. The thematic axes of the interviews were developed from issues that emerged during the first phase and were not retrospectively imposed as a predetermined analytical framework on the focus groups. The focus groups thus functioned as an exploratory first phase from which the axes of the subsequent biographical inquiry were developed. The empirical analysis reported in this article focuses on the biographical interviews.

3.2. Participants, data collection, and ethics

Thirteen social workers with experience in Adult Education took part in the first phase: seven without and six with EOPPEP certification of adult educators' educational competence, forming the two focus groups, respectively. Certification served as a criterion for group composition and a basis for comparison rather than as an indicator of professional competence.

The second phase comprised 40 biographical narrative interviews with certified social workers active in Adult Education. Participants were divided into two groups of 20 according to their period of certification. Group A comprised social workers from an earlier cohort of certified adult educators who had been certified under the former National Centre for the Accreditation of Lifelong Learning Providers (EKEPIS) system and, subsequently, under EOPPEP, up to and including 2014. Group B comprised social workers certified in 2021, the most recent cohort at the time the sample was formed. The certification period was used as a basis for comparison in examining the position of certification within professional trajectories, not as an independent causal explanation for differences between the groups.

Before the interviews, participants completed an anonymous online questionnaire covering basic aspects of their educational and professional trajectories. Participation followed informed consent. Pseudonymisation was applied during transcription, and information that could directly or indirectly identify participants was removed or replaced. The same principle was followed in the excerpts presented in the findings.

3.3. Data analysis

The analysis focused on the content, temporal organisation, and meaning-making of professional trajectories, consistent with the biographical narrative approach (Tsiolis, 2006, 2010, 2014; Rosenthal, 2013). Within-case analysis was conducted first, reconstructing each participant's trajectory with particular attention to education,

experience with groups, entry into Adult Education, certification, and subsequent teaching experience. Particular attention was paid to transition points and to how later experiences prompted the reinterpretation of earlier knowledge and practices.

This was followed by cross-case analysis within each group and comparative analysis across the two groups. Through iterative comparison, the analysis examined both the different pathways through which adult educator competence developed and the ways in which the relationship between Social Work with Groups and Adult Education became incorporated into professional identity. These pathways were treated as analytical configurations of professional trajectories rather than as fixed or mutually exclusive types of people.

4. Findings

The analysis identified different pathways into Adult Education and subsequent professional development. Prior experience, education, certification, and later educational practice occupied different positions and carried different meanings within participants' biographies. At the same time, participants understood the relationship between Social Work with Groups and Adult Education in different ways, ranging from strong integration to complementarity and convergence accompanied by explicit professional boundaries.

4.1. Biographical pathways in the development of adult educator competence

For several narrators, engagement with experiential learning and group work preceded certification and could be traced back to their social work studies. One narrator recalls that "we did quite a lot of role-play" and "we also worked in groups," yet what she identifies as having "stayed with me" is "experiential learning [...] beyond the theoretical": "the experiential part is what stays with you." Her emphasis on what is remembered distinguishes experiential learning from theoretical knowledge, for which, as she notes, "you always go back to your books." Experiential learning, by contrast, is recalled as knowledge that remains tied to the experience itself.

The connection between theory, lived experience, and professional practice also appears in other narratives. During practice-placement supervision, "real experiences we were having in placement" were brought "to the whole group," where participants discussed "how we felt about the way a colleague handled it" as well as their own responses. One narrator captures the value of this collective processing in the phrase "that helped us enormously," while role-plays were also based on "the placement settings each of us was in." Experiential education was thus linked early on to real professional situations, collective processing, and feedback. This pathway, however, was not shared by everyone. Another narrator states that she "didn't really experience the group, either during placement or at university," to the same extent as she did later when her work involved daily contact with large numbers of people. The contrast shows that competence in working with groups does not develop at a single or common biographical point: for

some, its foundations are laid during formal study; for others, it develops primarily through professional practice.

Against these different starting points, certification also occupies different positions. In some trajectories it encounters an already developed familiarity with groups and experiential learning. Microteaching is remembered as "demanding" and prepared "with a lot of effort," but as having gone "very well." In another account, the practical dimension of certification is located precisely in microteaching: "to get certified, you actually had to work with the group [...] and do your microteaching." Although the narrator describes it as only "a somewhat practical part" and as "an examination," she nevertheless recognises it as an experience of actually working with a group.

For another narrator, what remains from certification is not primarily the examination but the group experience: "I really liked all that interaction we had with one another," because "we all had a group spirit" aimed at "helping [...] each candidate adult educator." Here certification acquires educational significance through interaction and mutual support rather than solely through the assessment of individual performance.

