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## Interrogating Values of Adult Education Practice in Hong Kong

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**Abstract.** The practice of adult learning and education (ALE) in Hong Kong is lesser known to the wider community of ALE practitioners due to lack of exchanges with international peers. There is a small community of full-time ALE practitioners working mainly in university continuing education schools but a larger body of uncharacterised or alternative practitioners can also be found. Essentially, both types of practitioners are conservative in their outlook and they adopt strategies that align with market needs and priorities set by public funders. Under the backdrop of neoliberalism which has harmonised ALE practice worldwide, a dominant form of individualised learning makes it difficult to promote group learning for societal advancement. ALE practitioners in Hong Kong are no exception to this influence and have been found to profess philosophical orientations favouring the behaviourist/narrowed progressivist notions of learner empowerment for economic and personal gains. Given recent worldwide renewed enthusiasm in making ALE responsive to societal issues, this paper examines the options and learning areas that ALE practitioners in Hong Kong can make their contributions to, such as: health advocacy, climate justice, and media literacy. Through engaging in these aspects of work, practitioners will have to incorporate methods of facilitating group learning in formal and non-formal ALE programmes and courses. An embrace by practitioners of the original notion of progressivist philosophy in adult education may emerge as one of the outcomes to make ALE practice inclusive, relevant and socially responsible. Even with the ongoing COVID-19 health crisis, it is deemed even more pressing to pursue a balanced practice approach that can take care of individual's skills transformation for post-COVID economy as well as developing human bonds that would help to make society progressive as a countercheck to neoliberal-inspired individualistic adult learning.

**Keywords:** Adult education, adult learning and education, values, Hong Kong, lifelong learning, philosophy of education

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## Introduction

Adult learning and education (ALE) has traditionally been a loosely defined field of work staffed by practitioners who are guided less by formal theory than by situational reactions that require both experience and insights to perform their daily work and respond to exigencies. Nonetheless, theorisations about practice have been undertaken which give rise to philosophical positions about the purposes of ALE in preserving the status quo or creating new social order, the focus of learning for self-improvement or social good, the role of adult educators as directors or catalysts of learning, how to determine the contents of learning, and approaches to adopt for teaching and programme planning. Notable amongst the frameworks developed to understand ALE practice in the 1970s to 1990s is that of Elias and Merriam [1] which listed out five main philosophical traditions: liberal, behaviourist, progressive, humanistic, radical; and to which was added two more, analytic and postmodern, after the turn of the millennium. Conceptualising about the philosophy of ALE practice and clarifying about practitioner's values and belief have been active topics pursued by graduate students and academic researchers alike, where work on the latter was facilitated by the influential Philosophy of Adult Education Inventory (PAEI) developed by Zinn [2]. This research trend has since changed and very few published studies have been found on values of ALE practice in recent years.

At the level of practice-oriented discourse, a number of articles written by long time scholars, practitioners and policy advocates of adult learning have called for a renewed search of meaning for ALE practice in contemporary times. Reflecting on his long period of association with the field, Knox [3] specifically highlights the importance of employing a global perspective to inform local practice. He also calls for the importation of multiple views from personal, organisational, policy and associational levels to arrive at a collective vision and praxis to advance the field. Whilst noting the current worldwide state of affairs has reached the stage of confronting the "wicked problems", Sork [4] urges adult educators to drop their reactive stance in favour of adopting assertive, activist and global-oriented approaches to help solve common problems facing humanity across a myriad of environmental, social, cultural, political and economic issues. As adult education has been relied upon for building networks to support learners, Verheyen [5] reminds adult educators that the roles they take must not be limited to teaching new skills but should extend to the maintenance of social contacts and reduction of isolation risk during the new Coronavirus pandemic. According to her, this is a measure of how adult learning can help communities ride through the pandemic and which is complementary to the developmental function of ALE in societies during normal times.

