



Enhancing Positive Influence in the Context of adult education

RESEARCH REPORT



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The **EPIC project** operates on a fundamental premise: Adult education is never a neutral act. While European vocational training often focuses on the transfer of "hard skills" (digital literacy, technical competencies, language proficiency), the delivery mechanism for these skills is always a human being—the educator. This report posits that the educator's personal worldview, their handling of power dynamics, and their unconscious biases constitute a hidden curriculum that deeply influences the quality and inclusivity of learning.

This Research Report summarises the findings of the initial exploration phase conducted in Italy and Spain. By combining a theoretical desk analysis with field surveys (involving over 50 professionals) and in-depth interviews with learners and educators, the consortium has mapped the "state of influence" in the sector.

Key Findings:

1. **The Awareness Gap:** The quantitative data reveals a striking paradox. Over **90%** of surveyed educators are fully aware that their personal worldview impacts their work. However, they consistently identify "lack of awareness regarding unconscious bias" and "inability to manage power dynamics" as the primary barriers to quality education. There is a clear gap between *knowing* one has influence and *knowing how* to use it positively.
2. **The Rejection of the "Expert":** Qualitative interviews with adult learners highlight a strong resistance to traditional, authoritarian teaching styles. Learners described "arrogance" as the primary factor that causes disengagement, expressing a clear preference for educators who act as "guides" rather than "masters".
3. **Systemic Infantilisation:** A recurring theme in the fieldwork is the tension between the adult status of the learners and the school-like rules of the institutions (e.g., asking for permission to leave the room). This "infantilisation" undermines the andragogical contract and creates psychological resistance.

The EPIC Response:

Based on these findings, this report defines 5 core topics:

1. ***The Myth of Neutrality***
2. ***Redefining Authority***
3. ***Deconstructing Infantilization***
4. ***The Inclusive Mindset***
5. ***Vulnerability as Competence.***

These topics will form the theoretical and practical backbone of the upcoming **EPIC Workbook**, a tool designed to help educators transition from an intuitive management of power to a conscious, professional facilitation of adult empowerment.



INTRODUCTION

Beyond technical skills in Adult Education

In the current landscape of European education, adult education (andragogy) is frequently viewed through a functionalist lens. It is seen primarily as a tool for economic adjustment—upskilling workers for the digital transition, integrating migrants into the workforce, or reducing unemployment. Consequently, the training of adult educators often focuses heavily on pedagogical techniques, curriculum design, and assessment tools.

However, the EPIC (Enhancing Positive Influence in the Context of Adult Education) project suggests that this technical focus overlooks the most critical variable in the classroom: the educator themselves. The relationship between an adult educator and an adult learner is complex. It involves two adults who are peers in terms of civil rights and life experience yet placed in a temporary hierarchy of "knower" and "learner". This dynamic is fraught with potential for conflict, misunderstanding, and the unconscious exercise of power.

The "who" behind the teaching

The central research problem addressed by this report is the **unexamined influence** of the educator. When an educator enters a classroom, they do not leave their personal history, political beliefs, ethical values, and social biases at the door.

- *How does an educator's definition of "success" shape their feedback to a student?*
- *How does an educator's view on authority shape the physical layout of the room?*
- *How do unconscious biases regarding gender, race, or class affect who gets attention and who is ignored?*

The EPIC project seeks to make these invisible dynamics visible.

Defining the key concepts

To ensure clarity, this report utilises three specific definitions derived from our initial research framework:

1. **Power:** In the context of EPIC, power is not defined as coercion but as *relational capacity*. It is the ability to define reality in the classroom (e.g., what counts as "correct" knowledge). Power can be *power-over* (dominance) or *power-with* (collaboration).
2. **Worldview:** The complex "backpack" of values, political orientations, and cultural assumptions that every educator carries. The research assumes that a "neutral" worldview does not exist.
3. **Positive influence:** The conscious use of power and worldview to foster learner autonomy. Negative influence occurs when power is used to create dependency or conformity.



THE DESK RESEARCH

Before entering the field, the consortium conducted a mapping of existing literature and theoretical trends in Italy, Spain, and Europe. This "Desk Research" phase provided the intellectual scaffolding for our inquiry.

From "Adult Education" to "Lifelong Learning"

A critical insight from the literature review is the semantic shift in European policy discourse. Historically, the term "**Adult Education**" implied a holistic, humanistic approach focused on the development of the citizen, critical thinking, and social emancipation.