The significance of certification is not the same across biographies. One narrator distinguishes formal certification from a later educational process that he repeatedly describes as "very [...] good." He recalls "books," "many other very helpful texts," "experiential" work, and "assignments," concluding that "a lot of good work had been done." In his account, therefore, the greater biographical weight lies not in certification itself but in the learning process around it, which brought together theoretical study, experiential participation, and educational practice.

In other cases, certification encounters professional knowledge that is already experienced as familiar. One narrator describes its theoretical content as "very familiar": "it wasn't something unknown," but rather "what we had been doing all those years [...] what a social worker does." Even in microteaching, she believes that "being a social worker helped me there," particularly with "how the whole thing would be set up" and with "communication." In this trajectory, certification functions more as the recognition and systematisation of an already developed professional foundation than as its point of departure.

Competence continues to develop through actual educational practice. Particularly striking is the account of a social worker who describes role-play with a group of women with multiple sclerosis as "extraordinary" ("it was extraordinary [...] because they were extraordinary") and uses the same term for experiential activities with upper-secondary students: "they were extraordinary." The repetition conveys the intensity with which she makes sense of using role-play with real groups and distinguishes these experiences from its earlier use in an examination setting.

Another narrator places "working with the group" and the "interaction" among members, and between herself and the group, at the very heart of Adult Education. She repeatedly describes what occurred as "extraordinary," linking it to "all that depth that was there as we talked, as we interacted," to "the emotions that came to the surface," and to the process of "working on myself, getting to know myself." What she ultimately calls

"the perfect thing" is "the connection that existed among us." Here, the real group appears not simply as a setting in which techniques are applied, but as a relational space for self-awareness and learning.

Professional experience simultaneously functions as a continuing field of learning. Referring to a demanding period of educational work, one narrator repeats, "I learned so many things [...] so many things!" and concludes that he learned "both organisationally and educationally [...] as an adult educator." In another narrative, development is described as an ongoing search: initial studies provided "the foundation" and "the beginning," but "many of the things I did later I learned through other training and through continually searching and looking for more."

The development of adult educator competence therefore appears as both biographically differentiated and ongoing. Certification sometimes organises and institutionalises an already established professional foundation; in other cases, the learning process surrounding certification carries substantial educational significance; and in still others, certification lies closer to the initial formation of the educator role. Across these variations, however, competence is not exhausted by certification. It continues to develop through experience with real groups, interaction, feedback, reflection, and continuing learning.

4.2. Experiential learning as a point of intersection between the two fields

Experiential learning is a recurring point through which narrators recognise the connection between Social Work with Groups and Adult Education. This connection is not attributed simply to the use of similar techniques, but to active participation, interaction, communication, experience, and group dynamics. One narrator, for example, recalls social work workshops as settings in which "we worked in a clearly experiential way," using role-play and "active participation," and directly links this experience to Adult Education: "Social Work reminded me very much of Adult Education [...] and vice versa." She attributes the connection to "active participation," "interaction," and "very good communication."

The experiential dimension, however, is not located in the technique itself. A central criterion is whether a practice is appropriate for the particular group. One narrator explains that choices are made "depending on where we want to take the group" and "depending on the goal we have." She states this even more explicitly: "depending on the goal and the needs of the group [...] these are our criteria [...] each time," that is, "where we want to take the group or what the group is asking from us." The same activity may therefore be used differently depending on the intended purpose and the needs expressed by the group. The same logic appears in another narrative, where the choice of techniques depends on "what topic you have, what group you have [...] and who you are." The final phrase brings the facilitator into the experiential process as a relevant parameter: the suitability of a practice depends not only on content and participants, but also on the capacities of the person facilitating it.

Prior knowledge from Social Work with Groups becomes particularly important when experiential work brings personal material into the learning space. One narrator initially locates the connection "in the experiential part." When a learner is able to speak "about personal [...] experiences," she feels that "this clearly enters our own role." At this point she identifies a clear boundary of competence: "you also need to have the knowledge to be able to handle it. Adult Education alone isn't enough." Social work knowledge is relevant here not because the educational group becomes a therapeutic group, but because the emergence of personal material requires an understanding of groups, relationships, and boundaries. The same account is revealing because the narrator's meaning-making shifts as she speaks. At first, she identifies the connection mainly "in the experiential parts." When asked where the two fields do not overlap, however, she reflects: "now that I think about it, I think it's involved everywhere. But perhaps less so in the non-experiential part." The phrase "now that I think about it" captures meaning-making as an unfolding process rather than a fixed, pre-existing position.