A commonality that runs through the renewed practice-oriented discourse is that ALE as a field of practice must make itself useful to the target audience. This has direct implications on how practitioners choose to structure the way they carry out their practice. Clearly, it is pressing now more than ever before to clarify what adult educators believe in when they conduct their programme development and teaching. Chan [6] suggests that practitioner's values and their practice-related orientations have structuring properties on the adult and continuing education field. Amidst the soul-searching that has taken place worldwide in the field of ALE, as exemplified in the recent formation of "*The we-are-ale campaign*"<sup>1</sup> by a global alliance of major ALE players, Hong Kong remains under the radar. This paper examines why Hong Kong is such an anomaly and it seeks to find ways for adult educators to move closer to the international ALE practice community. The call to action is considered timely in view of the forthcoming Seventh International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VII) to be held under the auspices of the UNESCO in 2022<sup>2</sup>. This duodecennial event can provide the chance to promote dialogue with missing regional actors such as Hong Kong. Essentially, an international exchange of ideas on ALE practice is naturally an interrogation of each other's values in ALE practice with potential for catalysing useful changes.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on ALE Practice**

The predominant discourse that has influenced ALE practice around the world is neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is a political philosophy whose agenda is to transfer power from the government to the market and in the process promoting policy approaches based on decentralisation, privatisation and individualisation. The effect of neoliberalism on educational policymaking serves to advance a form of educational process that is aimed at creating a knowledge economy for the training of knowledge workers. Its outcomes can thus be defined by the objectification of the subject as a 'commodified self' marketable to the needs of the economy [7]. In relation to adult education, neoliberalism has shifted the field in three main directions to affect its funding (user pays), content (skills for work) and outcome (credentialed and individualised learning). The change is associated with a redefinition of socially responsive broad-based adult education to lifelong learning for economic ends [8]. Because neoliberalist-influenced lifelong learning has been advanced at the global level by no less than four international bodies (UNESCO, OECD, EU, World Bank) and spread through policy borrowing between countries, there is hardly any educational system that is left untouched by this dominant trend in policy thinking. Educationists in Hong Kong generally agree that the school system and higher education have been transformed by neoliberal influences that are incorporated into the educational reform and higher

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<sup>1</sup> See the 'we-are-ale campaign' at: <https://www.we-are-ale.org/the-ale-campaign/>

<sup>2</sup> See UNESCO CONFINTEA VII at: <https://uil.unesco.org/adult-education/confintea/seventh-international-conference-adult-education-confintea-vii>

education governance and management practices [9; 10]. Very little though has been written about its impact on adult education and lifelong learning in Hong Kong.

The operationalisation of neoliberal-informed policies on adult education affects both the learner and the practitioner. This is mediated through institutions that deliver adult learning programmes. In countries with a democratic tradition in adult learning such as Sweden, institutions like folk high schools provide space for collective learning about democracy and they serve to temper individualisation tendencies that would attempt to remould learners as neoliberal subjects [11]. Under the neoliberal discourse is an assumption about a hyper-individualised learner but this dichotomy between individual autonomy and social engagement has been found to be more complex than thought where even the purest form of self-help learning undertaken by individuals alone would contain elements of social engagement in it [12]. Thus said, it would not yet be a vain effort to pursue group-based learning under a climate of neo-liberal influenced learning which has dominated the centre-stage of ALE worldwide.

At the practitioner level, the practice of adult education under a neoliberal regime faces a constant struggle between meeting socially-oriented goals and an individual instrumentalist objective. Bowl [8] suggests that practitioners are influenced by the prevailing external environment, their own values and the expectations placed on them by the institution they work for. She found that practitioners are guided more by their personal experience than theory, which may include an assessment of how much maneuverability they have in their work and the future outlook before they decide on which line to tow — resistance or accommodation. Three kinds of strategic responses are normally adopted: wait and see; leveraging on funding from government, philanthropy, corporates; advocacy and campaigning. The last strategy moves adult education closer to community education which has been struggling to accommodate its original commitment to equality and justice as against a more recent but now fashionable business-led principles and co-optation by the state. Fitzsimons [13] asserts that under current realities, community education that aims to support personal wellbeing and development is insufficient but must be politically cognisant of the external milieu. She draws attention to the fact that community educators must act in a smart way to underline the "the need to be more strategic in relationships with the state, the need to network, the need to be more political and the need to showcase the work of community education". Both McLean [12] and Fitzsimons [13] who approached the matter from different angles (the learner and the practitioner) — have arrived at the conclusion that a humanistic form of adult and community education that focus solely on the individual is impossible and inadequate in current times.

