

Childhood and Adolescent Learning Experiences and Lifelong Learning

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Abstract:

Introduction: Learning experiences in childhood and adolescence are crucial in establishing the basis for lifelong learning, including parental education, learning experiences and the perceived labour market benefits of education.

Methods: In this research, life path interviews were conducted (n=62), partly semi-structured and partly in-depth interviews with adult respondents (40<).

Results: In this study, the goal is to provide examples of how the interviewees perceive lifelong learning in the light of their childhood and youth learning experiences and their family environment's attitude towards learning.

Discussion: This paper aims at finding answers to the question of how the understanding of lifelong learning is influenced by the supportive role of the family, whether learning is a value in the family.

Limitations: Due to the nature of the topic, this writing did not aim for representativeness in the selection of interviewees, but it is considered that they can be used to illustrate or nuance the guidelines.

Conclusions: The present work also confirms the role and importance of the family and socialisation environments, which can act as a deterrent as well as a pull.

Key words: lifelong learning, educational attainment, parental background, learning experiences.

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Introduction

This work is based on the of the European Communities' definition as "All learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective." (Commission of the European Communities, 2001, p.32) The term Lifelong Learning (LLL) places the process of learning along the time dimension, while the term Life Wide Learning (LWL) more strongly emphasizes the complementary nature of the different learning spaces. The notion of lifelong learning thus goes beyond the notion of lifelong education, as it extends the learning activity in the relation of learning contexts (formal, non-formal, informal learning) (see Global Report on Adult Learning and Education, UNESCO 2016).

Increasingly complex and frequent transitions (in particular digital and green transitions) and current and future challenges (such as climate change, demographic, technological, health and other changes) increasingly require the capacity to evolve and learn, see: Council Resolution on a New European Agenda for Adult Learning 2021-2030 (2021/C 504/02). Nowadays, we increasingly hear the term resilience, which means the ability to cope with challenges and implies that a resilient person can learn and grow. Researchers on the subject agree that resilience is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon, and the following three groups of factors are mentioned in the literature as resilience factors (Yang, Yang, Dela Rosa, & Cui, 2023), some of which were also mentioned in the interview questions:

1. Parental and relational traits: e.g. effective socialization by parents, contact with other prosocial adults and mentor.
2. Individual characteristics: e.g. self-regulated learning, life goals, talents.
3. Community context: socialization environments e.g. opportunities for the development of personal values, safe home environment, contact with prosocial organizations and groups (Masten, 2001).

Several international and national studies highlight that childhood learning experiences are crucial in laying the foundations for lifelong learning (see Bakker, Denessen, & Brus-Laeven, 2007; Barnová, Tamášová, & Krásna, 2019; Cai & Hao, 2023; Hursen, 2016; Oberuč & Zapletal, 2017; Tezer & Aynas, 2018). Imre (2017) elaborates that the greatest influence on the performance of school pupils is exerted by parental aspirations and attitudes towards learning, which stem from the values that parents represent, such as parental attention, etc. Several studies consider the mother's educational attainment as a key indicator of social belonging (for more details see Pusztai, 2009; Imre, 2017).

Studies also include that youth in their twenties with graduate parent background are more than four times more likely to participate in education: higher educational attainment, more favorable socio-occupational positions, than

children of parents with at most primary education (Nárai, 2022). Imre (2017) also highlights in his research that parental commitment to learning can provide students with a solid foundation for doing well in school. Support from the family circle is directly felt by children. While schools can raise awareness of the importance of support at home, it is the parents who are in the decision-making position, contributing to their children's academic achievement according to their commitment and resources (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012). Farkas (2014) draws attention to the fact that in many cases, part of what we think of as knowledge acquired at school is not necessarily acquired at school, but at home, for example, in extra lessons, in school clubs, through independent learning, etc.

1 About the research

In 2023/2024 a survey was conducted on the implementation of lifelong learning in practice (n=92). In this paper, partial results are presented (n=62), the questions/issues of the research that are related to the foundational and supportive activities. In the current paper, the results of the following questions are presented:

- How do you remember your schooling?
- Did you have a role model, if so, who and why?
- Can you think of people who have supported you in achieving your goals? Who and how?
- Did your family see learning as a value? Were you supported in your studies?
- What successes or possible failures did you have in your studies?
- Overall, what does lifelong learning mean to you?

In presenting the partial results, we focused only on interviewees over 40 years of age, the oldest being 82 years old (n=62). It was felt important to interview people over 70 years of age, and also to be able to interview people from villages/cities of different population sizes, to have respondents from villages with less than 5,000 inhabitants, and to include the capital. I also tried to reach out to as many people as possible in different professions and jobs to get information from as wide a range of people as possible. The educational background also varies widely, from lower education to academic doctorates.

