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Social exclusion in EU lifelong learning policies: prevalence and definitions

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to analyse the concept of social exclusion in EU lifelong learning policies: how the concept has evolved from the 1990s in terms of meaning, definitions and closely connected concepts, what are the implications of this evolution, and whether there is coherence between the conceptual evolution and lifelong learning policy. Using a qualitative methodology, this article focuses on policy documents that form the European Union's legal and political framework of reference in the lifelong learning area in the last two and a half decades. A total of 59 documents issued between 1992 and 2017 have been analysed using content analysis. The analysis of the documents has been complemented by 6 semi-structured interviews with EU lifelong learning experts. The results show that the concept is narrowly defined in terms of specific groups at risk of being socially excluded and in terms of employability, thus individualising the problem of exclusion and distracting attention from structural factors.

KEYWORDS

Social exclusion; lifelong learning; policy; EU

Introduction

The concept of social exclusion originated in France during the 1960s and spread to other European countries following the economic crisis of the 1980s (Silver, 1994). The European Union (EU) had a key role in introducing the concept throughout Europe by incorporating it in its policy discourse and its research policy, and by creating a space where the concept could be discussed (Saraceno, 2002). While several policies in the late 80s and throughout the 90s addressed social exclusion, it was only a minor concept and concern in the EU and its member states until the Lisbon strategy (Daly, 2012). In 2000, the Lisbon strategy turned social exclusion into an indispensable part of EU social policy (Levitas et al., 2007; Marlier, Atkinson, Cantillon, & Nolan, 2007) and gave social exclusion a richer identity (Daly, 2006).

Hence, Daly (2006) has distinguished two periods of the EU's engagement with social exclusion: the period from 1989–1994, and the period beginning with the Lisbon strategy. In the first period, the EU's engagement was limited to a discursive level and social exclusion was mentioned in resolutions, recommendations and communications that were non-binding which meant that while social exclusion was identified as something undesirable and in need of reform, there was a lack of programme of activity and very little action at member state level (Daly, 2006). The second period saw the start of a coordinated programme on social exclusion, which originated in Brussels and obligated member states to focus their social policy planning and development on fighting social exclusion. During this second period, the open method of coordination for social protection and

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social inclusion (Social OMC) was created as a main policy framework in the field of EU social protection (European Commission, 2016b), the year 2010 was designated as the 'European Year of combating exclusion and poverty' (European Network Against Racism, 2008), fighting poverty and social exclusion became one of the five main targets of Europe 2020 (European Commission, 2010a), and the European platform against poverty and social exclusion was launched in 2010 as one of the leading initiatives of the Europe 2020 strategy (European Commission, 2016a).

The concept of social exclusion has been explored in EU social policies (Abrahamson, 1995; Atkinson & Davoudi, 2000; Béland, 2007; Bernhard, 2006; Daly, 2006; McDevitt, 2003; Silver, 2007). In the field of lifelong learning, research has focused on specific socially excluded groups such as youth (Fergusson, 2004; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007), migrants (Devos, 2011; Souto-Otero & Villalba-Garcia, 2015), mental health care service users (Stenfors-Hayes, Griffiths, & Ogunleye, 2008), older adults (Lido, Osborne, Livingston, Thakuriah, & Sila-Nowicka, 2016), or working class adults (Findsen, Mcewan, & Mccullough, 2011), as well as different programmes and delivery modes (De Greef, Verté, & Segers, 2012; Patterson et al., 2016; Ravenscroft, Dellow, Brites, Jorge, & Catalão, 2018; Webb, 2006). Regarding lifelong learning policy, the concept of social exclusion has been analysed in policy documents from England (Williams, 2013) and the UK (Edwards, Armstrong, & Miller, 2001). The aim of this article is to analyse the concept of social exclusion in EU lifelong learning policies: how the concept has evolved from the 1990s until today in terms of meaning, definitions and closely connected concepts, what are the implications of this evolution, and whether there is coherence between the conceptual evolution and lifelong learning policy. We argue that social exclusion is narrowly defined in terms of specific groups at risk of being socially excluded and in terms of employability, thus individualising the problem of exclusion and distracting attention from structural factors.