Other narratives also support the convergence of the two fields without diminishing the importance of purpose. One narrator says that the fields are connected "depending on the purpose and the goal of the group" because they "rest on many similar things." She identifies as shared processes the roles that "will appear in every group," "interaction," and "the lived experience and experience each person brings into the group." Similarity is therefore located in group processes and in the use of experience, while the purpose of the particular group remains a point of differentiation. Experiential learning thus emerges as a key setting in which the two fields meet, but not as a mechanism that makes them identical. Narrators identify a shared language of active participation, interaction, communication, lived experience, and experience, while at the same time relating the selection and facilitation of experiential practices to the goals, needs, and dynamics of the particular group. Pre-existing knowledge from Social Work with Groups is not transferred wholesale into Adult Education; it is reactivated and becomes especially significant when the educational process calls for an understanding of groups, relationships, and professional boundaries.

4.3. The relationship between Social Work with Groups and Adult Education in professional identity

Narrators identify important areas of affinity between Social Work with Groups and Adult Education, yet they do not make sense of the relationship in the same way. The analysis identified three ways in which this relationship is incorporated into professional identity: synthesis, complementary expansion, and bounded convergence. These forms do not correspond to fixed or mutually exclusive types of people; rather, they represent different ways in which the relationship between the two fields is incorporated into and interpreted across a professional trajectory.

4.3.1. Synthesis

In some biographies, the two fields are brought together within a shared professional philosophy. One narrator states that "for me, they are very closely connected," because "the way you facilitate a group as an educator and as a social worker [...] has so many elements in common." Facilitation and encouragement are also described as shared features ("encouragement is there in both [...] in some way"), leading her to conclude that "for me, these two are very close." The connection is also grounded in long-term experience of working with groups, which she describes as "a great school."

In a stronger formulation, another narrator considers "Adult Education to be part of Social Work with Groups" and states that "there is a direct relationship." He also recognises continuity in practice: "what we did in Social Work with Groups, I saw again in Adult Education," identifying "a great many common elements" in "group dynamics," which in Adult Education appear "more specialised and more up to date." In these pathways, Adult Education becomes integrated into a pre-existing professional identity, with knowledge of groups, facilitation, encouragement, and an understanding of group dynamics functioning as elements of continuity between the two roles.

4.3.2. Complementary expansion

In a second form, the two fields complement one another without becoming fully integrated. One narrator locates their common basis in fundamental conditions for group functioning: "Can you work with groups if you don't have a contract?" and "Can you work with groups if you haven't created a climate of trust [...] a positive climate?" Overall, he describes them as "parallel things," recognising shared principles without treating the fields as identical.

The relationship also acquires biographical meaning. Looking back on an early experience ("when I was young, I used to teach the children in our apartment building"), he feels that this "eventually clicked into place with Adult Education through Social Work." The phrase "clicked into place" condenses the connection between different experiences within a continuing professional trajectory. Expansion also appears in another narrative. A social worker "already has quite a lot of resources": "has learned to listen," "to observe," "to facilitate," and "to work with groups." With additional training in Adult Education, the social worker can "see another side of the profession." Adult Education thus broadens the existing professional repertoire without replacing the initial professional identity.

4.3.3. Bounded convergence

In a third form, convergence is accompanied by a clear awareness of different purposes and professional boundaries. One narrator makes the relationship between the two fields contingent on "the purpose and the goal of the group." Although she believes that they "rest on many similar things," identifying shared features such as the roles that "will appear in every group," "interaction," and "the lived experience and experience each

person brings into the group," the group's purpose remains a central basis for differentiation.

The need for boundaries is captured vividly through the metaphor of a "puzzle." One narrator argues that a social worker in Adult Education needs "to combine" the different elements "very well," "to make a good puzzle," while at the same time ensuring that they "don't get confused." Convergence, therefore, does not mean an uncritical transfer of knowledge from one field into the other.

The boundary becomes clearer in practice: a social worker cannot import a psychodynamic approach into an educational group and "make interpretations about the group or its members." Instead, one needs "to let it run more as a group, to let it flow with its own dynamics." Boundary work therefore also concerns how professionals use, or deliberately refrain from using, parts of their available disciplinary repertoire.

Similarly, when experiential work brings personal material to the surface, one narrator notes that when a learner speaks "about personal [...] experiences," "our own role clearly comes into it." At that point, "you also need to have the knowledge to be able to handle it," because "Adult Education alone isn't enough." Knowledge from Social Work with Groups thus provides a foundation for recognising and responding to what emerges while preserving the boundaries of the educational role.