As far as the educational level of the interviewees is concerned, the proportion of graduates is over-represented. In total, 14 people with no or less than a school leaving certificate were interviewed. This is partly due to the fact that graduates were the most open to our enquiries and willing to answer our questions. Participation in the survey was also voluntary in the present research and participants were assured that their anonymity would be preserved. I also asked about the education level of the parents of the interviewees. The life path interviews could be described as partly semi-structured and partly in-depth interviews, since some of the questions were fixed, for example when asking

about childhood, family environment, etc., but the answers to the questions were also informal: the depth of the answers to each question was left to the individual. If it was clear that he or she was happy to talk, they were encouraged to elaborate in more detail, which also made the preparation of each interview time-consuming, as providing a supportive environment for the interviewee to open up and tell us about himself is something that cannot be rushed or hurried. Respondents were asked how they remember their childhood, their schooling, if they can think of any people who supported them in achieving their goals, in their studies, if they had a role model, and if yes, why exactly him/her, etc. The responses showed that support for learning was provided both in terms of financial support and in the form of encouragement and motivation: belief in the child, time, opportunity and attention was provided, and in many cases, by setting an example.

The following types of support emerged from the interviews:

1. Both financially (support to complete the studies) and emotionally (encouragement, belief, in many cases a role model for the interviewee) (n=28).
2. Financially not supported, but emotionally supported (n=13).
3. Learning was not seen as a value by the family, but they allowed it (n=11).
4. They neither allowed nor valued learning (n=10).

In this work, it was found that parents' educational attainment is a determinant of their support for learning (see Imre, 2015; Gežová, 2015). The higher the educational level of the parent, the more the supportive role of the family was found. The converse was also true, the lower the educational level, moreover lived in a town/village of smaller population, the less was present the mother's emotional support, but where it was present, the mother's emotional support was the determinant. The version that neither allowed nor valued learning was mainly found among older respondents.

Our research also confirms the role of the mother in supporting learning (see Pusztai, 2009), as the support of the mother was highlighted by several of our interviewees. Furthermore, the support and encouragement of grandparents and teachers was also mentioned several times.

“Of course, my parents and grandparents have been very supportive throughout my life, especially in terms of my education and career development. My parents have always been there for me, encouraging me and pushing me to learn. It is thanks to their support that I have experienced the importance of perseverance and commitment in any area of life. My grandparents also contributed to my development. Although their learning circumstances were different because of their age, they passed on the importance of diligence and values. Their stories have inspired me to value education and commitment to achieving goals.” (I/15)

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"On my mother's side of the family, education through learning has always been a great value. For as long as my ancestors could tell stories about their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents, everyone was an educated person and earned the right to be a leader in the community through their knowledge, conscience and responsibility to others." (I/23)

"My grandfather had finished school the year before he retired. Many people were puzzled as to why he had to study at such a time, but he was still active decades later and, as chief auditor, he was still being asked to carry out important and highly skilled tasks in his retirement, thanks to his last training. He was thus characterized by mental and physical freshness. In addition, there is so much new and even newer knowledge throughout our lives that we need in our daily lives. I seem to be on the same path of learning as my family members. This is natural for me, and I think even with this current training I am not finished with expanding my knowledge." (I/32)

The responses also show the role and importance of the family and socialization environments, which can act as a pull or even a deterrent.

"No one in the family really supported me, not even my parents or grandparents. All the goals I wanted to achieve I have covered from my own resources, from my own financial resources, until today. I have met more restraining forces in my life than supportive people." (mother graduated from 8th grade) (I/36)

As indicated earlier, the proportion of graduates was over-represented among the interviewees (n=38). 14 people have a secondary education. A total of 10 persons with low educational attainment were interviewed.

People who have experienced failure in their previous learning are reluctant to continue learning in an organized, institutionalized way. However, there are also many examples of individuals achieving success in their learning activities in adulthood, which encourages them to continue learning. It can also be said that participation in formal education and training declines with age, and that learning in non-formal learning environments becomes more popular among the adult population.

This work has also shown that successful learning, especially at secondary level, is made more difficult if it is not supported by the immediate family environment. According to Maróti (2015), in many cases, learning is not valued among those with lower levels of education because they do not experience that the knowledge they acquire can directly bring material benefits. Although a supportive family atmosphere was lacking in many life paths, the subjects of the research also reported that they continued their education in adulthood despite difficult family circumstances. Reasons given for this included drawing inspiration from other families, being supported by a partner as an adult, or wanting to break out of a previous lifestyle and outlook on life.

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"I grew up in difficult financial circumstances, so my childhood was also a difficult one. We didn't have money for anything that other kids took for granted, like never having a new doll or any toys. I was always given what I needed for my birthday or name day (coat, shoes, clothes). There were never any presents under the Christmas tree because it was either food or presents, and food was essential. This is very difficult for a child to experience and I think it haunts me to this day. I did very well at school in lower classes, and then it deteriorated considerably as I became a little boy. I always felt like an outsider in class because of our financial situation. I did everything on my own, and my husband supported me in getting my degree (I was 43). I had no role models, my goal was to get out of the world I grew up in." (Parents' education: vocational training) (I/44)

"My family did not value education, they preferred work and employment (...) I went from being a salesman to a nursery caregiver, first I did a course, then after a few years in the profession I applied to college, which I successfully completed. I am currently an MA student in Education." (...) "What I would change is to start learning things that interest me earlier." (Parents' education: 8 primary (mother), vocational (father). (I/46)

It was another goal to find out how parents' educational attainment influenced their participation in learning. It was found that a higher proportion of first-generation intellectuals, i.e. the first in their family to obtain a degree, which, according to the responses, can be explained by the role of a supportive family atmosphere. On the other hand, the expansion and massification of higher education has made it possible for students who previously had no access to it to enter education. It should be noted that in Hungary, according to OECD (2018) data, social mobility is low in educational, but also in income and occupational terms. It is interpreted as the top and bottom income quintiles of society having a strong retention power, i.e. the so-called 'sticky floor' and 'sticky ceiling' (Lőrincz & Antal-Fekete 2022).

