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Researching inequality and lifelong education from 1982 to 2020: A critical review

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Abstract

This article explores the *International Journal of Lifelong Education* archives in the period 1982-2020. We analyse how the Journal engages with the issue of inequality. This is accomplished by systematically identifying relevant articles within the archives, and reviewing these whilst taking account of the societal, cultural and political or economic contexts in which they were written. Most articles identified for review focussed on specific disadvantaged groups, discussing ways in which adult education might help, support and strengthen them. A minority took a more critical approach, assessing the drivers for inequality, or problematising the role of lifelong education as

a catalyst for addressing inequality or social injustice. In our analysis, we distinguish between inequalities related to class, gender and migration/ethnicity as themes emerging from our initial sweep of the archives, however these themes are represented unequally both in terms of number and attention given across the decades. Perhaps surprisingly, given the different forms of inequality addressed in the Journal, it seems that only very few of these papers can be directly associated with historical events and contexts relevant to the times in which they were written. Theoretically driven conceptualisations of inequality are rarities within the archives, with some notable exceptions.

Keywords: inequality, class, gender, migration, social and political changes

Introduction

Although lifelong education¹ has been high on the policy agenda for decades, associated increased participation is distributed unequally in tandem with a rise in social inequality internationally. Participation in potentially transformative lifelong education remains ‘a deeply unequal matter’ (Boeren, 2016). The analysis of this situation has encouraged the suggestion that providing adult education might contribute to reinforcing inequality and the further marginalisation of marginalised groups (Tuckett, 2017) and potential for conflicting functions of lifelong education is evident amongst literature within the field. While some studies expose lifelong education as precipitating an increase in social inequalities (e.g. Duckworth & Tett, 2019; Lee & Morris, 2016), others demonstrate how learning also has the potential to mitigate inequalities, mainly through serving a transformative and empowering role for individual learners (e.g. Hudson, 2016; Mojab & Carpenter, 2011).

Acknowledging the [above](#) paradox, in this article we consider inequality and lifelong education, focusing on themes of class, gender and migrant/ethnicity background, as revealed within the archives of the *International Journal of Lifelong Education (IJLE)*. Our aim was to identify how authors have engaged with inequality over four decades. We also acknowledge broader cultural, political and economic developments from 1980s to 2020s, allowing our analysis of *IJLE* archives to be contextualised within wider societal concerns over that period.

The paper proceeds in [three](#) sections and a conclusion. Firstly, an overview of influential international developments we identified as the backdrop to which research in lifelong education has taken place. Secondly, we [make](#) an outline of our methodology. [Thirdly, we present our findings, which include a brief analysis of how inequality is conceptualised within the archives, over a forty-year period and an analysis of](#) multiple dimensions of inequality regarding lifelong education, which we have identified, focusing on the themes of class, gender and ethnicity as revealed within the archives. The concluding section summarises the main findings and [points towards](#) directions for further research.

Societal and political changes

Lifelong education and associated research [are](#) shaped by social movements, historical events and economic developments, evolving ‘in concert with the broader society’ (McLean, 2022, p. 5). When the first issue of the *IJLE* was published in 1982, the world was still influenced by the oil-crisis of the 1970s. Despite partial recoveries by the capitalist economies internationally, by the end of the 1970s, the prevalence of price inflation and widespread unemployment [eventually](#) accelerated a drive forward of neo-liberal economic thinking and ideology [in many countries](#). At the same time, the 1980s was also a decade marked by [a renewed Cold War between the Western world and the Soviet sphere as well as declining living standards in Eastern European countries](#).

Culturally, the emergence of AIDS was influential in both reaffirming and pushing against cultural norms around sex and relationships, whilst popular movements against nuclear weapons and environmental damage proliferated in Europe (Davis, 2019).

These wide-reaching political and societal changes were not mirrored immediately in a political or global level policy interest in lifelong education. In the '70s, UNESCO and the OECD promoted an agenda of lifelong education, but they were less vocal when it came to lifelong education policy in the 1980s. To quote Rubenson (2006), '[a]t the end of the 1970s neither recurrent education nor lifelong education was visible on the educational policy scene and it would take a new crisis to bring the underlying idea of lifelong learning back onto the policy arena' (p. 160).

The late 1980s marked major changes in the world order, symbolised by the falling of the Berlin Wall in 1989. By 1990, the pro-Soviet regimes in Eastern Europe had been replaced and the 'iron curtain' running through Europe had fallen. The former East and West Germany were reunified as one country and at the end of 1991, the Soviet Union had ceased to exist and several former regions within the union had gained independence, including Ukraine. Over the same period, in South America, the oppressive Pinochet era ended with the 1989 election, removing him from power. Nelson Mandela was released from prison in South Africa in 1990, an event heralding the end of Apartheid in 1991 (Davis, 2019). Global change also reached the political elites, with the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change agreed on in 1992 and entering into force in 1994 (UN, n.d.). In relation to adult education, the European Union (EU) declared 1996 the European year of lifelong learning, leading up to the adoption of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000.

The 1990s thus saw a renewed interest for lifelong education, with the publication of a series of influential reports and initiatives and the EU emerging as a key stakeholder in Europe.

These developments mainly incorporated human capital understandings, e.g. as put forward by the OECD, contrasting with a dual interest in lifelong education for life and work, previously expressed in the 1970s (Larson & Cort, 2022).