In recent decades, this has been largely replaced by the term "**Lifelong Learning**". While ostensibly positive, critics argue this shift represents a neoliberal turn. It places the responsibility on the individual to "constantly retrain" to remain marketable. This shift creates structural pressure on educators. They are often forced by funding bodies and institutions to prioritise "efficiency" and "employability" over "critical reflection" or "inclusion". The educator becomes a "deliverer of skills" rather than a "facilitator of growth". This structural constraint is a key barrier to positive influence (Milana, 2012).

The political nature of andragogy

Our desk research highlights that andragogy is inherently political. As Freire (1970) noted, there is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity, or it becomes the practice of freedom.

Many educators in VET systems believe they are teaching "neutral" subjects (mechanics, IT, language). However, the *way* they teach, whether they encourage questioning or demand obedience, is a political lesson in democracy or authoritarianism.

Expert attitude vs. Facilitator attitude

Wang & Sarbo (2004) distinguish between two dominant philosophies:

1. **The liberal/expert philosophy** views the purpose of education as the transmission of high-status knowledge. The educator is the "sage on the stage". Authority is derived from content mastery.
2. **The progressive/humanistic philosophy** views the purpose of education as self-actualisation and social adaptability. The educator is the "guide on the side". Authority is derived from relationship building.

Considering our desk research, we at EPIC hypothesise that while most Erasmus+ projects promote the progressive/humanistic view, the actual *habit* of many educators in Italy and Spain remains rooted in the liberal/expert view, leading to friction with adult learners.



The "andragogical contract": Autonomy as a prerequisite

The EPIC project adopts the notion of an "andragogical contract" to describe the implicit and explicit agreement that underpins any authentic adult learning relationship. Building on classical andragogical theory, this contract assumes that adult learners enter the classroom with a pre-existing identity as decision-makers: they manage households, jobs, finances, and social responsibilities. When they step into a learning space, they do not suspend this autonomy; they expect it to be recognised, respected, and productively engaged. The andragogical contract is therefore not a formal document but a shared understanding: *"I recognise you as an adult person; you recognise me as a professional; together we negotiate how learning will happen"*.

Within this perspective, autonomy is not understood as an absence of structure but as co-ownership of the learning process. Adult learners expect to be informed about the purpose of the course, to understand the criteria by which their work will be evaluated, and to have some voice in the way content is approached. Conversely, the educator retains a clear role in designing the overall pathway, ensuring coherence, and safeguarding the learning climate. The difference from traditional pedagogical models lies in how decisions are taken and justified: instead of unilateral imposition (*"because I am the teacher"*), choices are explained, negotiated, and, where possible, co-constructed. This shift from obedience to shared responsibility is at the heart of the andragogical contract.

From the standpoint of EPIC, the violation of this contract is one of the main mechanisms through which negative influence manifests. When adults are treated as if they were minors—being required to ask permission for basic needs, having no say in rules, being subjected to unexplained sanctions—the message is clear: their everyday competence and dignity stop at the classroom door. This dissonance generates resistance, passivity, or strategic compliance: learners "play the student role" to avoid conflict but disengage emotionally and cognitively. The Spanish example of learners forced to ask permission to go to the bathroom is emblematic: the rule is trivial in content but profound in symbolic meaning, shifting the relational frame from "adult–adult" to "parent–child".

The andragogical contract also has a strong affective and relational component. Adult learners participating in the EPIC interviews consistently associated positive experiences with educators who demonstrated trust, transparency, and a willingness to share control. They appreciated when expectations were clarified at the beginning of a course, when their prior experiences were explicitly invited into the conversation, and when rules were explained rather than simply enforced. In other words, they felt treated as partners. This aligns with the EPIC emphasis on *power-with* rather than *power-over*: authority is not denied but is exercised in ways that enhance, rather than diminish, learner agency.

For educators, embracing the andragogical contract requires a double movement: letting go of certain inherited habits of control and, at the same time, developing new professional competences in facilitation, negotiation, and boundary setting. It is not enough to declare "you are adults"; the entire architecture of the learning experience—room layout, participation norms, feedback practices, and time management—must communicate the same message. In practical terms, this may include co-defining group rules in the first session, using learning contracts or shared goal-setting exercises, and regularly inviting feedback on how the course is run. These practices transform the contract from a theoretical principle into a living, revisable agreement.