Social exclusion

Social exclusion is a contested concept which has different meanings and interpretations. Definitions of social exclusion vary greatly and often focus on: groups at risk of exclusion, what people are excluded from, the problems that are associated with exclusion, the processes involved and levels at which they operate, or the actors and agents that are involved (Mathieson et al., 2008). The groups at risk of being excluded could denote different groups such as: single parents, the suicidal, addicts; what people are excluded from could range from: livelihood, secure employment, property, land, housing, education, skills, welfare benefits, to citizenship, humane treatment, or personal fulfilment; the problems associated with social exclusion could refer to: unemployment, poor skills, low income, poor housing, crime, poor health or family breakdown; and the agents and actors involved could range from globalisation, transnational organisations, nation states to excluded individuals or groups (Mathieson et al., 2008).

However, what the various definitions have in common is that they all conceptualise social exclusion as multidimensional, dynamic and relational (Mathieson et al., 2008). As a multidimensional concept, social exclusion encompasses social, political, cultural and economic dimensions and operates at different social levels, as a dynamic concept it has a changing and interactive nature, and as relational it entails a focus on social relationships (Mathieson et al., 2008). According to Silver (2007), social exclusion is also context-dependent and differs across countries as isolation and belonging have different meanings for different groups and cultures. For example, a society which values solidarity would view living alone as a disadvantage, while a society which values individualism could view it as a sign of independence, self-sufficiency, and privilege (Silver, 2007). Thus, the concept has quite a different usage in OECD and non-OECD countries (World Bank, 2013). In Europe, social exclusion has historically been defined in terms of homelessness, unemployment, and poverty, in South Asia it has been defined in terms of caste, ethnicity and gender, and in Africa in terms of poverty and voice (World Bank, 2013). There are also differences within the EU. Each member country has defined social exclusion based on its own specific context (McDevitt, 2003). The Netherlands has focused on

the lack of financial resources and skills, as well as disadvantaged groups, the UK has framed social exclusion in terms of deprivation, and France has adopted a more comprehensive approach tackling all aspects of exclusion (McDevitt, 2003). Therefore, it is difficult to find one generally accepted definition in the EU, especially after the enlargement process and the accession of previously communist countries (European Network Against Racism, 2008). One of the definitions used by the European Union, and adopted as part of the EU's Lisbon stategy can be found in the 2004 *Joint Report on Social Inclusion* (World Bank, 2007). The report defines social exclusion as:

> a process whereby certain individuals are pushed to the edge of society and prevented from participating fully by virtue of their poverty, or lack of basic competencies and lifelong learning opportunities, or as a result of discrimination. This distances them from job, income and education and training opportunities, as well as social and community networks and activities. They have little access to power and decision making bodies and thus feel powerless and unable to take control over the decisions that affect their day to day lives (Council of the European Union [CEU], 2004, p. 8)

While the abovementioned definition shows the multidimensional character of social exclusion in the EU, Bernhard (2006) argued that the European paradigm of social exclusion is focused around the idea of employment, education and income as the most important dimensions of social exclusion and that employment is the mechanism that can ensure inclusion. Furthermore, although the European paradigm consists of three dimensions, employment seems to be the most important one as the other dimensions are addressed in a way that complements employment (Bernhard, 2006). From the first EU definition of social exclusion, employment has been an important focus as the *Resolution on Combating Social Exclusion* noted that ´the reasons for this process lie in structural changes in our societies and that, of these, difficulty of access to the labour market is a particularly decisive factor´ (Council of the European Communities [CEC], 1989, p.1).

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was used in this study. The research involved content analysis of policy documents and interviews. The preliminary codes were developed a priori drawing on the existing theoretical work by Mathieson et al. (2008). However, ´even the best deductively generated codes often prove to be limited in real-world application´, so there is often need to inductively identify new codes through an in-depth analysis of the data set (Drisko & Maschi, 2016, p. 43). Thus, the study has elements of both inductive and deductive approach as some of the codes were pre-established, while others emerged from the data in the course of the analysis. The analysed categories included: social exclusion, related concepts, dimensions of social exclusion, factors of social exclusion, and vulnerable groups.