Whilst the above developments were seismic, with potential for the configuration of new democratic political formations, the economic context favoured corporate power and extreme concentrations of wealth, as revealed in the new Russia. Alongside this, China's capitalist economy grew alongside its colonial reach and control over international resources and workforces. Rode and Toniolo describe the 1990s as 'an extraordinary, contradictory, fascinating period of economic development' (2006, p. 4). These optimistic times, however, ended with the terror attack on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001 and the financial crash in 2008/9. The terror attack was followed by President Bush waging a 'War on Terror'. This war played out against the Taliban in Afghanistan, followed closely in 2003 by war in Iraq precipitated mass migration from war and poverty that continues to date. The 2010s also witnessed increased migration from the Global South to the Western World especially, as well as a rebirth of nationalism (Gusterson, 2017). As an antidote to nationalist currents, simultaneously, the decade saw widespread popular movements protesting against racism, sexism and climate change with the emergence of social media as a vehicle for organising and communicating.

Lifelong education in the 2000s entered the top of the political agenda in Europe. With the Lisbon Strategy, lifelong education (now renamed 'lifelong learning') came to dominate the education policy discourse in the EU, with a 'from cradle to grave' approach to education. Arguably, education was presented as a panacea for social justice issues, epitomised by British Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair's manifesto stating, '[o]ur top priority was, is and always will be education, education, education' (Blair, 2001).

In the 2020s the global political and social landscape was flipped with the global Covid-19 pandemic beginning in 2020, serving to highlight and swell existing gross and unresolved economic inequalities. At time of writing, Russia's invasion of Ukraine creates new heated tensions between the Western World and Russia.

Whilst the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (World Education Forum, 2015) sets goals and for the provision of inclusive, equitable and high-quality lifelong education opportunities for all, the Covid-19 pandemic seems to make the realisation of this agenda even more difficult (Haelermans et al., 2022; Shulla et al., 2021).

Parallel with political and economic developments, remarkable technological changes have also occurred, perhaps at times serving as driver to events. In the 1980s, the personal computer and mobile phone were rarities and distance learning organised largely by post. Here, the global pandemic might have further catalysed change, with impacts on inequalities, where the terminology of digital poverty and social isolation comes into play.

Methodology

With the limitation to research *IJLE* articles only, we applied a systematic review following the general idea of the PRISMA (2020) guidelines. In analysing the articles published in *IJLE*, our initial empirical base was the full pool of articles from 1982 – 2020, excluding editorials and book reviews, comprising 1,242 peer-reviewed articles. Our definition of conceptual relevance was based on whether the articles, directly or indirectly, explored inequality or where research focused broadly on disadvantaged or marginalised groups in lifelong education. The *ILJE* archives were divided into sections representing each of the four decades (1980s, 1990s, 2000s and 2010s). Each decade was screened independently by two researchers, through consideration of titles, abstracts

and text, resulting in a high degree of overlap with regard to articles identified for further consideration. Papers identified by only one researcher were discussed by other researchers from the group and a decision made as to whether to include or exclude that item. Papers with tangential reference or where the focus was not on inequality were excluded, producing a refined list of 193 studies (16% of all articles) for more detailed analysis. These studies were examined carefully, assessing developing trends in the research on inequality and the response of lifelong education. As part of the analysis, the nationality of authors, methods, geographic characteristics, and theoretical foundations were also considered and listed for further consideration. Building on that list, the main subtopics and dimensions of inequality were highlighted and analysed more in depth.

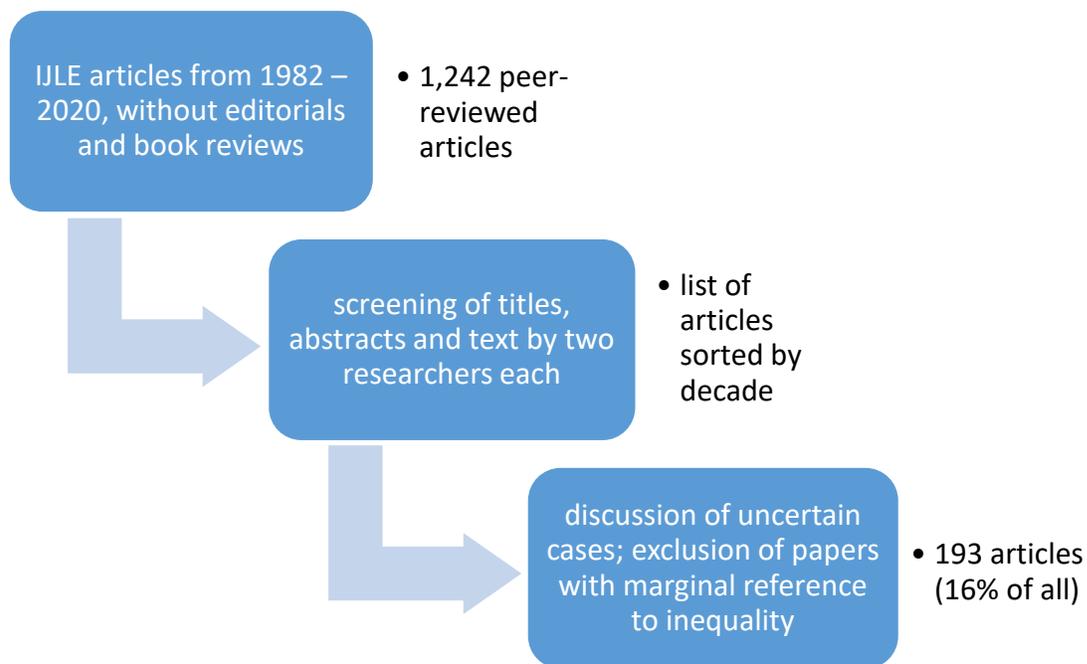


Figure 1. Flow diagram of paper selection process used in the present study

Results of the analysis

In this section we offer results of our analysis. First, we provide a summary of how inequality tends to be conceptualised and understood. Then, we present some observations relating to the archives as a holistic collection of papers spanning forty years of publication. We include findings in relation to the level of interest in researching inequality across the time period of the archives alongside suggestions of possible underlying purposes and motivations for interests in particular excluded groups. Finally, we focus on three central themes emerging from IJLE archives: i) class-based inequality, ii) gender inequality, and iii) inequality related to ethnicity and migration.

