



Reimagining learning provisions for asylum seekers in Italy: An exploration of asylum seekers' experiences of recognition and misrecognition in adult learning centres

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Abstract

This article employs narrative methodologies to present the stories of three asylum seekers enrolled in two adult learning centres in the Lombardy region of Italy. The author draws on Axel Honneth's theory of recognition to provide an understanding of how these adult learners' experiences might impact their self-identity. Based on the narratives the participants provided in the course of interviews the author conducted with them, this article highlights some shortcomings in the learning provision for asylum seekers in Italy. Using interpretative analysis, the participants' experiences are discussed under three categories: (1) valorisation of certificates; (2) appropriateness of teaching methods; and (3) recognition of prior learning. The author concludes that greater efforts should be put into recognising the asylum seekers' previous experiences, and training adult educators who work with asylum seekers in adult learning principles.

Keywords migration · asylum seeking · recognition of prior learning · recognition theory · adult learning and education

Résumé

Réimaginer l'enseignement offert aux demandeurs d'asile en Italie : examen de la reconnaissance et de la méconnaissance dont les demandeurs d'asile font l'expérience dans des centres d'apprentissage des adultes – Cet article adopte des méthodes narratives pour présenter les récits de trois demandeurs d'asile inscrits dans deux centres d'apprentissage pour adultes dans la région italienne de Lombardie. L'auteur s'appuie sur la théorie de la reconnaissance d'Axel Honneth pour fournir une conception de la façon dont les expériences de ces apprenants adultes peut se répercuter sur leur identité personnelle. S'appuyant sur les récits racontés par les participants lors des interviews menées par l'auteur avec eux, cet article met

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en lumière certaines failles dans l'enseignement dispensé aux demandeurs d'asile en Italie. En recourant à une analyse interprétative, il aborde les expériences des participants en les répartissant en trois catégories : (1) valorisation des certificats ; (2) adéquation des méthodes d'enseignement et (3) reconnaissance des acquis. L'auteur conclut qu'il faudrait faire davantage d'efforts pour reconnaître les expériences des demandeurs d'asile et former les éducateurs d'adultes qui travaillent avec eux aux principes de l'éducation des adultes.

Introduction: Learning provision for asylum seekers in Italy

In 2014, Italy expanded its structures for receiving, processing and accommodating asylum seekers by establishing new “centres of extraordinary reception” (*centri di accoglienza straordinaria*; CAS). By 2017, these centres were accommodating 80% of asylum seekers arriving in Italy (Paynter 2020, 2022). During their stay in the reception centres, asylum seekers receive education as well as legal, social and health assistance, though since 2018, reception centres are no longer obliged to enrol asylum seekers in language classes. While some reception centres still do this, asylum seekers who are not enrolled by their centre have to pay for their language classes themselves.

In Italy, the *Centri Provinciali per l'Istruzione degli Adulti* (CPIAs; Provincial Centres for Adult Education), are the major public institutions for adult education (Daniele et al. 2018; Deiana and Spina 2021; Loprieno et al. 2019; OECD 2021). One of the duties of these centres is to provide educational offerings for immigrants. Adults seeking asylum in Italy access formal education and vocational training mainly through CPIAs. CPIAs also offer lower and upper secondary school qualifications for both migrants and Italians interested in continuing their education (Deiana and Spina 2021; Longo 2019). While CPIAs are meant to serve both Italians and foreigners, in practice, the learners enrolled in CPIAs are predominantly foreigners who come to learn Italian, since knowledge of the language is critical for integration and obtaining long-term residency (Deiana and Spina 2021; Longo 2019). Language classes for migrants therefore constitute a major part of the CPIAs' educational provision (Deiana and Spina 2021).

In its *Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning* (CoEU 2011), the European Union (EU) recognises the role of adult learning in strengthening social inclusion and promoting active social participation of migrants and other disadvantaged groups in EU countries. The EU therefore encourages its member states to improve access to adult learning for migrants and other disadvantaged groups (ibid.). Member States of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) are also obliged to provide access to and ensure participation in adult learning for disadvantaged groups (Slade and Dickson 2020). However, Bonnie Slade and Nicola Dickson report that the *3rd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (UIL 2016) “indicates that 56% of countries who responded to the survey did not report on the participation of migrants and refugees” in adult learning and education (Slade and Dickson 2020, p. 2). Thus, while the importance of learning for refugees and asylum seekers is established in theory, it seems that countries and scholars are not doing enough to ensure learning

provision for migrants in general, and asylum seekers in particular. This article seeks to highlight shortcomings observed in the learning provision for asylum seekers in Italy from the narratives of asylum seekers themselves.

Based on three interviews with asylum seekers I conducted for my doctoral research, in this article, I examine the learning provisions available to asylum seekers in Italy. My three interviewees were attending CPIAs in the Lombardy region of Italy. My principal aim was to explore those factors which can contribute to richer learning experiences for asylum seekers in Italy. In the course of this article, I discuss the learning provisions for asylum seekers under three categories which emerged from the participants' narratives: (1) valorisation of certificates; (2) appropriateness of teaching methods; and (3) recognition of prior learning. I argue that if these factors are considered and worked upon, this will contribute to the improvement of the current provisions for asylum seekers' learning. I also posit that non-recognition of prior learning is a form of misrecognition.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL)

According to Andreas Fejes and Per Andersson, recognition of prior learning (RPL) is about "finding ways to recognise and document a person's prior learning" (Fejes and Andersson 2009, p. 37). For adult learners who have crossed borders, it is very important whether and how their previous learning experiences are recognised, since this will help to determine the next steps of their educational and career trajectories. For this reason, it is useful at this point to explore some of the literature on RPL. First, I trace the history of RPL in order to show why and how the concept has developed. While accounts of the history of RPL differ in some respects, it is clear that the concept evolved as societies searched for ways to address issues of access to and inclusion in education, learning and the labour market.