The analysed data included 59 EU policy documents and 6 semi-structured interviews with policy experts. The EU policy documents were selected based on 3 criteria: theme (lifelong learning), source (EC, CEU, EP) and time (1992 – 2017). The first criteria was that they refer to lifelong learning, the second that they are issued by the European Commission (EC), the Council of the European Union (CEU), or the European Parliament (EP), three institutions that were identified beforehand as the main policy making bodies with the EU, and lastly, that they were issued between 1992 and 2017. Only policies issued after 1992 were considered, since 1992 was the year the Maastricht Treaty was issued and education was formally included as an area of collaboration in the EU and a legal basis was created allowing the Commission to promote common education policies and initiatives (Rasmussen, 2014).

The analysed documents were then divided into three periods. The first period is the period before the Lisbon strategy (between 1992 and 2000), the second period is the period of the Lisbon strategy (2000 to 2010), and the third period is the period of Europe 2020. While only a few documents pertain to the first period, the majority come from the second and third period as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Documents analysed by source and time frame.

Source	Period before Lisbon strategy (1992–2000)	Period of Lisbon strategy (2000–2010)	Period of Europe 2020 (2010–2017)	Total
European Commission (EC)	6	9	14	29
Council of Europe (CEU)	2	12	7	21
European Parliament (EP)				0
EC + CEU		3	3	6
EP + CEU		3		3
Total	8	27	24	59

Table 2. Interviews conducted by type of organisation and gender.

Type of organisation	Male interviewees	Female interviewees
European Commission		2
Organisations on lifelong learning	2	2
Total	6	

The document analysis was complemented by 6 semi-structured interviews with EU lifelong learning policy experts. The participants were selected ensuring that they have been involved in designing lifelong learning policies at the EU level. Two of the interviewees came from the European Commission and four from organisations that focus on lifelong learning and that play a role in designing EU policies (Table 2). The interview questions were organised around the following themes: the policy drafting and consultation process, the concept of social exclusion, the role of social exclusion in lifelong learning and vulnerable groups.

Results and discussion

Prevalence and definition of social exclusion in EU lifelong learning policies

The analysis reveals that the concept of social exclusion is dominant in the EU lifelong learning policies. A total of 46 out of 59 documents focus on social exclusion. The concept can be found throughout all the three periods. It is especially predominant during the first period before the Lisbon strategy. From the 1993 *White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness, Employment: The Challenges and Ways Forward into the 21st Century* which remarks on ′the tragedy of social exclusion and marginality′ (CEC, 1993, p. 117), the concept is often used in the lifelong learning policies. The EU has been engaged with this concept for a long time, and this has been reflected in the lifelong learning policies. The fight against social exclusion and discrimination has been stipulated in the *Treaty on European Union* (Treaty on European Union [TEU], 1992), the *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union* (Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union [TEFU], 2010), and it can also be found in the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997), the Treaty of Nice (2001) and the Treaty of Lisbon (2007). This has ensured that the concept find its place in the lifelong learning area as well.

The analysis shows that social exclusion in the EU lifelong learning policies is increasingly defined through the groups at risk of being socially excluded. The 1995 *White Paper on Education and Training* talked of ′several categories of the population being left by the wayside (young people without qualifications, older workers, longterm unemployed, women re-entering the job market)′ who are ′even more vulnerable since access to knowledge is crucial to fitting into society and finding employment′ (CEC, 1995, p.42). It also set the objective of paying special attention to vulnerable groups as one of its main future directions. The Lisbon strategy (CEU, 2000) called for

giving priority to actions designed for different target groups such as minorities, older people, children, and people with disabilities. Europe 2020 set out the *European Platform against Poverty* initiative which had member states ´define and implement measures addressing the specific circumstances of groups at particular risk (such as one-parent families, elderly women, minorities, Roma, people with a disability and the homeless)´ (European Commission, 2010a, p. 18). The *Council Resolution on a Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning* (CEU, 2011) focused in particular on the low-skilled and the low-qualified, while the 2015 *Joint Report on the Implementation of the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training* (ET 2020) *New priorities for European cooperation in education and training* (Council of the European Union and European Commission, 2015) singled out individuals with special needs, migrants and especially newly arrived migrants, and the Roma.