Inequality within the IJLE archives: concepts and understandings

Whilst our foray into the archives of the *IJLE* was focused on inequality, we acknowledge that the greater majority of articles in the journal do not deal with that theme. Based on a mapping of all articles published in the journal since its inception (Nylander et al., 2022), inequality seems unrecognized as a major topic, though issues and concerns of social justice, (in)equality and disadvantaged groups, transect the examples given from all four global regions (Eastern, Northern, Southern and Western). In line with Nylander et al. (2022), we find both critical and descriptive approaches to research [on the subject](#), where it seems inequality is addressed in all corners of this semantic map, but in very different ways, where differences are related most typically to a methodological divide.

Related to the above, we found that where journal articles [do](#) address inequality, typically no conceptualisation of inequality or social justice is offered, even when specific excluded groups are the subject of attention. Zepke (2005) confirms this in his own survey of adult education

research, identifying two stances in the addressing of inequality. Firstly, a non-critical approach to the study of excluded groups, assuming neutral social contexts for learning, and secondly, critical approaches where research is purposed clearly towards social justice outcomes.

In our investigation, we observed that the majority of journal articles focusing on education for excluded groups fall within the non-critical bracket. Here, inequality tends to be revealed empirically, e.g. from data garnered through research or surveys co-ordinated by governmental institutions. These might be statistics relating to poverty, unemployment, qualification profiles, or access to opportunities for groups with varying characteristics such as disability, sex or ethnicity. There are several examples where articles are short of critique with little curiosity in relation to potential drivers of inequality, power hierarchies, or political contexts. This is a feature identifiable throughout the decades (e.g. Ellis, 1987; Kump & Krašovec, 2007; Pfundtner, 1990).

Nonetheless, the inequalities under focus may be acknowledged with weight or urgency, perhaps reflecting contemporary traction within national political agendas. Diverse examples include addressing racism in the British police force (e.g. Thomas & Tolley, 1995), women's education in post-Taliban Afghanistan (Alvi-Aziz, 2008) and the perennial issue of poverty (van der Veen & Preece, 2005). Regardless of weak conceptual underpinnings, authors might maintain ethical principles, for example, by acknowledging problematic terminology around 'managing the poor' (Mark, 1987, p. 201).

In the minority of articles where critical approaches are adopted, conceptualisations appear stronger. However, they do not rest on a clear definition of inequality per se. Rather conceptualisations of inequality seem fully bound up with understandings and claims about the purposes of lifelong education. Inequality comes into focus conceptually when researchers point at societal drivers for exclusion, be they structural economic factors, or manifestations of

patriarchy and colonialism, [and we offer thematic examples of this below](#). Within these particular papers, it is typically assumed that engagement with adult education might address inequality, and associated theorising or conceptualisations tends to focus on potentially beneficial educational or research practices.

The idea that lifelong education might serve to address equality is rarely challenged, with discussions circling around the question of ‘how’ rather than ‘whether’ this might be achieved or worked towards. This assumption appears as a leitmotif over the four decades, typically translating into the notion that lifelong education research and educational practice should recognise students’ life experiences and practices, as ways to progressing inclusivity or social justice (e.g. Lee & Morris, 2016; Tagoe, 2011). In the non-critical papers, the value placed on the transformative potential of adult education is largely implicit. We see this within a series of articles from the 1990s onwards, focusing on encouraging adults to participate in learning, with a tacit assumption that participation leads to positive benefits (e.g. Benavot et al., 1993; Jung & Cervero, 2002; Walter, 2004). Such papers are more likely to focus on learners’ personal trajectories to empowerment, or functional approaches to improving motivation.

As mentioned above, in papers where stronger conceptualisations are offered, inequality is often conceptualised indirectly through the consideration of adult learning practices. This might be indicative of a common conceptualisation of lifelong education as praxis, coherent with theorists influential in the 1980s and 1990s notably Habermas, Freire, Gramsci and Mezirow (for more detail, please see Gouthro, 2022). Associated practices lean towards the relational, resting on the ideal relationship between teacher and students alongside accompanying notions of conscientisation. In addition, practices might endeavour to raise potential for lifelong education to circumvent structural processes of knowledge production and associated ideology, resting upon

concepts of structural hegemony. In the 1990s, such key concepts and associated theorists still warranted attention from writers keen to establish a truer interpretation, relevance or purpose for those theoreticians' work (e.g. Allman & Wallis, 1995; Mayo, 1994).

Nonetheless, critique of praxis-orientated theorists is raised in the 1980s, alongside suggested alternatives. Staying within the praxis tradition, such contributions tend to be grounded empirically, the starting point being perceptions from the practice field of lifelong education (e.g. Elsey, 1986), bringing alternative conceptualisations into play as tools for analysis with implications for practice (e.g. Hart, 1985). Hart's critique stands out as a prominent forerunner for a range of criticism acknowledging the effects of power in adult learning settings, typically unrecognised [at that time](#). Hart focuses on adult learning, centring feminist writings, foregrounding inequalities understood from the perspective of women's experience whilst offering a conceptualisation of how power operates. Similar conceptualisations feature more prominently across the decades, occasionally informed by Foucault (e.g. Andersson & Guo, 2009). Understandings drawn from feminists' writings are of greatest prominence here, with many examples (e.g. Blundell, 1992; Gouthro, 2005; Hughes, 1995). These developments might also reflect a rapid steer away from Marxist inspired class-based conceptualisations, following the fall of the Soviet Union and the decline of European heavy industries, with leftists privileging social movements and specific group identities as potential key agents for social change.