Finally, the concept of the andragogical contract provides a useful lens for interpreting the tensions identified in the EPIC data. Educators experience a paradox: they know they influence learners, yet they often feel unable to manage that influence, which can be seen as a symptom of a contract that is vaguely sensed but rarely articulated. Educators intuit that they should treat learners as adults, yet institutional constraints and unexamined habits pull them back toward pedagogical control, which can lead to frustration and a disconnect between their teaching philosophy and practice. By naming and working explicitly with the andragogical contract, EPIC offers educators a framework for aligning their intentions, their institutional context, and their everyday micro-practices. In doing so, it lays a crucial foundation for the five EPIC Topics, each of which can be understood as a different way of honouring—or, when neglected, violating—the basic agreement of adult-to-adult education.

The impact of diversity and unconscious bias

The andragogical contract and the exercise of positive influence must be contextualised within the increasingly diverse realities of contemporary adult education classrooms. Today's adult learners present a wide array of profiles, intersecting across dimensions of gender, race, cultural background, and socio-economic status. Given the worldwide increase in social tensions and polarisation surrounding these topics, educators must be acutely aware of their own unconscious biases.

An educator's unexamined prejudices can severely disrupt the learning environment. When these biases leak into the classroom, they implicitly violate the andragogical contract by treating certain adult learners as less capable or less deserving of autonomy. Therefore, acknowledging and actively deconstructing these biases is not merely a matter of social inclusion but a fundamental pedagogical prerequisite for establishing a safe, cognitively hospitable space where true adult learning can thrive. By reflecting on their own cultural and gendered lenses, educators can prevent their unconscious biases from becoming invisible barriers to their students' success.



METHODOLOGY

Research strategy

To capture the nuance of "influence", quantitative data is insufficient. Influence is felt in stories, emotions, and relationships. Therefore, we at EPIC adopted a mixed-method approach, triangulating data from three sources:

1. **Desk research** (Literature & policy analysis).
2. **Survey** to measure scale and trends.
3. **Semi-structured interviews** to understand the lived experience.

Readers can find the survey in Attachment A and the template for the semi-structured interviews in Attachment B.

Survey

A digital survey was distributed to professionals in the Adult Education ecosystem.

- **Respondents:** Over 50 valid responses were collected.
- **Target:** Adult educators, trainers, managers, and educational support staff.
- **Key Indicators:** The survey utilised Likert scales (1-4) to measure:
 - Self-perception of influence.
 - Awareness of unconscious bias.
 - Agreement with statements regarding barriers to quality (e.g., political views, lack of soft skills).

Semi-structured interviews

To deepen the analysis, we conducted semi-structured interviews with two distinct target groups in both Italy and Spain.

- **Group A: Adult learners.** We asked them to describe "good" and "bad" educational experiences, focusing on feelings of inclusion, authority, and respect.
- **Group B: Educators & staff.** We asked them to reflect on their role, their definition of "expertise", and the challenges of managing diverse classrooms.



Demographic profiles

The survey data indicates a highly experienced cohort.

- **Experience:** Approximately 60% of respondents reported having "More than 5 years" of experience in the field.
- **Roles:** The sample is balanced between direct practitioners (Trainers/Teachers) and coordinators/managers.
- **Significance:** The findings of this report represent the views of seasoned professionals, not novices. This adds weight to the finding that even experienced educators feel unprepared to manage power dynamics.



SURVEY ANALYSIS

The "awareness paradox": High self-perception, Low competence

The most significant finding from the quantitative phase is the discrepancy between **theoretical awareness** and **practical competence**.

When asked, *"Have you ever thought about how your role... might impact learning?"*, over 90% of respondents answered **YES**. Similarly, for Q5 regarding inclusion and diversity, the affirmative response rate was equally high.

However, when asked to rate specific barriers (Q7), the same respondents showed high agreement with the statement: *"The quality of teaching decreases if educators show little awareness about how their unconscious biases affect their working style."*

Analysis: We could say that educators are in a state of "conscious incompetence". They are painfully aware that their role is impactful and that bias is a problem, but they identify a lack of "insights/skills" on how to manage these dynamics as a major barrier. They know *what* the problem is but lack the *toolkit* to solve it.

The inevitability of worldview expression

Q6 asked: *"Is your worldview (personal values, political ideas, ethics) expressed through your work?"* Most participants answered **YES**. This debunks the myth of the "neutral educator". Professionals in Italy and Spain admit that their personal ethics and politics are visible in their work. We believe that this validates the EPIC approach: since we cannot hide our worldview, we must learn to manage it transparently.

Identified barriers: Unconscious bias and Power management

The survey invited respondents to identify the most pressing barriers to positive influence. The top-rated barriers were:

1. **Unconscious bias:** A fear that hidden prejudices are affecting the quality of teaching.
2. **Communication of values:** A difficulty in communicating personal values without imposing them (indoctrination).
3. **Power dynamics:** A lack of skills in managing the hierarchy of the classroom.