However, scholars have been critical of this tendency to define the concept of social exclusion in terms of particular social groups. Silver (1994, p. 540) argues that ´exclusion discourse may also ghettoise risk categories under a new label and publicise the more spectacular forms of cumulative disadvantage, distracting attention from the general rise in inequality, unemployment, and family dissolution that is affecting all social classes.´ Similarly, Levitas (1998) claims that by defining social exclusion in terms of those that are included and those that are excluded, we place the reasons for disadvantage outside of society. Nevertheless, Gough, Eisenschitz, and McCulloch (2006) argue that social exclusion is a feature of society and it is created by its structural inequalities. Since social exclusion is created by society as a whole, it does not affect only certain populations but it affects the entire society, and that is why ´measures to alleviate poverty focused solely on the poor cannot succeed: effective policy has to address society-wide processes´ (Gough et al., 2006, p. 126).

However, EU lifelong policies are not concerned with rectifying the causes that have brought about social exclusion. Instead of focusing on the transformation of the social fabric and its structural inequalities which produce exclusion, they tend to concentrate on how different disadvantaged groups can be lifted out of poverty and exclusion. The factors of exclusion are rarely addressed in the lifelong learning policies. When they are, the most cited causes for social exclusion are early school leaving and low skills. The 1993 *White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness, Employment: The Challenges and Ways Forward into the 21st Century* states that ´the problem of *the failure of education . . . is a particularly important and increasingly widespread factor of marginalisation and economic and social exclusion´* (CEC, 1993, p. 118). This is reiterated in the 1995 *White Paper on Education and Training* (CEC, 1995) where school failure is stressed as a factor of social exclusion. While these documents address school failure, other policies talk specifically about early school leaving and/or low skills. Thus, the *Education and Training Monitor 2012* (European Commission, 2012, p. 17) suggests that early school leaving ´fuels poverty and social exclusion´ and the 2015 *Council Conclusions on Reducing Early School Leaving and Promoting Success in School* (CEU, 2015, p. C 417/37) argues that:

> since early leavers from education and training face a higher risk of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion, investing to support the educational achievement of young people can help to break the cycle of deprivation and the intergenerational transmission of poverty and inequality

What is common for these factors is that they do not address the structural causes behind social exclusion. In the policies, we see what Veit-Wilson (1998, p. 45) calls a weak discourse of social exclusion where power relationships and those that do the excluding are not emphasised, solutions which aim to eradicate the powers of exclusion are not provided, and instead ´the solutions lie in altering these excluded peoples' handicapping characteristics and enhancing their integration into dominant society´. Moreover, looking for the reasons of social exclusion and disadvantage in the individual risks constructing these groups as passive victims and creating a culture of dependency on the government and on educational institutions (Williams, 2013).

Regarding how the vulnerable groups are defined and by whom, the interviews revealed that it is the EU member states that decide which groups will be prioritised. A country´s particular situation, context and needs are key in determining which vulnerable groups will be the focus of the lifelong learning policies:

> . . . well if you look at how European policies are designed, it is the member states themselves that have a say, no? For example, if you consider the situation of the Roma people it´s because the member states have said we have problems with the Roma, they are not integrating, they need to be included, so then it is first the countries that determine what the situation is like (Interviewee 2, authors´ translation)

However, international and global events are having an influence as well. The economic crisis of 2007–2008 emerged as an important factor in the second period after the Lisbon strategy. Regarding the third period after Europe 2020 the refugee crisis and the terror attacks across different European capitals were viewed as important influences on the policies, especially in focusing on migrants:

> It´s true with the migrant crisis there was quite a focus on migrant population and refugees, after the terrorist attacks in Paris there was also a strong focus on preventing terrorism and providing young people with other skills and occupation and employment so that they don't radicalise, I mean I suppose it is civil society that represent those groups that can bring their voice heard, and also unfortunately sometimes events happening internationally or at European level like this migrant crisis and terrorist attacks (Interviewee 4).