In line with this development, concepts grounded in critical theory are less commonly applied in the later decades. In addition, there are fewer examples of historical research focused on working class social justice movements (e.g. Evans, 1983; Taylor & Ward, 1984) though according to Macrae (1994) such research holds a potential for addressing inequality, by raising the potential for hegemonic change.

Freire's influence is more persistent, perhaps reflecting the development of Freire's work by NGOs and a deep, longstanding rootedness within practitioners' experiences internationally (e.g. Maruatona, 2005). Freire's work is also employed as a way of anchoring research within contexts of structural inequality. However, as the decades progress, conceptualisation of structural and economic inequality is increasingly informed by reproduction theory, notably Bourdieu and Putnam (e.g. Duckworth & Tett, 2019; O'Shea, 2015), with Schuller and Field's (1998) interpretations of social capital gaining prominence as a secondary source for researchers. Whilst Freire and Bourdieu offer conceptualisations acknowledging structural and economic class and social conflict, interestingly, the adult education interpretations steer towards personal empowerment of learners, as does the increasing influence of transformational learning (Mezirow, 1991), a theorist of continuing contemporary interest. Perhaps this focus towards the individual and away from social emancipation and solidarity, can be tracked to the late 70s where the aforementioned oil crises dampened (and perhaps stamped out) 1960s optimism (see Wildemeersch, 2014).

There is a lack of current or alternative critique on how inequality might be conceptualised or addressed, perhaps significant given the continuing prevalence of social inequalities internationally. Wildemeersch (2014) and Galloway (2017) are voices reconsidering critical perspectives, acknowledging historical critique of the ways in which inequality has been conceptualised in lifelong education research, whilst recognising the urgency of current economic, social and ecological crises. In particular, Wildemeersch acknowledges and problematises a principle, untroubled by understandings drawing from Bourdieu or Mezirow. This is the idea that through critical reflection, students can gain awareness of structural and hegemonic domination, with the educator holding a privileged role as 'one who knows' and therefore leads. Drawing from

Rancière, Wildemeersch moves the focus away from social justice aims, towards prospects for an immediate practice of equality, for ‘what matters is that...participants experience democratic moments, where they are treated as equals and where space is created to question what is taken for granted’ (Ibid., p. 830).

Inequality in lifelong education as a multidimensional phenomenon

As mentioned above, we found that most articles addressing inequality focused on specific disadvantaged or marginalised groups, discussing ways in which adult education might help support them, though not always framing the learner as passive. A minority of articles address social inequality via a comparative approach, problematising the role of lifelong education as a catalyst further encouraging educational disadvantage. On closer inspection of the archives, some general observations can be descended and certain historical developments are revealed. One of the early articles problematising the ‘Matthew effect’² suggests that lifelong education fails to reduce social inequalities (Gelpi, 1984). Furthermore, recent papers also demonstrate how lifelong education not only fails to reduce inequalities but, actually increases them (e.g. Lee & Morris, 2016; Palumbo & Pandolfini, 2020). These contributions seem to thwart the longer list of articles serving to underline the positive outcomes of adult education for marginalised groups. What does seem clear, however, is how access to educational programmes is unequally distributed, where already disadvantaged groups are disadvantaged once again, through diminished opportunities for participation in adult education.

While women in lifelong education are addressed across all the decades, within the *IJLE* archives, other social groups and identities are warranted attention during specific time periods only. For example, in the 1980s and 90s, there are four papers centring on prisoner education (e.g.

Rocks, 1985; Uche & Harries-Jenkins, 1994). In contrast, youth in transition (e.g. D'Agostini & Tilton, 2020; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007) and older adults (e.g. Kump & Krasovec, 2007; Mestheneos & Withnall, 2016) emerge as significant topics in more recent decades. In the case of older adults, this might reflect aging populations, alongside the establishment of [critical gerontology](#) as a research field (see Kern, 2018). Not unrelated, the education of disabled students, neglected in earlier decades, emerges strongly in the 2000s (e.g. Jackson, 2006; Moni et al., 2007; Stenfors-Hayes et al., 2008) including the consideration of students with serious health conditions (Cooke et al., 1987). The new millennium also brings papers addressing lifelong learning more generally, coherent with the above-mentioned profile raising of global policy around lifelong learning. Here there is a strong focus on adult literacy education and [provision of basic skills](#) (e.g., Illeris, 2006; Duckwoth & Tett, 2019). Whilst literacy learners are more likely to experience disabilities and to identify as working class, few such articles refer to economic class or working-class students (Smid, 1991; Thomson, 1991), or discuss adults experiencing poverty per se (Farnes, 1993). It is noteworthy, however, how articles do make reference to the underprivileged (Dovey & Onyx, 2001), socially excluded (Edwards et al., 2001), and socially disadvantaged (Jung & Cervero, 2002) whilst six articles focus on 'non-traditional students'.