Judy Harris (2006, referred to in Andersson 2008) and Fredrik Sandberg (2012) show that the concept of RPL can be traced back to World War II when universities in the United States began to recognise the experiences of American veterans. However, "the concept of prior learning assessment (PLA) was not introduced until the late 1960s in the United States" (Sandberg 2012, p. 355) in an effort to broaden access to higher education. These accounts therefore trace RPL back to the United States. Judy Harris and Christine Wihak (2018) state that RPL emerged as a practice in the 1970s. Patrick Werquin also traces the history of RPL back to the 1970s, but argues that it developed with the World Bank's realisation that formal education "was too slow to adapt to socio-economic changes of the time" (Werquin 2007, p. 470). Linda Cooper et al. (2017) also claim that the concept of RPL originated in the 1970s and 1980s with the humanist discourse then emerging in North America and the United Kingdom, particularly as it related to inclusion. They deduce that RPL grew as a response to issues of widening access to education, inclusion and socio-economic change, among others.

Some scholars have argued that RPL can open up educational opportunities for individuals who would otherwise be denied them. In South Africa, RPL is

a comparison of previous learning and experience of a learner howsoever obtained against the learning outcomes required for a specific qualification and the acceptance for purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirements (SAQA 2004, p. 16, referred to in de Graaff 2014, p. 2).

Writing about the experience of RPL in South Africa, Jane Castle and Gillian Attwood (2001) state that RPL allows individuals to obtain recognition for their prior learning by a higher education institution. This recognition may either permit the individual to take part in an academic programme for which s/he does not have the required qualifications (access), or exempt the individual from some parts of the academic programme by assigning credit for her/his prior learning (credit). While Castle and Attwood agree that assigning credit to an individual's prior learning allows students to determine their own pathways, they also argue that "it may deprive them of certain forms of learning, including self-affirmation; process learning; depth of understanding; relational and critical perspectives" as well as "remove them from sites of learning which develop a deeper sense of empowerment and collective responsibility" (ibid., p. 67). They question the thinking that equivalency can be established between learning gained from experience and learning gained from formal contexts. They support RPL for access, which they believe "can be an enabling process, involving individuals in generalising, drawing analogies, identifying differences, reflecting on performance, and attempting to abstract from one context to another" (ibid., p. 69).

According to a number of scholars, RPL benefits both the individual and society at large (Castle and Attwood 2001; Cretchley and Castle 2001; Harris 1999; Osman and Castle 2002; Radovan 2011; Singh 2009; Smith and Clayton 2009; Yang 2015). At the individual level, RPL offers students a variety of options: career progression, acquisition of certificates/diplomas (Bjornavold and Le Mouillour 2008) and personal fulfilment. Writing on findings from an experiment carried out in France, Sue Ford states that RPL makes provision for "individualised learning paths, personal empowerment and shorter training times" (Ford 1997, p. 323). Empirical results from a study conducted by Per Andersson and Kristina Hellberg (2009) reveal that the RPL process can boost participants' self-perception, a view also shared by Werquin (2007). In Sweden, one of the purposes RPL serves is the integration of immigrants into society. It is also used to match immigrants' training to individual needs as part of labour market training (Andersson and Osman 2008, p. 44). At the institutional level, RPL contributes to "designing flexible curricula and offering flexible routes into and through higher education" (Brown 2017, p. 60).

Around the world RPL is increasingly used as an alternative access route into higher education, particularly in fields with a professional base, such as law, engineering, teaching, nursing and management (Osman and Castle 2002, p. 63).

In the workplace, RPL can help workers update their skills and enhance employability, which has positive impacts on the organisation (García-Peñalvo et al. 2013).

I agree with the argument that RPL can enable more individualised learning pathways and shorter periods for learning (Ford 1997). This is particularly useful if the individual already possesses the necessary skills for a particular qualification but needs to have these skills certified. This helps to prevent reinventing the wheel and saves time both for individuals and institutions. The story of Elias below illustrates this poignantly. Per Andersson and Ali Osman (2008) have also pointed out that RPL is useful for helping to integrate immigrants into their host society. RPL can facilitate economic integration by finding ways to get immigrants into the workforce as soon as possible. The next section of this article looks at the RPL situation in Italy.

RPL in Italy

Italy, like other EU member states, started benchmarking their national qualifications on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)¹ in 2008. Nevertheless, the country still lacks a national qualifications framework (NQF) (Bencivenga 2017). Rita Bencivenga asserts that there is some confusion around legislation and institutions relating to RPL in Italy. She identifies three main pieces of Italian legislation that make reference to RPL (*ibid.*). These are:

- (1) Law 92/2012 (MoLSP 2012), which acknowledges that the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is fundamental to lifelong learning and citizens' employability;
- (2) Legislative Decree 13/2013 (GoI 2013), which sets out standards for certifying non-formal and informal learning, and
- (3) Decree of the Ministry for Employment and Social Policy promulgated in 2015 (MoLSP and MoEUR 2015), which provides a comparison framework for recognising regional qualifications in Italy.