These events are closely connected with an emergence of a securitarian vision in the EU. Security has arisen as a new policy objective in recent years and has also played a role in singling out different vulnerable groups. Other important events in the third period include the rise of conservativism, the rise of the so-called gig economy, the development of the Agenda 2030 and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, as well as events that are related more closely to education such as the introduction of PIAAC, and moving the unit on adult education from DG EAC to DG EMPL in 2014. Taking over the European Commission presidency, the new president, Jean-Claude Juncker, introduced several changes to the structure of the European Commission departments. As a consequence, the units dealing with Skills and Qualifications, Vocational Training and Adult Educational policies (parts of Unit EAC A3 (Skills and Qualification Strategies; Multilingualism Policy) and parts of Unit EAC B2 (Vocational Training and Adult Education; Erasmus +)) moved from DG Education and Culture (EAC) to DG Employment (EMPL) (European Commission, 2014). Although the head of DG EAC, Martine Reicherts, assured that the move will ´in no way affect the educational aspects´ of the policies and the existing ET 2020 policy framework, she added that ´creating jobs, through growth, competitiveness and skills matching is at the heart of the Commission's priorities and education and training policies are supporting this agenda´ (Nether, 10 November 2015). While DG EAC has tried to support a more balanced concept of adult education that does not focus only on vocational training, other directorates, especially DG EMPL, have always emphasised employability (Rasmussen, 2014). Hence, it seems likely that the internal reorganisation within the European Commission will result in an even stronger emphasis on the economic dimension of lifelong learning and neglecting the most vulnerable groups because of low chances of returns on investments targeted at these groups.

While the policies focus on vulnerable groups, we see that the power to define who these groups are and what their needs are still remains out of the hands of these groups. In her analysis of the equality discourse in EU education and training policy, Brine (1998) also found that the power over disadvantaged groups remains in the hands of other powerful actors such as the member states governments or the European Commission. This imbalance of power affects the decisions that are made, especially in policy making. When the powerful make decisions about the powerless these decisions are more likely to be more harmful than when decisions are made in situations where power is equally shared (Clements, Rapley, & Cummins, 1999). Lacking power signifies that these groups are less likely to receive benefits and government aid, and among the first ones to face funding cuts during times of economic crisis (Schneider, Ingram, & Deleon, 2014).

The economic dimension of social exclusion

While exclusion is multidimensional, certain dimensions can be more relevant than others depending on the context (Silver, 2007). The analysis has shown that the economic dimension is central to the EU conceptualisation of social exclusion. Not only do EU lifelong learning policies focus on the economic dimension, but they stress the economic dimension in a very narrow way referring specifically to labour market exclusion. However, the economic dimension does not only refer to employment, but it can also refer to ´monetary poverty or insufficient income´, as well as ´exclusion from land, credit, and other assets, food and other consumption goods´ (Silver, 2007, p. 2). Yet, employment is central to EU lifelong learning policies. The 1995 *White Paper on Education and Training* (CEC, 1995) and the 1996 *Council Conclusion on a Strategy for Lifelong Learning* (CEU, 1997) link unemployment to social exclusion, and stress them as major concerns in society.

While the previous documents link social exclusion and unemployment, the 2000 Lisbon strategy maintains that ´the best safeguard against social exclusion is a job´ (CEU, 2000, p. 9). A similar message that ´the right, decent job is still a major strategy for social inclusion´ (Interviewee 3) transpired in one of the interviews as well.