Alongside women learners, the ethnicity of learners has received some attention from researchers, across all four decades. Given recent international contexts of war and economic volatility, discourse around ethnicity is sometimes difficult to distinguish from matters relating to migration and migrants as a group at risk of marginalisation - perennial themes since the 2000s. Here the archives reveal a focus on female migrants across a range of cultural backgrounds (e.g. Wu, 2019) with a latter focus on refugees (e.g. Webb et al., 2019).

Consideration of the geographic origins of publications is a helpful indicator of intersections between inequality and ethnicity, particularly when looking at the regions from which the empirical data on inequality is derived. During the 1980s and 90s, most empirical papers referring to dimensions of inequality are from UK contexts (eleven) with fewer relating to other parts of Europe (five) or the rest of the world (three). Recent decades have seen a shift with greater numbers of international empirical research projects reflected in the archives, alongside a pronounced focus on international comparative analyses, as well as more international contributions in general. Since the millennium, just eleven out of fifty-three papers focus on UK contexts, with eight papers referring to other parts of Europe and twelve comparing different countries, in many cases based on data from the EU or the OECD. It is noteworthy that over the same period, the journal has also published four papers addressing inequality in African countries and two papers related to the Near East.

Below we focus on three themes, which loom large within the *IJLE* archives; firstly, class-based inequality, secondly, sex and gender and finally, ethnicity and migration.

Inequality based on social and economic class

We identified thirty-nine articles engaging with inequalities around lifelong education and social and economic class. These studies echoed the sentiment that ‘class is not an abstract concept but is real and operative in the daily lives’ of the working-class adult learners (Bamber & Tett, 1999, p. 474). Following Schindler et al. (2011), we understand class in terms of employment relations, assuming that occupations and job roles define socioeconomic differentiation. Within the *IJLE*, the concept of class is further expressed not only as lived experience or in terms of

working place occupation, but also a dynamic operator in relation to a range of perceived social classes (Preston, 2006).

Class orientated papers, from the 1980s, focus on the body of lifelong learners and the composition of working-class people within that pool. Here links are made between learners' unfavourable socioeconomic situation and motivation for lifelong education, which is judged as lacking, positioning learners in deficit mode. Allied to this observation are considerations of the adult learning offer in curriculum terms, with concern that learning opportunities are insufficiently adapted to the wider public, risking potential for education to act as a driver of social exclusion (e.g. Rocks, 1985). Less common in the archives are papers conceptualising adult learning as an emancipatory vehicle with and for working class people. Here women learners feature more prominently (see Hake et al., 1985), which we discuss further below.

In the 1990s, research tends to place emphasis on the cultural aspects of lifelong education, as furthering a middle-class ethos and discourse, catering predominantly for middle-class needs, operationalising the abovementioned reproduction theory and 'Matthew effect'. Here, Freirian inspired dialogic community work methods (Thomson, 1991), remain in play, identified with potential to address these issues. Significantly, in this decade a range of studies explore possible country variations in the way learners across economic and social class engage with lifelong education, particularly with regard to inequalities in participation. For example, Gooderham and Dale (1995) argue that a policy of redressing skill shortages by increasing mature graduate output was more likely to be assistive in countries, such as Norway, where social class is less dominant as a social determinant, rather than the UK, where historically rigid class lines exert greater influence on labour market entry.

In later decades, the intersections between class, gender and ethnicity are accorded greater attention, revealing considerable inequalities around participation in lifelong education. Here, there is focus on class patterns, strategies and transitions, as analyses gain more complexity (e.g. Macleod & Lambe, 2007; Preston, 2006; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007).

Regarding class strategies, the notion of ‘positionality’ is employed in third person analyses unfolding the complex ways in which the distinctions between classes are created and strengthened through adult education and [strategising](#) how these might be enhanced through redevelopment of adult education policies (Preston, 2006). Similarly, patterns and trends over time are critiqued in relation to lifelong learning policies and practices.

By contrast, youth transitions, understood as the pathways young people make in their developing relationships with employment, family and housing (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007) are assumed to hold heuristic potential so that processes of social structural formation and socioeconomic change might be identified and observed. Perhaps inevitably, the primary focus is the transitions of predominantly white working-class people, revealing the complexity and insecurity of transition routes over time, with vocational destinations perceived more favourably by young people.

In the 2010s, the archives reveal an extension in the adult lifelong education contexts selected for research attention, going beyond the reach of curriculum, teaching and learning, for example, to include admissions processes (Croxford & Raffe, 2014), varying job roles (Schindler et al., 2011), as well as structural and institutional aspects. Specific themes include trends to disqualify discourses on educational democratisation, the expansion of secondary school general education courses (D’Agostini & Titton, 2020), and the overall level of inequalities in the countries in which people live (Lee & Desjardins, 2019).

Conceptual frameworks revealing different aspects of class inequalities, are varied and also vary over time. For example, Jansen and van der Veen (1992) rely on Beck's concept of the 'risk society', exposing potential challenges for adult education in the context of economic development or deindustrialisation, depending on geographic context. Critical gerontology, focuses on possibilities for empowerment of marginalised older working-class learners, as well as a lens for exploration and analysis (McAllister, 2010). This approach enables scrutiny of the experiences of ageing, taking into account the intersections with a range of identities, including gender and ethnicity, but acknowledging older people as a disadvantaged group.

Two articles apply Marxian perspectives in addition to the Bordieuan concepts of class (Payne, 1992; Preston, 2006). In this vein, Payne (2006) demonstrates (yet again) how lifelong education orientates towards middle-class learners' dispositions, raising insights on how alternatives might be resourced in ways to encourage better lifelong learning offers for working-class and black women. Preston (2006) draws from both Bourdieu and a classical Marxist understanding of class, reorientating away from the socio-linguistic and towards economic conceptualisations of class dynamics, purposed towards the less common aim of analysing the influence of the 'ruling classes' in lifelong learning.