Bounded convergence therefore captures convergence without fusion: the "good puzzle" coexists with the warning "don't get confused," just as the "many similar things" coexist with the different "purpose and goal" of the group. Convergence involves both drawing on shared elements and recognising distinct professional purposes and boundaries.

4.4. Comparison and synthesis of the two certification cohorts

The two groups do not form homogeneous or opposing categories. Both contain different pathways in the development of adult educator competence and different ways of making sense of the relationship between Social Work with Groups and Adult Education. In Group A, professional maturation and a more consolidated integration of Adult Education into the overall professional trajectory are more prominent. The greater temporal distance from certification provides a broader biographical span within which later experience, revision, and reinterpretation can occur. Group B shows greater heterogeneity in points of entry into Adult Education and makes more visible the process through which the connection between the two fields is recognised and negotiated. For some participants, certification lies closer to the initial structuring of the educator role, while experiential and relational fluency continues to develop through practice. This difference is a tendency within the research material rather than an absolute distinction. The certification period is not treated as an independent causal factor, and substantial heterogeneity remains within both groups.

Overall, becoming an adult educator emerges as a non-linear biographical process for social workers. Certification serves different functions according to its position within the professional trajectory: in some cases, it systematises adult educator competence that

has already developed; in others, it is more closely associated with the initial pedagogical structuring of the educator role. Experiential learning remains a consistent point of intersection between the two fields, but shared processes do not imply identical professional purposes. The appropriateness of a practice depends on "the goal and the needs of the group," while the emergence of personal material brings into view the claim that "Adult Education alone isn't enough," highlighting both convergence and the need for professional boundaries. Finally, the relationship between the two fields is incorporated into professional identity through synthesis, complementary expansion, or bounded convergence. These forms describe different ways of organising and making sense of professional experience biographically rather than fixed types of people.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that the development of the social worker's role as an adult educator neither begins nor ends with certification. Rather, the educator role is shaped by an already established professional biography and continues to evolve through education, practice, and reflection. This pattern is consistent with approaches that understand adult educators' professional development as a continuing learning process embedded in biography (Hof & Maier-Gutheil, 2011; Anthopoulou et al., 2017; Kedraka, 2017).

5.1. The role of certification within professional trajectories

Certification does not serve the same function across professional trajectories. When it follows years of experience with groups and prior educational practice, it functions primarily to systematise and formally recognise knowledge and skills developed previously. When it occurs closer to entry into Adult Education, it may contribute more substantially to the initial pedagogical structuring of the educator role. The finding therefore distinguishes certification from adult educator competence itself.

Greek scholarship has highlighted both the importance of certification in the institutional development of the field and the need to avoid reducing educator competence to the formally certified possession of discrete skills (Kokkos et al., 2014). European research similarly points to heterogeneity in the roles and competences of adult education professionals (Mikulec, 2019), while continuing education remains an essential dimension of professional development after certification (Valkanos et al., 2010; Anthopoulou et al., 2017).

The present study adds a biographical dimension to this discussion by drawing attention to the position certification occupies within a professional trajectory. Its significance depends on the knowledge and experience that precede it, as well as on subsequent opportunities for application, reflection, and further learning. The same institutional process may therefore serve different functions and acquire different meanings depending on its position within a professional biography.

5.2. Experiential learning as the reinterpretation of prior knowledge

Experiential learning provides a central site at which prior knowledge and experience of working with groups intersect with the new educational role. The findings do not reduce the relationship between the two fields to the use of similar experiential or participatory practices. More importantly, they show how experience, participation, and interaction are used and processed within the group to acquire educational meaning.

This distinction is consistent with experiential learning theory, according to which experience does not automatically amount to learning but becomes educational through the ways in which it is processed (Kolb, 1984). In his systematic reconsideration of Kolb's model, Morris (2020) emphasises active engagement, links to real-world problems, and the crucial role of reflection in turning experience into learning. The narrators' emphasis on working through real cases, feedback, and meaning-making also resonates with transformative learning's focus on critical reflection and the reconsideration of experience (Mezirow, 1991).

The group as a setting for experiential and reflective learning is also highly significant in Social Work with Groups. Warkentin (2017) brings together theoretical, experiential, and reflective learning in education for group work, while Baird et al. (2024) show how group process and mutual aid can support the development of critical reflection.

The present findings nevertheless show that this pre-existing experiential and group-work background is not simply transferred intact into Adult Education. It is reinterpreted within a new pedagogical context and takes on different functions according to the purpose and needs of the educational group. Experiential learning therefore operates not as a technique mechanically shared by both fields, but as a site in which earlier professional knowledge is worked through and given new meaning within the educator role.