Bencivenga argues that the absence of a single national framework has impeded the implementation of RPL in Italy.

Laura Zanfrini et al. (2015) corroborate Bencivenga (2017) by confirming that the RPL process in Italy is very complex. They claim that only formal qualifications in regulated professions obtained outside Italy need to be recognised. To do this, a person has to make "a request [for] qualification's equivalence to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers – Department of Public Function" (Zanfrini et al.

¹ "The EQF is an 8-level, learning outcomes-based framework for all types of qualifications that serves as a translation tool between different national qualifications frameworks. This framework helps improve transparency, comparability and portability of people's qualifications and makes it possible to compare qualifications from different countries and institutions" (EU n.d.). The framework was established in 2008 (CoEU 2008), and later revised (CoEU 2017).

2015, p. 49). According to the authors, the experience of people who obtained their qualification in the EU might be different from those who obtained their qualification outside the EU. While organisations are obliged to recognise qualifications from within the EU, they are under no such obligation to recognise qualifications obtained outside the EU. This means that recognition can be withheld or granted only partially, depending on whether or not the organisation assesses the applicant's previous education or training as being sufficient.

Zanfrini et al. (2015) acknowledge that there are legal stipulations for recognising non-formal and informal learning in Italy. They point out that some regions of Italy have developed or are developing their own frameworks for RPL, but argue that the culture of recognising competences acquired via non-formal and informal learning is not yet sufficiently widespread. They point out that regional recognition of learning or skills often lacks public value as there is no guarantee that it will be accepted by employers. They also argue that information about RPL is not well publicised in Italy.

Whilst Italy has some laws in place to recognise learning or competences acquired in both formal and informal contexts, the lack of a national qualifications framework poses a problem. Further research is needed on the extent to which RPL is implemented in Italy. Zanfrini et al. (2015) claim that there are no scientific studies on the recognition of migrants' non-formal and informal learning and competences, which makes it difficult to offer evidence-based information. Bencivenga (2017) tried to fill this observed research gap by investigating how Italian organisations assess migrants' non-formal and informal learning and skills. She concluded that "the full scope of migrants' competences and experiences, desires and expectations is not explored" (ibid., p. 152) by the organisations she studied. Another important point to note is that the authors cited above discuss RPL with reference to persons with legal residency in Italy, which may exclude asylum seekers. The next section presents a more holistic view of the concept of recognition.

Theory of recognition

What if a person is denied the recognition they expect? Scholars have called this disrespect, mistreatment, injustice, social ostracism, degradation and deprivation of rights (D'Avila and Saavedra 2011; Honneth 1995, 2004). My own research presented here draws on German social philosopher Axel Honneth's theory of recognition as expounded in his book, *The struggle for recognition: The moral grammar of social conflicts* (Honneth 1995). In this book, Honneth outlines and explicates the conditions for self-realisation in an attempt to understand what happens when an individual is denied recognition, especially how this affects their self-identity. Honneth argues that denial of recognition "injures [a person] with regard to the positive understanding of themselves that they have acquired intersubjectively" (ibid., p. 131). This injury, according to Honneth, can cause a person's identity to collapse. This highlights humans' vulnerability in needing recognition from others in order to develop a positive and healthy sense of self.

In his theory of recognition, which has wider ramifications beyond RPL, Honneth (1995) argues that social relations are regulated by intersubjective recognition. When an individual receives the recognition they feel they deserve, it can help them to develop a positive relation to self. Honneth's overall aim is to provide a critical framework to explain how societies develop. His criticism is nevertheless "grounded in love and processes of recognition" (Formenti and West 2018, p. 21). His idea is that justice is present in a society to the degree that every member of that society receives the social recognition that makes them a full citizen (Honneth 2004). For Honneth, social equality and the opportunity for everyone in society to form their identity are important to the discourse of social justice. He advocates for equal treatment of all members of society in order to enable each person's self-realisation.

For Honneth, "feeling recognised and legitimate in groups and whole society was essential" (Formenti and West 2018, p. 18). Honneth's focus is on the dynamics of self-other recognition at different levels. Self-other recognition or intersubjective recognition is expressed in three forms: love, rights and esteem (Boston 2018; Honneth 1995), which beget self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. Self-confidence is enhanced when one experiences acceptance from others. Self-respect is forged when one feels accepted as part of a community of rights. Self-esteem comes from being honoured through the acknowledgment of one's abilities (Formenti and West 2018; Honneth 1995; West et al. 2013).

Honneth argues that "the experience of social injustice is always measured in terms of the withholding of some recognition held to be legitimate" (Honneth 2004, p. 352). In his earlier book, Honneth (1995) categorises the denial of recognition according to the three forms of recognition he identifies. In the sphere of *love*, disrespect takes the form of any "attempt to gain control of a person's body against his or her will" (Honneth 1995, p. 132). This includes physical injury and abuse such as torture or rape which causes both physical and psychological injury to the victim. The victim feels defenceless and at the mercy of another person. Such disrespect damages a person's self-confidence and leads to a loss of trust in themselves and others, thus impacting negatively on their relationships with others. Disrespect in the sphere of love destroys the "most fundamental form of practical relation-to-self, namely, one's underlying trust in oneself" (ibid., p. 133).