Given the influence of reproduction theory, it is perhaps unsurprising to note the dominance of qualitative and ethnographic methods applied in research settings, with very few articles making use of a mixed-methods approach. The post-millennium rises of large-scale surveys on lifelong education, such as the Adult Education Survey and the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies furthers quantitative research in the later decades, accommodating some more advanced forms of statistical analysis in relation to economic class and adult learning (e.g. Nienkemper & Grotluschen, 2019; Schindler et al., 2011).

Gender inequality

The notion of gender inequity is not static and responds to real world experience of women, including violence, poverty, workplace challenges and cultural values. In our analysis, we included articles offering lenses illuminating the power of women's initiatives for mobilisation. This includes theoretical and methodological frameworks for exposing the cyclical nature of gendered inequality, emancipatory work and its links to adult education, as well as intersections with ethnicity and migration in the volatile global world. With regards to all of these, notions of 'spaces' that empower women and their communities have some significance and are therefore included. As apparent from the analysis of the archives presented so far, sex inequality and the experiences of women intersect on many occasions within research focused specifically on class and ethnicity. For this reason, below, we do not offer precise indication of numbers of journal articles with sex inequality as a focus, instead tracking noteworthy themes and conceptual trends as revealed across the decades.

It seems that the 1980s offered a dearth of empirical papers addressing marginalisation of women, both generally and from an intersectional perspective, a notable exception being Hart's (1985) abovementioned critique. We found three empirical papers dating from the 1980s specifically addressing female participants in adult education (Hake et al., 1985; Ellis 1987; Warren, 1987). Hake et al. (1985) address lifelong education and working-class women in the Netherlands in relation to the educational work of the Union of Social Democratic Women's Clubs 1905-1925. Here the notion of (in)equality is operationalised, probing the organisation of social movement lifelong education and its alignment with emancipatory working-class and feminist movements. Ellis (1987) explores women and literacy learning from a Caribbean perspective,

focusing again on emancipation, revealing how contemporary lifelong learning, in the 1980s, was strongly orientated towards traditional homemaking skills. A more critical approach, aimed at consciousness raising, proposes a model whereby women can rupture related cycles of historical and contemporary inequity. Warren's (1987) article is also driven by conceptualisations of emancipation, contextualised within the use of technology in lifelong education programmes. Societal and cultural expectations are queried exposing how women are left unprepared for engaging with technology, in part due to difficulties around accessing necessary maths and science pre-requisites. The research is noteworthy for illuminating underlying societal conflicts needing to be systematically addressed by educators, including matters relating to the value of family life, requirements for highly trained technical personnel, and importantly, equal opportunities to gain practical skills, where careers in information technology might marry well with a fulfilling family life.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, overarching feminist critiques are published, addressing the positioning of women in society (Gouthro, 2005; Hughes, 1995), while others explore the situation of women in lifelong education from a socialist and Marxist theoretical perspective (Blundell, 1992), or transformational learning (Loughlin, 1994) viewpoint.

Loughlin (1994) researches women experiencing reflective awareness of consciousness-raising leading to their commitment to social action, revealing that emancipatory learning manifested itself within women's lives through a transformation from alienation to agency in knowing. Blundell sheds light on how adult curricula might maintain the status quo drawing on diverse feminist discourses including liberal, radical, Marxist and socialist perspectives. Blundell suggests developing a women centred, women-only methodology and a corresponding theoretical framework, stressing the importance of class perspectives that might root lifelong learning in the

real-life experience of women, rupturing a cycle of inequality. Hughes (1995) also examined similar strands in feminist, extending (as with Hart, 1985) to include postmodern feminisms. Drawing upon these influential feminist writings from the previous decade, Hughes examines the relationship between feminist education and feminism as a body of thought, probing the meaning of ontology in relation to women. As with Hart, Foucauldian notions of knowledge and power hierarchies are acknowledged, suggesting the potential for a more productive educational environment, or methodology, for both students and educators interested in the liberatory possibilities of education.

The final noteworthy examples from the 1990s include Hayes (1992) and Stalker (1994). Hayes considers critical literature as a lens to explore gender inequity in relation to the extent to which selected lifelong education publications have been receptive to feminist perspectives, while Stalker offers an insight into mentoring, exposing how literature 'ignores women academics' unique location as both 'same' and 'other' within the patriarchal academy.

In later decades, in line with a broader focus on ethnicity and migrations found within the archives, a greater number of articles are contextualised with the geographies of less developed countries (Alvi-Aziz, 2008; Maruatona, 2005; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2008). These focus on identifying, describing and **problematising** the life situations of women and their educational participation. Many articles from the 2000s continue in this vein, orientating towards specific groups of **marginalised** women, including female migrants (e.g. Jackson, 2010; Sadeghi, 2008; Shan, 2009), while others focus on Muslim women (Pickerden, 2002), older women (Narushima, 2004), or women in rural areas (Walter, 2004).

Bierema (2003) examines the notion of transformative learning and its potential for liberation, through researching the experiences of women learners. Here a connection is

established between gender consciousness and women's perceived need or desire to appropriate themselves into the 'old boy' networks (ibid, p. 4). Drawing upon one hundred and twenty biographical interviews, Preston (2003) explores the relationship between education, learning and civic participation, in English contexts, taking an intersectional approach.