5.3. Shared processes, different professional purposes

The group, interaction, participation, experience, and relationships constitute major areas of affinity between the two fields. In Social Work with Groups, group dynamics, mutual aid, collaboration, and the development of group process are central dimensions of professional practice (Gitterman & Shulman, 2005; IASWG, 2006; Toseland & Rivas, 2017). In Adult Education, experience, active participation, and reflection likewise take on central educational functions (Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1991; Morris, 2020).

The findings, however, show that shared processes do not imply a shared professional purpose. The distinction becomes particularly visible when experiential work activates personal or emotionally charged material. Knowledge of group dynamics can then help the social worker-educator recognise and respond appropriately to what emerges while maintaining the boundaries of the educational role.

From this perspective, the finding of "convergence without fusion" is particularly revealing. The two professional fields may draw on common processes, but the functions those processes assume are shaped by the purpose, context, and boundaries of the

particular professional role. Convergence therefore does not imply equivalence; it may involve integrating shared elements while retaining distinct professional purposes and boundaries.

5.4. Professional identity as biographical reconfiguration

Entry into Adult Education does not appear as the simple addition of a second professional role. Narrators reinterpret earlier experiences in light of their subsequent trajectories and, conversely, approach the educator role through knowledge and experience acquired previously. This finding aligns directly with biographical approaches to professional learning.

Hof and Maier-Gutheil (2011) conceptualise adult educators' professional development as a process unfolding over time through different forms of professional learning. Milana and Søgaaard Lund (2009) likewise show that pathways into Adult Education are linked to prior professional experience and processes of professional identity formation. Koutoulianou and Gravani (2024) highlight the contribution of earlier life experiences to identity formation and educational practice, while Orfanidou et al. (2025), drawing on biographical narratives of health professionals, show how lifelong learning experiences become connected with the meanings attributed to professional trajectories. Adult educators' professional identities are also characterised by heterogeneity related to initial education, professional pathways, and the different contexts in which educational work takes place (Paulos & Cavaco, 2023).

In the present study, this dynamic is reflected in three forms of relationship between Social Work with Groups and Adult Education: synthesis, complementary expansion, and bounded convergence. These are not fixed categories of people but different ways in which earlier and newer professional experiences become connected and acquire new meaning over time. Professional identity thus emerges as an evolving biographical configuration rather than a fixed outcome of moving from one professional field into another.

5.5. The temporal positioning of certification within professional trajectories

Comparing the two groups adds a temporal dimension to the biographical interpretation of the findings. In Group A, consolidation of the connection between the two professional roles is more pronounced, whereas Group B more visibly displays the heterogeneity of entry points into Adult Education and the process through which the relationship between the two fields is recognised and negotiated. This difference represents a tendency in the material and does not justify attributing causal force to the timing of certification.

A biographical perspective approaches professional learning as a process that develops across the life course and is connected with the professional and institutional contexts in which it takes place (Hof & Maier-Gutheil, 2011). Milana and Søgaaard Lund (2009) similarly identify different professional pathways into Adult Education and highlight the significance of prior professional experience in forming the educator role,

while Orfanidou et al. (2025) emphasise the biographical meaning-making of lifelong learning experiences.

From this perspective, greater temporal distance from certification is not interpreted as a cause of greater professional maturity. Narratives in Group A encompass a longer span of subsequent professional experience through which the relationship between the two roles can become the object of retrospective interpretation and meaning-making. In Group B, by contrast, the more recent timing of certification makes more visible, in this particular material, the processes through which the educator role is formed and its relationship with prior professional experience is recognised and negotiated. The distinction therefore concerns different temporal positions from which professional trajectories are narrated and interpreted, rather than a hierarchy between the two groups in terms of professional development.

5.6. Conclusion

The study conceptualises the development of the social worker's role as an adult educator as a biographical process in which prior professional knowledge and experience, experiential learning, certification, and educational practice play different roles. Knowledge, skills, and ways of working developed before formal entry into Adult Education may contribute to the subsequent development of adult educator competence, while certification assumes different meanings depending on what precedes and follows it within a particular professional trajectory.

At the same time, the case of social workers shows that entering a related professional field as an already established professional involves more than acquiring additional skills. It entails reinterpreting earlier knowledge and experience within a new professional context, forming new connections, and negotiating the boundaries between two roles. Experiential learning emerges as a central site in this process because it enables prior professional experience to be used and reinterpreted within the educator role. Convergence between the two fields therefore does not imply equivalence; shared processes can coexist with distinct professional purposes and boundaries.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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