In the sphere of *rights*, disrespect takes the form of the structural exclusion of individuals from the "possession of certain rights within a society" (Honneth 1995, p. 133). This denial of rights or social ostracism, in the words of Honneth, is the refusal to afford an individual the status of equality with other members of the community and "the same degree of moral responsibility as other members of the society" (ibid., p. 133). This causes the individual to feel that they do not enjoy the privilege of being a full member of society with the same rights as others. "For the individual, having socially valid rights-claims denied signifies a violation of the intersubjective expectation to be recognised as a subject capable of forming moral judgments" (ibid., pp. 133–134). Disrespect in the sphere of rights is therefore a form of discrimination and injures a person's self-identity with regard to self-respect.

The form of disrespect that can manifest in the sphere of *social esteem* is the downgrading of the social value of an individual or a group. This happens when the characteristics, contributions, beliefs, abilities or way of life of an individual or

a group are regarded as inferior or deficient. Individuals then lose their self-esteem as they are denied social approval of their abilities and contributions. They develop the sense that they do not have anything positive or significant to contribute to their society. “In order to acquire a successful relation-to-self, one is dependent on the intersubjective recognition of one’s abilities and accomplishments” (Honneth 1995, p. 136). To experience disrespect in any of the three spheres of recognition is therefore to be denied forms of recognition which are essential to a person’s sense of self or self-identity.

Immigrants, particularly asylum seekers, are likely to experience denial of recognition since they have moved into a new socio-cultural context. Furthermore, asylum seekers from the Global South are more susceptible to being misrecognised because they are usually perceived as coming into the host society with less desirable social and cultural values, academic and professional qualifications (Andersson and Guo 2009; Guo and Maitra 2019; Heinemann and Sarabi 2020; Morrice et al. 2017; Slade 2004). Honneth’s work on recognition provides insights into the experiences of asylum seekers in Italy with regard to learning and integration. The next section presents the methodology and context of my research.

Methodology and context

For my study; I adopted a narrative approach in order to provide rich insights into the dynamic interplay of individual and society. I interviewed three participants from two adult education centres. Two participants from the same centre voluntarily offered to take part in the interviews after they were informed by their teachers about my research. The third participant was suggested to me by the staff of the charity organisation in charge of his accommodation centre.

I conducted narrative interviews with the participants which were then systematically analysed in order to arrive at an understanding and interpretation (Bochner and Herrmann 2020). These interpretive practices are subjective, since I interpreted the narratives through my own experiences and what I thought the participants were communicating (Connelly and Clandinin 1990). Acknowledging one’s subjectivity as a researcher is recognised and appreciated in qualitative research, particularly in narrative research where the focus is on stories. Arthur Bochner and Andrew Herrmann argue that telling stories

is the means by which we represent our experiences to ourselves and to others; it is how we make sense of our lives and fill them with meaning. To study persons is to study beings existing in narrative and socially constituted and shaped by stories (Bochner and Herrmann 2020, p. 2).

By letting people tell their stories, narrative research gives “voice” to participants and highlights the meanings people assign to their experiences. It also allows for the observation of both uniqueness and similarities among participants’ stories.

I chose to focus on the content of the stories rather than the precise way they were structured. My main intent was to keep the story intact for the purposes of

interpretation. The process of analysis was recursive, taking place throughout the research process and not only when I started writing this article. While returning from each of the interviews, I would think about what I had heard and try to make sense of it. After extensive and careful consideration of the transcripts, I identified themes which I grouped into three major categories.

Throughout the analysis, at the back of my mind was the awareness that the interview was a co-construction of reality between the participant and myself (Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Guba and Lincoln 1989, 1994; Lincoln and Guba 2000, 2013). I was conscious that the narratives were shaped by the relationship that existed between the participants and myself, and that this relationship determined which stories were told to me and which ones were left out (Formenti 2014; Galimberti 2014; Merrill and West 2009). During the interviews, I had tried to build an interactional or conversational rapport in the spirit of “equal and democratic relationship” (Merrill and West 2009, p. 116), in order to show the participants that I considered their views to be important. Whenever they spoke about an experience that I had also had – as a Black migrant – in Italy, I would mention it as a way of identifying with them, since Herbert Rubin and Irene Rubin (2005) advise qualitative researchers to demonstrate reciprocity and self-revelation during the interview process. Each interview was transcribed in full and there was no attempt to ensure the grammatical correctness of the speech. Pauses are indicated by three dots. Four dots indicate that a statement has been shortened; italics are used when the participant was reporting someone else’s speech. For the sake of anonymity, the participants’ names have been changed.

Participants

The three participants selected for this study were two Nigerians and one Cameroonian. This composition of participants was not intentional; rather, these participants were simply the ones I was able to interview at that particular point in my research and whose stories threw up similar themes. The interviews with the Nigerians took place in Standard English and Nigerian Pidgin English. Nigerian Pidgin English is a combination of English words and words from Nigerian languages. Most Nigerians are able to communicate in Pidgin English, regardless of their educational status. The participants and I switched between these two varieties of English throughout the interviews. The interview with the Cameroonian was in English; though his English was not fluent, it was comprehensible.