The emphasis on the economic dimension has continued throughout the decade and the *Europe 2020 Integrated Guidelines* propose tackling poverty and social exclusion ´through removing barriers to labour market participation especially for women, older workers, young people, disabled and legal migrants´ (European Commission, 2010b, pp. 6–7). Moreover, the 2016 *Resolution on Promoting Socioeconomic Development and Inclusiveness in the EU through Education* makes a similar point:

> Providing people with relevant skills, competences and knowledge drives innovation and growth and promotes personal fulfilment and well-being. It is the best means of preventing individuals from becoming unemployed, thus reducing the risk of poverty and social exclusion (CEU, 2016, p. C 105/1)

It is important to note that all the interviews also emphasised employment as a very important part of fighting social exclusion. It seems that a particularly popular view of social exclusion in the EU is the one which focuses on labour market participation as the way to integrate into society (Jenson, 2000; Levitas et al., 2007). The analysis shows that this view has found its place in the EU lifelong learning policies as well. While the EU has long emphasised the non-economic aspects of lifelong learning, concepts such as equity, inclusion, exclusion and cohesion have always operated within the parameters influenced by the single market (Holford & Špolar, 2012). The EU's roots are profoundly capitalist as competition and free market form part of its founding treaties, and this has shaped EU education policy since the 1950s (Holford & Špolar, 2012).

However, the social exclusion discourse in which employment is central, the so-called social integrationist discourse, not only narrows down the definition of social exclusion to mere participation in paid work, but it conceals the inequalities that exist between paid workers, especially gender and class inequalities (Levitas, 2005). Having a job does not ensure equality, and not everyone who is in employment enjoys fair working conditions. Labour is increasingly becoming instrumental, insecure and opportunistic in the sense that you have to accept whatever job you are offered (Standing, 2011), and these insecure, low-paid forms of work are a reality for many. In their research on youth transitions of disadvantaged young people in the UK, Shildrick and MacDonald (2007) found that these young people have access only to insecure forms of employment and that they are pushed into a secondary labour market where their main challenge is holding on to a job.

Being subjected to unfair working conditions can only perpetuate more inequality. It is no longer only the long-term unemployed that are excluded, but we see more and more that households where low-paid work is common represent ´the most usual kind of excluded life in our sort of society´ (Byrne, 2005, p. 78). According to Sen (2000), exploitative work, unequal terms of social participation and other types of unfavourable inclusion can lead to social exclusion, poverty and deprivation. Furthermore, these kinds of exploitative and unregulated labour market conditions

affect adult education as well, as the benefits associated with adult education are more likely to go to employers and not to workers in the lower echelons (Desjardins, 2017).

One of the interviewees shed some light on the fact that often educators who work in adult education are themselves in a vulnerable situation subjected to insecure working conditions with low pay and no steady contracts. These vulnerable teachers who are being sent to the groups of vulnerable learners are afraid to talk about improving the courses and to be critical of adult education:

> How can we work on the quality when people can´t even live on what they are paid? And when they are in a fragile work situation with limited contracts, and they can be sent home every day, they are paid per hour . . . So they are made silent. And few dare to say more (Interviewee 6)

Silencing teachers and depriving them of a voice and political power can lower the quality of the adult education provision. In a situation like that, disadvantaged learners are subjected to courses of low quality which only perpetuates more exclusion. In an era where we see the rise of a gig economy and precarious, insecure forms of work becoming the norm, this finding highlights that it is not enough to focus on employment, the issue of quality of employment must be addressed as well.

A shift from social exclusion to social inclusion

Although social exclusion is a prevalent concept, a clear shift can be seen throughout the years towards more positive and affirmative notions such as social cohesion and social inclusion. While social exclusion is very much present throughout the two and a half decades, in the second period following the Lisbon strategy there seems to be more focus on social cohesion, and in the third period the focus shifts to social inclusion. From the late 1950s a discourse on peaceful unity, first on external unity and later on increasingly on internal unity, has been dominant in EU education and training policy, revealing the Commission's fears of social conflict and disorder (Brine, 1998). The prevalence of social cohesion in the second period demonstrates that the EU continued to be preoccupied with this issue. The two enlargements in the 2000s resulted in 12 new countries with very diverse economic, social and political contexts joining the union, thus challenging social cohesion. The global financial crisis led to unprecedented unemployment rates, posing a further threat to stability and unity. In this kind of situation, vulnerable groups such as the low skilled were viewed both as at risk and as a potential risk to the knowledge economy that needed to be remedied through lifelong learning (Brine, 2006).