The perspective of Chinese immigrant women in Canada is analysed through interviews capturing their employment experiences (Ng & Shan, 2010). The researchers picture tensions in lifelong education as serving divergent social purposes in addition to fulfilling labour market requirements. In a theoretical and conceptual study, Jackson (2010) also focuses on migration in the context of lifelong learning in post-colonial London. The study proposes that learning spaces enable migrant women to network with each other, affirming identities and developing relational capital, alongside an enhanced sense of belonging.

Inequality related to migration/ethnicity

The relationships between migration, social inequality and lifelong education were explored as represented in the *IJLE* archives. We searched the archives for articles addressing the experiences of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers as marginalised groups, finding just twenty-six articles in that category. The terminology of 'migration' or 'immigration' appears initially in the early 2000s, possibly reflecting the USA's 'war on terror' response to the 9/11 attacks in 2001. An early article dates from 2003, focusing on language acquisition among adult immigrants in Sweden (Bron, 2003). Perhaps surprisingly, the first special issue on migration dates from as late as 2010, with seven papers devoted to 'Lifelong Learning in the Age of Transnational Migration' (Guo, 2010). Breaking down further by decade, twelve articles were published in the 2000s and fourteen in the 2010s, including a second special issue published in 2019, focusing on

‘Decolonising Lifelong Learning in the Age of Transnational Migration’ (Guo & Maitra, 2019). The small number of publications on migration, regardless of a global crisis context, exacerbated by war and economic globalisation, may indicate a lack of interest amongst adult and lifelong educators and researchers, as suggested by Canadian adult educators (Guo & Liu, 2021).

Despite the low numbers of migration-related articles, a wide variety of topics are encompassed, including language, citizenship and identity, transition to work, migrant and refugee women and young people, refugee resettlement, foreign credential recognition, and informal learning. Of note, eight articles specifically focused on the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers associated with their resettlement experiences (Morrice, 2013; Webb et al., 2019). Special attention has been paid to the most vulnerable among the migrant and refugee population, including ten articles on migrant and refugee women, youths, and seniors. With respect to geographic locations, most of the studies were conducted in major migrant and refugee receiving OECD countries, such as Australia, Canada, the UK, and the USA, reflecting the current global migration trends and patterns from the Global South to the North. It is important to acknowledge that since 2000, internationally, numbers of refugees and asylum seekers have doubled from 17 to 34 million (UN DESA, 2020). In 2020, 80% of that number were hosted by low and middle-income countries located primarily in Northern Africa, Western Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. It is therefore deserving of our attention that no article was published on migration from scholars based within the Global South. Remarkably, more than 50% of research articles focused on immigration originate from Canada, mostly authored by researchers from racialised minority backgrounds, including researchers who are also recent immigrants.

Researchers draw from a rich diversity of theoretical approaches in their studies on migration, including transnationalism, post-colonial theory, Foucault’s governmentality, critical

race theory, and feminist perspectives. Transnationalism examines migration as a transnational phenomenon involving multiple and circular mobilities across transnational spaces, departing from the more typical approach which treats migration as unidirectional movement from the Global South to the North (Alfred, 2010; Brigham et al., 2018; Guo, 2010). The concept of transnationalism challenges rigid, territorial nationalism and as a paradigm, serves to critique models of assimilation.

Migration is also approached drawing from post-colonial theory, analysing how postcolonial formations and ideologies frame policy imperatives and discourses in lifelong education (Morrice, 2019; Maitra & Guo, 2019; Shan, 2019). Drawing on Santos' framework of global abyssal lines and cartographies of exclusion, Morrice (2019) problematises the concept of integration as a starting point to explore the binary logics upon which postcolonial and national discourses depend, illustrating the persistent legacy of European colonialism and how global inequalities are perpetuated through colonial modes of representation. The methodological approaches used in the studies were mainly qualitative, including case study, narrative inquiry, grounded theory, participatory photography, ethnography, and institutional ethnography.

The racialised experiences of migrants and refugees in the process of settlement was given attention from the perspective of inequality, revealing multifaceted structural barriers in transitioning to work in a host society. In this regard, papers explored the deskilling and devaluation of migrants' existing qualifications and prior work experience (Andersson & Guo, 2009; Morrice, 2013; Ng & Shan, 2010), regardless of the significant human capital resources brought to nations affected. Many migrants encountered difficulties in accessing the local labour market owing to racial discrimination and hierarchical skills regimes based on skin colour rather than qualifications. Researchers explored the employment experiences of migrant and refugee

women, towards gendered, racialised and class-based barriers (e.g. Brigham et al., 2018; Jackson, 2010). Drawing on a transnational feminist framework, Brigham et al. (2018) explored the gendered dimensions of refugee and women's migration and learning experiences, whilst Ng and Shan (2010) investigated how professional migrant women navigated the gendered and ethnically segregated labour market in Canada. Their analyses revealed how lifelong education as an ideological frame is naturalised, becoming a mechanism of neoliberal control aimed at producing idealised workers and learners for the knowledge-based economy. In contesting the colonial and racial forms of knowledge and practices that inform migrants' lifelong education, Maitra and Guo (2019) argue for an approach to lifelong education aiming to decolonise the ideological underpinnings of dominant colonial relations, challenging the passivity, colonisation and marginalisation of lifelong learners.

Conclusion and future directions

We aimed to explore how the *IJLE* has engaged with inequality over four decades. **In order to achieve this aim, we analysed the articles published in *IJLE* in the period between 1982 and 2020 via a systematic review.** Our analysis demonstrates movement with respect to how inequalities are being addressed in the journal. Among our findings is the identification of a growing number of articles investigating dimensions of inequality empirically and more often from an international comparative perspective, a development that might above all be due to the fast-growing amount of data made available by public statistics or international large-scale studies. **Furthermore, we have identified as important three main themes related to inequality: class, gender and migrant/ethnicity status.** This finding is in line with previous research, which has shown that participation patterns in lifelong education are strongly classed, raced and gendered (e.g. Leathwood, 2006; Boeren, 2016).