Below are short portraits of each of the participants I selected for my study. Before starting each interview, I spent considerable time getting to know the participants to try and develop a trusting relationship with them, so that the interview would be like two Nigerian or African migrants having a conversation. How much our different residency status (since I was a student with legal residency in Italy) impacted the tone of the interviews was not easy to determine. An interesting situation arose when one of the interviewees began to insist that I

should get a job, because, according to him, I needed to be earning money. After several calls and some admonishment from him, he stopped communicating with me altogether because he felt I was not serious.

Barth

At the time of interview, Barth was a 44-year-old man from Nigeria. He arrived in Italy in March 2017. He had only primary school education in Nigeria and had been working as a car mechanic there for almost twenty years, with his own workshop and numerous apprentices. Due to his level of education, he could not speak fluent English. His speech was a mixture of Standard English and Nigerian Pidgin English. At the time of the interview, Barth was enrolled in middle school, called *terza media* in Italy. He did not have a stable job and was hoping to finish middle school and find a driving job.

Clement

Clement was in his early 40s at the time of the interview. He arrived in Italy on his third migration attempt after the first two were unsuccessful. He first tried to immigrate in 2007 but was arrested by Libyan police. He was released after paying 350 dollars. He made a second attempt in 2009 and spent five days at sea before being arrested and imprisoned in Libya along with the other members of his group. He was released from prison in 2010, having converted to Christianity.

In 2011 Clement went back to Nigeria, where he met and proposed to his wife before returning to Libya. He went back to Nigeria in 2013 to get married and brought his wife to Libya, where they had two children. He spent thirteen years in Libya overall and learned to speak Arabic there.

Clement arrived in Italy with his wife and two children in 2017. After arriving in Italy, he and his wife had another child. Though he was trained as a welder, he did not have legal permission to practise his vocation in Italy because he did not have any Italian training. However, his workplace nevertheless allowed him to work as a welder. He was combining working with Italian language classes at the time of the interview.

Elias

Elias was 37 years old at the time of the interview. He said he had completed secondary education in Cameroon and worked as a trader. He later went to Qatar for two years where he worked as a bowling mechanic, returning to Cameroon after two years. After some months, he left Cameroon again, this time for Germany. He said he left Cameroon because he had some problems, but did not explain what these were.

Upon arrival in Germany, Elias requested asylum and lived in Germany for two years, during which time he worked in a factory. His asylum application was unsuccessful, so he came to Italy in January 2020. He attended language classes online due to the COVID pandemic. At the time of the interview, he was enrolled in middle school, *terza medi*. He felt frustrated because he had not yet found a job, but he was participating in various training courses in the hope of boosting his chances of getting a job after completing middle school. He thought it was impossible to get a good job in Italy without at least a middle school certificate.

Analysis

Valorisation of formal certificates

The three participants all spoke about the necessity of formal learning in order to flourish in Italy. While Barth and Clement emphasised the importance of language classes, Elias emphasised the importance of middle school (*terza media*). Barth's position was that it was necessary to learn Italian in order to have a good life in Italy not only for intrinsic reasons, but also because of the recognition afforded by a formal language course certificate, which he felt was crucial for getting a job. So, when his camp operators told him they could not afford to send him to language school, he sponsored himself:

"I tell dem I want to go school, dem say for now I would need to dey study at home. I say, no. Me don already pass dat level to dey school for house. Me don already start school for outside When you talk to dem, dem go tell you sey dis cooperative no dey send immigrant dey go school. If you want to go school, then you go by yourself. You pay everything by yourself. You understand? I dey come here every day. I pay the ticket, pay for train, everything, moni for school fees, everything, I pay by myself."

Clement expressed a strong desire to learn Italian because he had heard that it was important to attend language classes in order to participate in vocational training:

"Yeah, even when I come to here now, I want to learn again, to learn it, to know more so that I can use this work ... this welding to be working but due to the situation of Italy, they say you must go to school, you do here, do here ... well I thank God that I try my best but God now gave me a job, and these people, they are very nice. I do welding there. I help them to weld ... to do everything that in that working place."

Elias explained that he was attending middle school (*terza media*) because it was the basic requirement for starting a career path in Italy:

"When you have *terza media*, now you can look every work. You can have orientation. You understand what I'm saying?"

Everybody can do terza media. When you have terza media Dopo terza media now ... after terza media, you can say, ‘Okay now, you do mechanic, go there.’ Before you do that mechanic, you need to have the basic, terza media. It’s like that.”

All three participants viewed formal certificates as essential for personal and career progress in Italy. This valorisation of formal certificates makes uncertified learning unattractive. For example, Barth mentioned that learning Italian at language classes in camp would not be recognised because no certificates would be awarded. This was why he made every effort to attend a certificate-awarding institution like CPIA, even though it was not easy for him. Arne Carlsen points out the implication of overreliance on formal certificates: “many societies still focus exclusively on the outcomes of formal learning in educational institutions” and “a great deal of learning remains unrecognised” (Carlsen 2015, p. 6).