On the other hand, the shift to social inclusion in the third period after 2010 demonstrates a more positive approach. Firstly, there seems to be a general tendency to get rid of harmful language and to replace it with a more positive one where everyone is appreciated and valued. Instead of emphasising the vulnerability of different groups, the focus now is on stressing their strengths, talents and abilities, and their potential to contribute to society as active citizens. Not reinforcing what they lack and their deficits is a more constructive and empowering approach, and ensures it does not lead to stigmatisation. Secondly, the shift from social exclusion to social inclusion means making these groups visible by ensuring they take an active part in society. Inclusion is more than avoiding exclusion or removing barriers. The shift to social inclusion implies a focus on actions and measures that tackle structural problems thus allowing these groups to participate as an essential part of society.

However, the analysis revealed a lack of coherence in the policies. While the concept has evolved, not much else has changed. Just like with social exclusion, there is still a focus on vulnerable groups, as well as a lack of focus on the structural causes. Furthermore, social inclusion is closely linked to employment and economic growth with the *Education and Training Monitor 2015* calling social inclusion and growth ´two sides of the same coin´ (European Commission, 2015, p. 3). Moving from a discursive shift to a paradigm shift is always more slow and requires time. The change or evolution in the way of understanding social exclusion/inclusion should go hand in hand with

action policies that address structural problems, since both concepts reveal, firstly, the factors or variables that intervene in the problem or phenomenon (exclusion), and, secondly, they make explicit the scenario that is to be approached (inclusion). Putting in place effective lifelong learning policies and providing learning opportunities can provide vulnerable groups with a chance to improve their situation. However, lifelong learning policies are not enough to tackle social exclusion. In their study of the potential of adult education to enhance participants' social inclusion which involved 32 vulnerable adults in the Netherlands, De Greef et al. (2012, p. 473) argued that ´lifelong learning might possibly be a lever for achieving a better position in present-day society´, but noted more impact on the individual level than on the collective level of social inclusion. Seeking to integrate these groups back into society without addressing the structural causes of inequality and exclusion will ultimately fail. What is needed is a coordinated effort – putting in place not only well-designed lifelong learning policies but also other public policies such as health, as well as social policies (labour market, housing, land, social welfare), and macroeconomic policies (fiscal, monetary, trade policies). Furthermore, these policies need to be designed with the political power of vulnerable groups in mind. By providing the financial means, processes and platforms we can make certain that they are represented in policy making and have a say in defining their needs.

Conclusions

After analysing the 59 EU lifelong learning policy documents and the 6 interviews with policy experts, with the objective of examining the concept of social exclusion in EU lifelong learning policies: the evolution of its meaning, definitions, and closely connected concepts from the 1990s until today, the implications of this evolution, and the coherence or lack of it between the conceptual evolution and lifelong learning policy, we found that the concept has dominated EU lifelong learning policies in the last two and a half decades. While prevalent throughout the three periods: the period before the Lisbon strategy, the period of the Lisbon strategy, and the period of Europe 2020, the results showed that the concept is narrowly defined in terms of specific groups at risk of being socially excluded and in terms of employability, thus placing the blame on the individual and turning the attention away from the structural causes of social exclusion. Individual characteristics such as school failure and lack of skills are stressed, placing the reasons for poverty and exclusion outside of society and diverting attention away from pressing issues such as the general rise in inequality, poverty, unemployment, precarious employment and the working poor. As for the power to define the groups at risk of social exclusion, it remains out of the hands of these groups with EU member states and international and global events shaping lifelong learning policies and influencing how social exclusion is addressed.

While we have noted a slow discursive shift from social exclusion to social inclusion starting from 2000 and the Lisbon strategy, which points to, on one hand, a trend to use a positive language emphasising the strengths and talents of different groups instead of their vulnerabilities, and, on the other hand, going beyond merely avoiding exclusion and focusing on measures that tackle structural problems, translating change from discourse to practice will require a coordinated response across different policy sectors, as well as providing the vulnerable themselves with an opportunity to define their needs.

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