## Past and Present of Hong Kong ALE

Hong Kong once had a burgeoning adult education sector in the 1960s which lasted into the early 1990s [14]. Although it had always taken a narrow focus on vocational training for employment and remedial adult education for obtaining a formal school leaving qualification, this has not deterred local adult educators from working with their overseas peers for professional exchanges and collaborative programme provisions. As such, Hong Kong delegates were present at the CONFINTEA III (Tokyo) in 1972 and they were also involved in the initiative of the International Council on Adult Education (ICAE) to research Chinese adult education in the mid-1980s. The 2nd International Conference on Adult Education Research and its Journal was held in 1997, which happened to be the last major event related to ALE hosted by Hong Kong.

On collaborative programmes for training adult educators and lifelong learning practitioners, there had been a succession of institutions that came to Hong Kong, including the University of British Columbia, the University of Surrey, and the last one was the University of Nottingham. Hong Kong's homegrown training programme, the Graduate Diploma in Adult Education and Training (which was predated by a Certificate and a Diploma), offered by the University of Hong Kong's School of Professional and Continuing Education (HKU SPACE), morphed into the Postgraduate Diploma in Adult Training and Vocational Education and this programme currently has a sole focus on training and development for corporate trainers and vocational educators.

The HKU SPACE sponsored International Journal of Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (ISSN:1997-1034) led a worthwhile decade-long existence but ceased to be published from 2016. Hong Kong's isolation from the wider context of discussions going on in adult learning and lifelong education was partly due to its lack of embrace within the UNESCO framework, unlike its neighbour Macao which became an associate member of this international body in 1995 whilst under Portuguese rule. Another reason for the absence of an international dimension of practice in Hong Kong ALE can be attributed to educational policymaking priorities that overlooked this domain of educational practice. In fact, a similar phenomenon can be found in advanced city-state economies in the Asian region like Singapore which although being a full member of UNESCO had all along not taken part in global surveys of ALE, including the last round of the Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE 4) in 2019.

Throughout its development since British colonial days, Hong Kong's adult education, university extra-mural studies and successive continuing and professional education, bore no relations to any of the traditions familiar to adult educators worldwide, e.g. liberal adult education, folkbildung, folk high school, study circle, community education. Hong Kong's ALE is also characterised by formal learning that occurs in institutional settings with negligible elements of non-formal community-based learning courses. In their scoping study about the state of lifelong learning provisions in Hong Kong, Douglas and Adamson [15] found that

Hong Kong's self-funded model has a much lower participation rate in continuing education for employment than other developed OECD economies. Learning for health and wellbeing is not as critical as in developing countries and learning for social, civic and community life is subsumed within participations in volunteering for NGOs and government auxiliary services.

### **ALE practitioner community in Hong Kong**

As ALE continues to operate in Hong Kong although on a reduced scale, why are practitioners not calling and considering themselves adult educators? The answer is not as straightforward in seeing the field to be of diminished importance but rather with their lack of realisation about doing work that actually falls under the scope of ALE. Since the official policy discourse has accorded no place for adult education, practitioners would tend to identify their practice with the closest educational area that they could identify with. For example, those who deliver courses for non-traditional learners (e.g. elderly academy) would count themselves as teachers of non-formal interest courses whilst those who teach in remedial education would align themselves with secondary education. The same could be expected of those teaching in retraining courses who would likely identify themselves with corporate training and technical and vocational education. In the absence of a defined professional space and no dedicated programme that teaches adult learning theory and teaching methods, the small number of practitioners employed in full-time posts in ALE had become incognito.