(In)appropriateness of teaching styles, subjects and lessons

Clement recounted some experiences in his CPIA which he did not enjoy. There was a particular teacher whose teaching method did not fit Clement’s expectation of how a teacher should teach. He also found some of the topics and discussions irrelevant:

“You know ... Let’s put it like this now. Sometimes, you meet me today now, you ask me how is my family? I say fine. The next day again, you are still talking about family, family, family. You don’t even bring the notes, they bring ... or book to open it the book. Sometimes we ask him say, ‘We don’t use the book to teach? This book?’ He will say leave it. Write ... Draw your finger down. Draw this one. That’s manoa. This one, this one”

Clement said the teacher also asked unnecessary questions about their personal lives which made the students uncomfortable:

“Not only me, all of us. Not only me, all of us. We were complaining ... All of us. He go say, ‘Nigeria. Where do you come from in Nigeria?’ (Participant laughs) O my God. People come to come and learn. You have been asking them, ‘Which food do you eat in Nigeria?’ (Participant laughs loudly) Is it ...? That one is not concern him. The food we eat in Nigeria ... How many house? Look at your house in Nigeria, non piccolo abi grande? Asking people, all that ... (Participant hisses) you know? You come to school, you have to teach the children, eh the teacher, eh the student what they need.”

The issue of teaching methods resonates in Clement’s narrative. He felt his teacher asked students inappropriate personal questions instead of focusing on her duty of teaching. These questions centred on lifestyle and ways of doing things in the students’ home cultures, but such intercultural experience did not interest Clement. His

aim was to learn the language and he expected the teacher to teach him just that. This implies that Clement, and possibly the other students, did not understand the teacher's method and that the teacher did not explain the connection between the tasks she gave the students and language learning. Maybe it would have been better if this teacher had explained how her method was related to language learning. Clement might then have been able to appreciate the teaching method.

Clement seemed to be describing the teacher as someone who did not understand how to teach. It is difficult to establish whether this really was the case. What one can observe from Clement's narration, however, is that he and other students were not satisfied with their teacher's methods. This shows how important it is that adult educators adopt principles and methods adapted to the needs, desires, motivations and experiences of adult learners rather than those based on predetermined content. It is also crucial that teachers of adult learners present themselves as facilitators of learning rather than as authority figures (Jarvis 2004; Merriam 2004). A sensitive and reflexive instructor attempts to find out learners' interests and then reaches an agreement with the learners on how the lesson will be organised. Sensitivity is especially important for those who work with asylum seekers, some of whom may be triggered by insensitive questions about past traumatic experiences which they may not want to recall. Others may be wary of talking about their past lives in order not to contradict the claims they made in their asylum application. A sensitive teacher or adult educator will therefore find out whether or not learners, particularly vulnerable learners like asylum seekers, are comfortable talking about certain aspects of their lives.

Elias' narration also touched on teaching methods. He claimed that some asylum seekers found middle school (*terza media*) difficult because they did not have any education in their home countries. They could not understand the relevance of the topics they were being taught:

"... Many guys there, they don't go to school. They cross by boat, they came. They never go to school in their country. For them, they say, '*Go to school*'. He say, '*Okay*'. When he reach to school, they say, '*This is geography*'. He don't understand. This is storia, the name of president in Italia. You need to give ... You need to know about the name the president, the prime minister, different power, power legislative, democracy. '*See. What is this? No work, nothing. Why I comes you told me about president in Italian?*'"

Elias' narration indicates that the lessons in his school may have been teacher-centred instead of learner-centred. As mentioned already, in learner-centred classes, teachers teach what is learner-appropriate and what learners find interesting and relevant, not what is predetermined by a curriculum. Elias also mentioned that many of the students found exams difficult. "For me, exam is exam because for me, it's very easy for me because I go to school, I tell you. But for another guys, it is strong." One can understand that the teachers in Elias' adult education centre thought it important to teach the same subjects taught in regular middle school if learners were to be awarded a middle school certificate, but there is also a need to consider the particular composition of learners in the

classroom and organise lessons according to their level or find a way to make regular subjects and topics relevant to their needs. This is not easy, as it requires innovation, enthusiasm and commitment from both programme planners and teachers.

(Non)recognition of prior learning

Barth's plan was to obtain his driver's licence as soon as he finished *terza media* (middle school) so that he could get a job as a driver. Though he had worked as a mechanic in Nigeria for over twenty years and even owned his own workshop, he was unable to work as a mechanic in Italy because this would have required him to re-train and obtain a certificate. He therefore made his living as an agricultural worker, and even that work had stopped for some months when we met. He said he was planning to start again in the month following our interview. When I asked if he would not prefer to work as a mechanic, he replied that he still harboured hopes of doing so in Italy, especially after obtaining the *terza media* certificate. He felt that when he was ready to obtain the certificate it would not be difficult given his twenty years' experience working as a mechanic.

Barth was more interested in getting his driving licence so he could get a job quickly. Finding a way to make a living was more important to him than working as a mechanic. It appeared that his twenty years' experience as a mechanic in Nigeria might go to waste. Barth's story suggests that recognition of prior learning irrespective of where it was acquired (Stenlund 2010) is still not properly implemented for asylum seekers in Italy. Barth was nevertheless confident that there would be opportunities for him to learn various vocations. He said that companies and vocational schools regularly asked his CPIA for students who were interested in being trained, and that his teacher would inform them whenever such requests came in. He added that he had already told his teacher he was interested in training as a motor mechanic but that he wanted to pass the *terza media* exam to be able to attend the course.