"I would have liked to continue my studies, but the situation at the time did not allow me to do so. However, time later made up for this shortcoming, because I later attended adult education, completed my primary education with excellent results and passed my driving test, first for a passenger car, then for a truck and a lorry." (I/8)

2 Interpretation of lifelong learning - personal approach

Childhood learning experiences are crucial in laying the foundations for lifelong learning. The present research aimed at finding out what lifelong learning means to the interviewees and how they interpret it.

Typical motives for learning in adulthood/old age were: preparing for a new field of work, increasing knowledge for current work; becoming well informed, seeking leisure activities, performing everyday household tasks; meeting external expectations; meeting new people; breaking out of daily routine.

If we compare the answers with the research of Mária Kispálné Horváth (2017), who examined the impact of adult learning on mental well-being, the result is a similar picture, i.e. the gaining of success, a more positive outlook on life, a wider horizon, an increase in self-confidence, etc.

Overall, similarities were found on several points: adapting to our environment, to a changing world, personal development are common threads.

The graph below illustrates the number of mentions, note that one interviewee may have highlighted more than one thing (Figure 1).

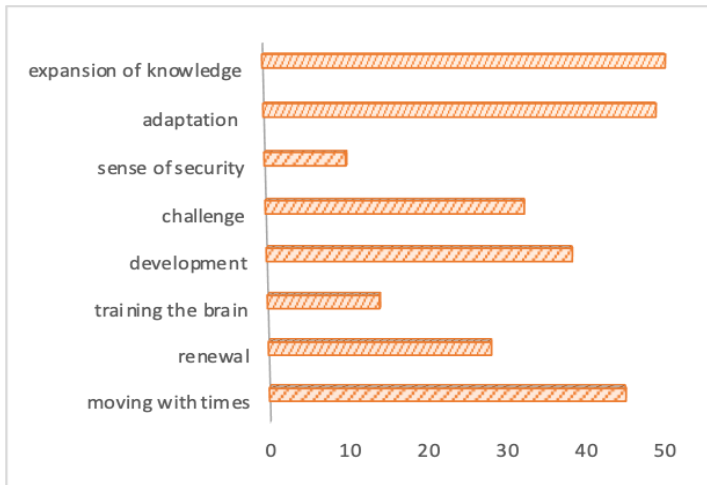


Figure 1. Interpretation of lifelong learning - number of mentions (person).

It was found that for those who were supported both financially and emotionally in childhood and youth, and for those who were not supported financially but were supported emotionally, lifelong learning tends to be a means of renewal and moving with the times. And for those who have not valued learning, it is mainly about development and security.

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The responses of the interviewees also confirmed that learning is not age-related, with almost no respondents linking it to learning only at the school.

"Lifelong learning is a security that it's never too late to learn anything, you just have to want to." (I/12)

"I was born a "worthless" girl, and if I accept that, I will remain a worthless girl. I found comfort in reading, in learning, through which I was shaped and polished. Spiritually, mentally, but also physically. Today I am who I am, but I dare to say that I am not worthless. I am constantly learning. Now I am enthusiastically learning how to be a good grandparent. What can I do for my own health so that I can support my family for a long time to come. With every question comes another question." - said our interviewer, a 59-year-old woman. (I/34)

"I think it's important to keep improving our knowledge. This is combined with my great curiosity, I like to "know" everything, so I try to get knowledge and information from all walks of life. For me, lifelong learning is not only about expanding my professional knowledge, but also about expanding my general knowledge. This continuous curiosity about the world gives me access to a lot of information and knowledge, which can increase my self-confidence and help me to reduce my feelings of inferiority." (I/50)

Conclusions

Creating a positive attitude towards learning and establishing motivation to learn can be seen as one of the pillars of lifelong learning.

In the present research the goal was to find out how the interviewees interpreted lifelong learning, i.e. how their views and beliefs are influenced by their childhood and youth learning experiences, the relationship of the family environment to learning, etc. This work also confirmed the role and importance of the family and socialization environments, which acted as both a deterrent and a pull. The high number of first-generation intellectuals among our respondents, i.e. the first to graduate from their families, can be explained by the role of a supportive family environment and the mass influx of higher education. Furthermore, this work has shown that successful learning, especially at secondary level, is made more difficult if it is not supported by the immediate family environment.

Learning begets learning was also reflected in the responses, with those with higher education tending to emphasize age and keeping up with digital technology. Overall, the idea that lifelong learning is nothing more than a continuous adaptation to our environment, to the world around us, was recalled in the interpretation of lifelong learning, and was confirmed by the interviewees' own formulation.

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