Since the turn of the century, some disadvantaged and [marginalised](#) groups e.g., prisoners, learners experiencing poverty and working-class people, have drifted out of focus, perhaps indicating a movement where responsibility for research has been passed over to the disciplines of sociology and criminology. In contrast, some group identities are more frequent subjects of research journal articles, e.g., older adults, migrants and low-skilled or disabled adults.

To some extent, journal archives reflect historical contexts of western societies, such as war and migration or the ageing population. These themes might also be indicators of a direction of travel for adult education research in general, which, in recent decades, has become more empirical and more international in outlook.

Regarding papers associated with historical events, in general there is little correlation between research themes and real-world contexts, such as the repercussions of deindustrialisation and ongoing economic crises. We find few papers addressing associated lived experience of learners, including poverty, workplace or union learning, personal debt, public health education or recovery from drug or alcohol misuse. Remarkably, there is a dearth of research addressing ongoing transformative relationships with information and communication technology (ICT) in learning contexts. Perhaps, again, this indicates research being picked up by other disciplines, absencing the educational perspective. Here the move of focus from ‘lifelong education’ to ‘lifelong learning’ might be significant. [It is](#) therefore interesting to note that in recent years, we did not identify consistent or wide-ranging responses to the changing focus of adult education policy contexts, summarised as a movement from dual interest in learning for living and working, to mainly learning for work.

In general, re-conceptualisations of inequality and associated revisiting of methodologies is undertaken commonly by researchers addressing gender, ethnicity or related intersections. Those scholars typically share characteristics with the groups being researched, suggesting strong personal and vocational commitments by researchers, often expressed through criticality and questioning of historical approaches. This might also indicate how continued research addressing inequality relies upon determined efforts by small groupings within a research community generally focused on other aims.

Gender inequalities have been a relevant research topic across all decades, with an early move towards a more intersectional perspective, taking multi-various dimensions of inequality into consideration and employing post-modernist perspectives focusing on power and identity, with the potential for individual empowerment. A focus on ethnicity emerges in later years, emphasising the racialised experiences of immigrants and refugees, foregrounding post-colonial theory and attempts to rupture thinking and practices reinforcing historical privilege.

Since the *IJLE* inception in 1982, there has been a lack of focus on the Global South, especially Africa, arguably, most deeply affected by drivers of inequality at micro-, meso- and macro-levels, and disproportionately affecting women and indigenous people. There continue to be very few articles from Africa and Asia, aside from those acknowledging global policy initiatives, such as the Millennium Development Goals. In Western contexts, a continuing pressing issue is the continuing undervaluing of the qualifications and experiences immigrations bring, preventing personal, family and community development – a matter worthy of further investigation.

With regard to class, a recurrent theme in the archives is the issue of unequal participation in lifelong education, including the analysis of explanations and perceived consequences for

learners and communities, resting upon the assumption that adult learning, per se, might address inequality. The sense is that lifelong education has to address the needs and challenges of disadvantaged groups in order to achieve its potential and empower the people concerned.

In contrast, throughout the decades, many articles display ambivalence towards possibilities for adult education to address inequality, emphasising instead the potential for a widening of social and educational disparities. Perhaps this is a forgone conclusion, if reproduction theory is employed as research methodology. However, at time of writing, social and economic contexts tend to confirm increasing inequity around the world, with prospects for war and further environmental degradation. Here, the ‘Matthew effect’ might be invoked again, to question whether adult education research has been a help or a hindrance.

What remains outside the field of vision of adult education research is an orientation towards the privileged ones, regardless of whether they (or we) are understood as individuals or a social class. Maybe it is paradoxical and troubling to consider the prospects for reducing inequality by shining a light on advantaged groups, whether by sex, ethnicity or class. However, this does infer a blind spot in adult education research, which [needs](#) be carefully investigated.

Allied to the above are the ways in which disadvantaged groups are positioned within research. Whilst the archives reveal a tendency, over time, towards research raising opportunities for learners’ voices to be heard, there remains a dearth of writing presenting learners as active and responsive, taking ownership of difficult circumstances and organising their own responses to these. We return to Wildemeerch’s (2014) reconsideration of critical perspectives in adult education, which acknowledges the research and practices as we have found within the *IJLE* across four decades. These are the perspectives informing research specifically aimed at addressing inequality, already discussed above. To restate, for Wildemeerch, ‘what matters is

that...participants experience democratic moments, where they are treated as equals and where space is created to question what is taken for granted' (p. 830). With this in mind, a single article stands out. Speaking from Palestine under siege, Shalhoub-Kevorkian's (2008) representation of women's voices points towards inequality defined by adult learners' refusal to accept their situation and be identified as oppressed, by making assertive, social responses to unchosen circumstances, challenging us to re-reconsider the meaning of equality in lifelong education. Perhaps this territory might be a helpful starting point for a revisiting of critical perspectives, in the light of our analysis.

Notes

1 Lifelong education is widely discussed in both academic and policy spheres, and different terminologies and understandings are used, such as lifelong education, lifelong learning, adult education (Holford et al., 2014; Jarvis, 2010). In this article, we focus on lifelong education in its variety of forms: formal, non-formal and informal and do not engage in this very broad discussion.

2 'For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath' Matthew 25: 29, Authorised Version KJV.

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