Clement's story also indicates that his previous experience as a welder was not recognised in Italy. His desire to learn Italian was motivated by his wish to have the freedom to practise this vocation. He mentioned that because he was not trained as a welder in Italy, he did not have the permission to work as such, though his current workplace allowed him to work as a welder in contravention of the law. This was only between him and his employers. He expressed his desire to go to a vocational school to obtain a certificate that would allow him to work freely as a welder in Italy. In order to attend this vocational school, he first had to obtain a language school certificate. Clement's story shows that he wanted to attend vocational school in order to comply with the requirement to obtain a certificate. He did not feel he was going to learn anything new.

"There is a time I try to meet him. He say no. He say I am not hearing Italy. I cannot go to a school of welding. He said he want me to learn ... That

Valeria is very good. I love that woman so much. He teach people well. He say, I am not speaking Italy, how can me go to, errr, go ... went to ... I will go to class? Errr, this one is saldatore. I can't ... I don't write it, I ... He say this one, they will just teach me, I will be writing it, I will be doing everything. I say yes but I want to go because just to learn the practical to get my certificate. I do the work. I build the hanger, door, window ..."

Elias said that his CPIA gave him a placement test in order to place him in the appropriate class in middle school, not to establish whether he needed to attend middle school or not. What is interesting about his case is that even though he had finished secondary education in his country, Cameroon, he still had to start middle school again in Italy. There seems therefore to be an implicit assumption on that part of CPIAs that asylum seekers have to start their education or training all over again in Italy. Elias said that he found *terza media* easy because he already had secondary education from his country:

"For me, it's easy. But they cannot change the exam because I know, you understand what I'm saying. So, they make exam for all people. The same level and everything. Now, I know all that thing. It's very easy for me. But for that other guys, they don't know mathematic. They don't know fraction. They don't know ... For them, it's errr ... you understand?"

Elias repeated again and again that the subjects, except for Italian, were easy for him because he had finished secondary education in his country. It was clearly important to him to present himself as an educated person who went to *terza media* just to obtain the certificate. One can surmise that apart from Italian language class, *terza media* was mostly a waste of time for Elias.

There seems to be no information or orientation from camp operators, CPIAs or other government agencies about a person's right to have their previous knowledge recognised and validated. Elias was not aware of the opportunity to have his previous educational experience evaluated or validated, even though he had not brought his certificate with him to Italy. He insisted that it was necessary to start all over again in order to get the certificate. This lack of awareness was also evident among the other participants in this research:

"For them, you need to do it to have a diplom. You cannot ... you cannot say I have a diplom, they come give you ... no, no. You need to ... if you are doing it before, yes, you need to do it again."

Discussion

The stories of the three participants highlight different aspects of the topic of recognition. As I have already mentioned, from the narratives of the participants there appears to be no process in place for carrying out RPL for asylum seekers in Italy. I view this non-recognition of participants' prior knowledge and experience as a form of misrecognition. Their worth and abilities are not recognised in Italy.

Fredrik Sandberg and Chris Kubiak (2013) examined the place of Honneth's recognition theory in the recognition of prior learning (RPL). They assert that recognising people's previous knowledge can improve their self-awareness, self-confidence and self-esteem. A notable point is that Barth and Clement seemed to have accepted the misrecognition they were experiencing. Honneth claims that misrecognition injures a person's sense of self, but Barth and Clement seemed to have accepted the fact that because they were in another country, they could not question or challenge unfavourable practices. It is therefore not clear how the non-recognition of their previous work experience affected their self-identity. Despite his many years of working as a motor mechanic, the most important thing for Barth was to obtain a language certificate and get a job. The immediate recognition he seemed to be seeking was to be employed and earn money; the specific field of employment was of less importance.

Making Elias attend middle school all over again can be described as a form of subtle misrecognition perpetuated by academic institutions. He seemed to think that attending middle school again was a waste of time, but felt he had no other option, even though this might well have felt humiliating. In Elias' case, then, non-recognition of his previous learning might result in humiliation. According to Honneth (1995, 2004), humiliation is one of the feelings a person might experience from the denial of recognition. Carrying out RPL to evaluate Elias' experience and asking him what career or educational path he wanted to pursue might have saved time for both Elias and his CPIA, as well as sparing him these feelings of humiliation. If the RPL process confirmed his competence as equal to that of a secondary school leaver, he could have been counselled and guided about vocational or further educational pathways, even if that meant not attending classes at his CPIA.

It is important to point out that non-recognition of immigrants' prior learning is not confined to Italy. Scholars have found that immigrants who migrate from the Global South to the Global North are likely to have their previous experiences, competences, education and learning not recognised and thus find themselves forced to take up jobs below their level because their experiences and qualifications are considered inferior to or incompatible with those of their host country (Andersson and Guo 2009; Fejes 2019; Fejes and Dahlstedt 2017; Gogia and Slade 2011; Guo 2014; Morrice et al. 2017; Slade 2004, 2008; Venturini and Villosio 2018). Fausta Scardigno (2019) claims that Italy promotes the active inclusion and participation of refugees in the economic and social system by recognising the importance of access to education and granting recognition to formal qualifications acquired outside Italy through its National Integration Plan (MoI 2017), but the experiences of Barth, Clement and Elias indicate otherwise. This may be linked to the fact that Barth, Clement and Elias are asylum seekers and not refugees. Refugees in Italy benefit from international protection and enjoy legal residency, while asylum seekers do not.