Interestingly, technical barriers (lack of digital tools, etc.) were mentioned less frequently than these "relational" barriers. In our opinion, this confirms that the sector needs skills related to emotional intelligence, reflexivity, and power management.



INTERVIEWS ANALYSIS

The learner's perspective: The rejection of arrogance

When adult learners were asked to describe negative experiences, they rarely mentioned the difficulty of the subject matter. Instead, they focused on the **arrogance attitude** of the educator. For example:

- *"Every time the educators showed too much arrogance, my attention and interest went down"* (Italy).
- *"Some educators showed their expertise with too much arrogance... I showed them they had to respect me"* (Spain).

Considering these results, it seems that adult learners have a low tolerance for arrogance. In the traditional academic model, a professor's arrogance might be tolerated as a sign of genius. In adult education, it is perceived as a sign of disrespect. The "expert" posture, intended to establish authority, often achieves the opposite: it creates resistance. Learners explicitly stated they prefer a "guide" who is helpful and clear over a "master" who is distant.

The learner's perspective: The practice of infantilisation

A critical theme emerging from the data is **infantilisation**, that is, the treatment of adults as children. In the interviews this seems quite a structural theme:

- *"My experience is ambiguous... teachers force us to follow centre rules, like asking permission to go to the bathroom, which is absurd for an adult..."* (Spain).

We believe that this finding is pivotal. It illustrates how institutional habits (borrowed from compulsory schooling) infect adult education. When an adult is forced to ask for permission for basic bodily needs, the power dynamic shifts to a more "parent-child" like relationship. This is dangerous for maintaining the autonomy required for effective adult learning.

The learner's perspective: The desire for human connection

A decisive pattern emerged across all interviews in both Italy and Spain: the quality of the learning experience was rarely attributed to the technical infrastructure or the syllabus content. Instead, it was almost exclusively attributed to the **relational quality** of the educator.

In traditional academic settings, "professionalism" is often synonymous with "distance", that is, the idea that an educator must maintain a rigid boundary to preserve authority. The EPIC research findings suggest that in Adult Education, this model is obsolete. Adult learners do not seek a distant authority figure; they seek a **human connection** that validates their dignity and life experience.

When learners were asked to define what made an educator "good", the vocabulary used was consistently emotional and relational rather than technical. The most frequent terms recorded in the interviews were: *"Closeness"*, *"Empathy"* and *"Availability"*.



- **Closeness** challenges the traditional hierarchy. It implies that the educator steps down from the pedestal to meet the learner at eye level.
- **Empathy** is the primary mechanism through which inclusion is felt. It is not enough to have an "inclusive policy" on paper; the learner must feel understood.
- **Availability** is interpreted by the adult learner as a sign of respect. When an educator takes five extra minutes to explain a concept to a struggling student, they are sending a powerful non-verbal message: *"Your success matters to me."* This builds the trust necessary for positive influence.

The data from this section leads to a strong conclusion for the EPIC project: relational competence (the ability to build trust, show empathy, and maintain a human connection) is not an "optional bonus" for adult educators; it is a prerequisite for effectiveness. If the educator is perceived as a "technocrat" or a "bureaucrat" (focused only on rules and content), adult learners—who participate voluntarily—will disengage. Positive Influence can only flow through a channel of human connection.

The educator's perspective: Struggling with institutional norms

Educators, for their part, feel trapped. They do not necessarily *want* to be authoritarian, but they operate within rigid systems:

- *"Institutional norms... infantilise adult learners"* (Italy).
- *"One of the biggest challenges is the diversity of profiles... there is a risk that the shy ones or women in male-dominated environments stay in the background"* (Spain).

It seems to us that educators are seeking help. Educators are grappling with increasingly diverse classrooms (migrants, varying literacy levels, different ages) and feel ill-equipped to ensure everyone's inclusion. They fear that their "standard" way of teaching might be excluding the "shy ones" or those from different cultural backgrounds, which could hinder the learning experience for these students and limit their academic success. Heterogeneity without resorting to authoritarian control, such as collaborative frameworks and inclusive teaching strategies that respect diverse perspectives, appears to be the key to creating an engaging learning environment that accommodates the varied backgrounds and experiences of adult learners.



TOPICS FOR THE WORKBOOK

Synthesising the theoretical framework, the survey data, and the qualitative narratives, the consortium has identified 5 core concepts. These topics represent the essential areas of competence required to enhance positive influence in adult education. They will serve as the topics addressed by the EPIC Workbook.

