

## BOOK REVIEW

**Andreas Frejes and Erik Nylander (Eds.) *Mapping out the Research Field of Adult Education and Learning* Springer Nature, Cham, Switzerland, 2019, 242 pp. ISBN 978-3-030-109455 (hbk)**

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In the book *Mapping out the research field of adult education and learning*, Andreas Frejes and Erik Nylander (2019) offer a comprehensive overview of the research landscape, research methodologies and emerging trends within adult education (AE) and learning. They adeptly contextualize adult education within broader societal, economic, and political contexts, shedding light on the diverse factors influencing adult learning practices. Apart from this, the book helps to uncover the networks and communities of researchers, often referred to as “invisible colleges” (p. 4), who are actively engaged in adult education. The book is also significant because Frejes and Nylander critically analyse current research trends and identify areas for future exploration and inquiry. Their insights into emerging topics such as lifelong learning, digital literacy, and the impact of neoliberal policies on adult education offer valuable guidance for researchers seeking to contribute meaningfully to the field. The volume also speaks about ‘*Bildung*’, which encompasses a personal growth journey that intertwines education, nurturing, knowledge, culture and personal responsibilities towards humanity and the world. This concept encourages lifelong learning by promoting critical thinking, self-reflection, and the continuous quest for personal growth (Laros et al., 2017). The authors’ reference to such a concept is laudable for providing an enriching basis for AE.

Several key findings were identified by the authors. Firstly, some characterise adult education as a “weak field” (Fejes & Nylander, 2019, p. 16) due to its fragmented nature and lack of coherence. Another significant finding is the concept of “invisible colleges” (p. 75), referring to researchers who know each other and their work, which serve as a framework influencing the boundaries of discussion within the field. Additionally, the historical evolution of AE research mirrors the history of AE in practice, changing “from social movements and AE movements in the early years through university departments in the period of institutionalisation to international bodies in the present” (p. 199). This shows how the relationship between the theory and practice in AE is an issue.

Whilst, the book discusses several theories, other AE relevant theoretical perspectives could have been explored, such as postmodernism, critical theory, and ecological perspectives. While the book discusses critical pedagogy, postmodernism, and critical theory offer alternative perspectives on adult education that emphasize deconstruction of power structures, cultural narratives, and knowledge production. These theories question dominant ideologies and challenge traditional notions of education and learning (Hamilton, 1997), which could have been explored deeper in the book. Additionally, with growing concerns about sustainability and environmental challenges, theories related to environmental education, and ecological literacy, adult learning contexts are increasingly relevant. These perspectives explore the interconnectedness between human societies, the environment, and lifelong learning for sustainable development (Clover et al., 2013).

The volume serves as a guide for scholars, educators, and policymakers seeking to understand the key themes, theories, methodologies, and trends shaping the field. It is a good introduction to the topic in hand; yet does not delve into enough day-to-day practices within adult education. Having said that, the scholarly thought and research discussed still expose the reader to theories and perceptions to adult education.

While the book does not delve into asset-based community development (ABCD), there are potential connections that can intersect. ABCD is a strengths-based approach that emphasizes identifying and leveraging the existing assets, and resources within communities to promote

positive change and sustainable development, focusing on local assets instead of solely addressing needs (Russell, 2022). Similarly, the book discusses co-creation of knowledge, community empowerment, community-based learning and experiential learning, which parallel the community-centred approaches advocated in ABCD theoretical foundations.

The editors and contributors conducted a bibliometric analysis that specifically examined three crucial elements that shape the connection among scholars in the field of adult education: indexation, publication, and citation. The imagery of 'mapping' allows us to conceptualize the interconnections among 'items on the map', akin to how this book navigates the landscape of adult education research and theories. However, this approach also presents certain limitations. Their selection of journals was restrictive as they opted for data exclusively from "Scopus and Web of Science" (Fejes & Nylander, 2019, p. 55), inadvertently excluding potentially valuable studies from other sources that might have warranted further research. It is conceivable that a list of the AE articles published in journals like the *International Journal of Educational Development*, or the *Cambridge Journal of Education* would perhaps better reflect the status of AE research than the specialist journals. Although, qualitative research entails the personal experiences and depth analysis, the researchers' choice for mostly qualitative journals shows their specific interests in the journals used, specifically in Chapters 7 and 8.

To add to this, as their concentration was on English-language journals, they overlooked developments in regions where research may not have been published in English. The editors were aware of this as can be seen in (Fejes and Nylander, 2019):

what would our results be if we drew on data from other geographical sites and included altogether different language regimes? Would the image of the field perhaps look entirely different if we included other sources of data in our analysis, such as books and book chapters or conference proceedings? (p. 135).

Additionally, the absence of primary research may lack the richness of insights gathered from stakeholders, community leaders, or policymakers that work within AE. Despite the limited research, the

reliable sources organised patterns and relationships among AE theories and research through conceptual mapping, guiding the reader to understand the field's overarching structure. Finally, their data set comprises of over 150,000 citation links among over 33,000 distinct authors from five prominent AE journals between 2006 to 2014, providing a telescopic view derived from the cumulative impact of citations.

In sum, the book's strengths lie in its exploration of various theoretical perspectives, including critical pedagogy, experiential learning, andragogy, transformative learning, and sociocultural approaches. This theoretical grounding enriches readers' understanding of adult education research and practice. Moreover, Chapter 10, focusing on historical aspects, was fulfilling, though it would have been more beneficial earlier in the book. Chapter 7's discussion on reflexivity was noteworthy but lacked depth, which may discourage readers. I agree that the editors encourage introspection on the AE research field and learning. As an aspiring adult educator and current community development worker, this broadened my understanding with fresh perspectives.

While the book offers insightful resources, this book speaks about the field, rather than discussing from within the field. I advocate for *praxis*, which is the integration of theory and practice in a dynamic, dialectical and transformative process (Ritchie, 2023), which the book does not cover. As the title suggests, the book primarily focuses on mapping out the research field of adult education, providing a solid theoretical foundation and highlighting research methodologies. However, practitioners seeking practical guidance on implementing strategies or addressing real-world challenges in AE may need to supplement this book with additional resources. More practical examples of how these concepts apply in real settings could enhance the book's usefulness for individuals seeking actionable practices. Moreover, some sections are dense, particularly for newcomers to the field of adult education.

Despite these limitations, *Mapping out the research field of adult education and learning* (2019) remains a valuable resource for scholars, researchers, and practitioners seeking a comprehensive overview of the theoretical foundations and research landscape within adult education. Yet,

supplementing the book with additional readings and practical examples can enhance its applicability to diverse educational contexts.

## References

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