Clement's and Elias' narratives illustrate the significance of adopting appropriate instructional methods in facilitating asylum seekers' learning. Their descriptions of their experiences in class remind educators of asylum seekers to be sensitive to their students' feelings and needs. Scholars have noted the heterogeneity of asylum seekers in the learning situation in terms of linguistic proficiency and educational and cultural backgrounds (Barkoglou and Gravani 2020). This is why Danny

Wildemeersch posits that instructional practices for asylum seekers should not be one-directional but “a multi-directional experience creating opportunities for both participants and facilitators to articulate their own, unique voices” (Wildemeersch 2017, p. 124).

One of the reasons lessons may be organised in the way described by Clement and Elias is because the educators’ approach is informed by a deficit model of learning which assumes that learners lack important knowledge that will make them useful to their host society (Heinemann and Sarabi 2020). Adopting the deficit approach is a form of misrecognition, since those on the receiving end are deemed not to possess the requisite knowledge and experience in the host society mainly because of where they came from. The deficit approach presumes to help immigrants overcome their deficiencies, but fails to take the specific needs of adult migrants into consideration. Educators provide immigrants with learning that they assume is relevant for the host society. This implies an assimilative view of integration in which immigrants jettison their cultural backgrounds and take on the values and ethos of the host society. The aim of such assimilation is to make the immigrant similar in culture, values and character to members of the host society (Bartram et al. 2014).

Alisha Heinemann (2017) contends that the assimilatory approach perpetuates hegemony and aspires to turn immigrants into submissive and compliant subjects. Shibao Guo and Srabani Maitra (2019) argue that this hegemonic philosophy currently shapes lifelong learning policies and practices in many developed countries. They therefore call for a “decolonisation” of lifelong practices in receiving nations, a call supported by Linda Morrice (2021). It is worth noting, however, that more research is required to determine whether or not the deficit approach observed in my participants’ narrations was an attempt to assimilate them or simply the result of limited resources, as approaches which build on learners’ existing experiences and attempt to meaningfully recognise prior learning may be seen as too costly.

Furthermore, the subject of teaching methods raises the issue of infantilisation. Heinemann (2017), citing the example of Germany, notes that there is a tendency for teachers of adult migrants and refugees to infantilise them, which the adult learners may find humiliating. Clement’s narration above suggests a feeling of being infantilised by his teacher. He regards some of the exercises this teacher assigned as unnecessary, eliciting complaints from learners. According to Malcolm Knowles (e.g. Knowles 1980), adults are interested in learning that can help them solve real-life problems quickly (Jarvis 2004; Merriam 2004). It is important to point out that teachers’ infantilisation of adult asylum seekers may not always be deliberate. Sometimes, it may be borne out of compassion and the desire to help students learn the virtues and norms of the receiving society (Heinemann 2017). Whatever the motive behind it, however, infantilising adult learners is a form of misrecognition, since it treats fully grown adults as morally irresponsible or immature (Honneth 1995). The consequence of this misrecognition is a feeling of social disrespect or humiliation which can destroy a person’s self-confidence (Honneth 1995, 2004; Sandberg and Kubiak 2013).

Conclusion

This study identifies some important factors to be considered in learning provision for asylum seekers in Italy. These are: valorisation of certificates, appropriateness of teaching methods and recognition of prior learning. I believe that considering and working on these factors will improve provision for asylum seekers' learning. I suggest that there is a need in Italy for either adult education centres or a separate agency to help learners create learning portfolios and press for recognition of their previous knowledge and experiences, instead of having to learn what they already know all over again. As things stand, an asylum seeker or refugee in Italy has to obtain a certificate before they can put their knowledge and skills to use. Through RPL, the period of certification for asylum seekers who already have experience in particular vocations might be reduced and they would not have to study for the same length of time as persons just starting to learn a vocation. To implement RPL successfully, it will be necessary to train adult educators on how to carry it out, since effective RPL requires a thorough assessment process (Werquin 2009). Italy could draw on the experiences of other nations, for example Canada and Thailand, which have developed strategies for implementing RPL.

After creating a portfolio for each asylum seeker student and identifying their previous knowledge, adult education centres can teach students Italian and at the same time prepare them for qualification tests or assessments which validate their competences, instead of making them go to middle school and then vocational training. If there are companies that offer vocational training courses, adult education centres can send them their students who already have experiential knowledge or skills, probably based on existing agreements, so that students can work and make a living and also attend language classes. This will require concerted coordination among various stakeholders such as the government, camp operators, companies, and adult learning and vocational centres. Fejes and Andersson (2009) demand a change in mindset in the workplace, so that credits and certificates awarded through RPL can be valued.

With regard to instructional methods, educators who work with adult asylum seekers need to be trained in adult learning principles. For instance, Igor Deiana and Stefania Spina (2021) found that the majority of language teachers in provincial centres of adult education in Italy (CPIAs) were primary school teachers. They recommended that qualified and well-trained teachers should be employed in adult education centres. Moreover, lessons need to be organised to incorporate asylum seekers' wealth of experience, rather than having as their "sole aim ... to accommodate the newcomers to our principal values and norms" (Wildemeersch 2017, p. 124). These instructors will also need to be trained to understand the sensitivities associated with relating with asylum seekers in order to get them to participate actively in learning activities. Acknowledging asylum seekers as individuals with significant prior experience and learning can make them feel recognised and help them develop a more confident identity.

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