CONCEPT 1: THE MYTH OF NEUTRALITY

There is a pervasive belief in vocational training that the educator should be "neutral". However, our desk research confirms that education is inherently political. Every curriculum choice, every historical example used, and every behaviour punished or rewarded reflects a worldview. When an educator claims to be neutral, they are often simply rendering the dominant ideology invisible.

Our results show that 93% of surveyed educators admit their worldview is expressed in their work. Yet many lack the tools to process this. The danger is not that educators have values, but that they are unaware of how those values shape their teaching.

*Operative topic: **The Values Compass.***

Aim: The EPIC Workbook will guide educators to move from this illusory neutrality to *transparent subjectivity*. It will help educators map their own ethical and political "red lines" before entering the classroom. By being aware of their own bias, they can ensure they are facilitating learning rather than indoctrinating.

CONCEPT 2: REDEFINING AUTHORITY

Traditional education relies on *power-over*, that is, authority derived from status, punishment, and the hoarding of knowledge. Our results data shows that this model triggers resistance in adults, as it is seen as an **arrogant attitude**. Learners, instead, explicitly asked for "guides" and "facilitators". They respect competence, but they reject hierarchy for hierarchy's sake.

*Operative topic: **Facilitative Leadership***

Aim: The Workbook will focus on techniques to "de-centre" the educator and to provide practical tools for shifting authority. For example, changing the physical layout of the room (circles vs. rows), changing the feedback mechanism (peer review vs. teacher grading), and changing the flow of questions (asking "What do you think?" before giving the answer).

CONCEPT 3: DECONSTRUCTING INFANTILISATION

Adults learn best when they are autonomous and their life experience is respected. Institutional rules often violate this by treating learners as blank slates or unruly children.

*Operative topic: **The Autonomy Audit.***



Aim: The Workbook will help educators distinguish between necessary structure (deadlines, learning goals) and unnecessary control (dress codes, permission to speak). It will provide ideas for negotiating a "contract of equals" on the first day of class.

CONCEPT 4: THE INCLUSIVE MINDSET

Inclusion is often limited to physical access or "tolerance". We at EPIC believe that actual and effective inclusion involves "cognitive safety", that is, creating an environment where diverse worldviews are safe from ridicule or erasure.

Operative topics: **The Narrative Check.**

Aim: The Workbook will focus on practices of "micro-inclusions" to train educators to analyse their own language and examples. Are my metaphors only understandable to men? Do my case studies only feature local names? The goal is to create a "cognitive hospitality" where all backgrounds feel recognised.

CONCEPT 5: VULNERABILITY AS COMPETENCE

The "expert" model demands perfection. This creates high anxiety for the educator and high power distance for the learner. Our results, instead, show that learners value closeness and authenticity as basic for trust.

Operative topics: **Strategic Vulnerability.**

Aim: The Workbook will reframe vulnerability not as a weakness, but as a pedagogical strategy, to encourage educators to say, "*I don't know*" or "*I was wrong*". This models lifelong learning behaviours. When an educator admits ignorance, they validate the learning process (Knowles et al., 2011). The Workbook will provide scenarios/role-plays to practice this sort of "confident humility".



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We can summarise the analysis of the results gathered during the EPIC research phase as follows:

- The high levels of self-awareness in the survey data indicate that adult educators are not in denial about their power; they are anxious about it. They are seeking guidance on how to align their professional role with their personal values.
- Educators do not need more abstract theory on why inclusion is important. They need concrete soft skills to manage the difficult moments (the conflict in the classroom, the silent student, the moment of political disagreement, etc.).
- Adult learners demand an educator who is an empathetic guide. Any pedagogical intervention must start from this assumption.

Thus considered, we believe that the EPIC Workbook will be characterised by the following features:

1. **Practicality:** The Workbook will consist of checklists, insights, self-reflection prompts and some exercises to immediately apply the EPIC approach in the trainees' work contexts. This is the reason why each of the 5 concepts has been translated into a more "operative" topic.
2. **Narrative-based:** The stories collected (e.g., the bathroom example) will be used as case studies to spark discussion.
3. **Focus on the relational side of the education:** The Workbook's content will target those aspects of teaching which are related to how educators communicate and handle the relationships with adult learners.

By addressing the 5 concepts outlined in this report, the EPIC project will provide a tangible, much-needed contribution to the professional development of adult educators in Europe, moving the sector toward a more conscious, inclusive, and positive exercise of influence.



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