Ironically, outside of formal education, a lot of people are also involved in one way or another with the practice of ALE which includes learning in their working agendas. The arena of social policy making that has been implementing policy objectives through various designated funding schemes to serve community needs is one such prominent unconventional context where alternative adult educators can be found in Hong Kong. Since the political transition in 1997, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government has followed an incremental policymaking approach aimed at preserving the extant power structure in society whilst attempting to address evolving societal demands. Hence, there are no shortages of designated funding schemes created to support projects to build social capital (e.g. Community Investment and Inclusion Fund), to combat poverty and address social exclusion (e.g. Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship Development Fund), to promote diversity and social inclusion (e.g. Community Involvement Broadcasting Fund), to name just a few. Since many of the projects selected for funding are activity-based and embedded with educational, training and community-oriented methods of engagement, project team members would have to simultaneously act as adult educators and brokers of community participants' interest when they lead in this kind of project. Interestingly, what this has given rise to is a new kind of adult educator, who again would not normally consider themselves to be doing ALE work but might cite a more commonly understood functional role such as community organiser, social advocate, social entrepreneur

or simply use their job titles of social worker, project officer, development coordinator. It should be noted that the field of ALE practice has always been fluid and inclusive especially towards those people engaged in leading non-formal learning, where tourist guides can also be considered as adult educators [16].

A professional identity and status recognition are certainly important for adult educators themselves. But ALE has always been concerned about changing the learner and therefore the values that guide adult educator's practice should have received greater attention. This leads us to question what philosophical orientations adult educators in Hong Kong are inclined towards and which may reflect what roles practitioners consider that they have towards learners and society. Referring to the map of adult education territory defined by Boshier [17], which is a model for thinking about educational processes and how they could affect power relationships, Hong Kong' alternative adult educators were operating within the "structural functionalist" paradigm. These practitioners are pragmatists who try to work through the system to solve problems without perturbing the power structure in society. They take care of their target subjects' interest but are also on an agency relationship with the state. The strategy adopted by these practitioners are related to what Bowl [8] describes as aligning and leveraging funding from the government, including the use of social enterprise and social entrepreneurship, to achieve their goals. An earlier finding reported by Chan [18] using the PAEI inventory on subjects studying in the Diploma in Adult Education and who have a working role in ALE or training had shown that the majority of practitioners preferred the progressive and behaviourist philosophies over the other three orientations. What this suggests is that ALE practitioners in Hong Kong see their roles primarily in imparting knowledge and skills that helps the individual learner rather than bringing about changes to society.

### **Alternative Ways of Imagining ALE Practice**

Similar to other places, the language used to promote adult education courses in Hong Kong often emphasise the empowerment of individuals through learning. In neoliberal-influenced educational policy making, this carries an instrumentalist overtone that overrides a traditional progressivist notion of learning where individuals are situated within the social context. The new progressivism in ALE is difficult to differentiate from a behaviourist notion and both can be considered conservative, individualistic and aimed at social reproduction. For ALE practitioners to be able see the significance of their work in helping individuals and at the same time promoting benefits to society, Bowl [8] reminds that conceptualising about ALE practice need not fall into a false dichotomy of individual-society divide. Replacing it should be a spectrum of beliefs and values ranging from behaviourist/progressive to liberal/ humanist to radical philosophical approaches. The liberal/humanist position is one where the potential of individuals can be developed for both the welfare of the learner and that of society to attain

social advancement but which has now been overshadowed by the behaviourist/progressive orientations.

Reflecting on the conditions of society and polity in Hong Kong in recent years, a critical form of ALE that underlies the radical philosophical orientation can hardly have a place in future. A tradition of social activism in ALE practice is foreign to Hong Kong and bringing about social and political change is not the order of the day amidst the general atmosphere that calls for maintenance of stability. Based on the realities of Hong Kong, programming to promote an empowering form of adult education does not imply that it has to seek to overthrow deep-seated contradictions in society and resist unequal power relationships as conceived from a Western perspective (radical structuralism, see Boshier [8]). Even within the middle ground of the values spectrum, Chan's finding [18] has pointed to the effects of age, gender, prior work experience and educational level, on ALE practitioner's preference for the humanist philosophy. Preference for this orientation was low amongst older male ALE practitioners who had more than 5 years of experience in the field. Interesting as this may be, it does serve to remind about entrenched thinking in Hong Kong society and amongst experienced ALE practitioners who tend to be conservative in their outlook. It is fair to say that far from being fatalists, ALE practitioners in Hong Kong are able to recognise the limitations to their practice, as those working full-time are circumscribed by institutional priorities and the other group of alternative practitioners have to depend on funding from public schemes. These factors may serve to condition but do not restrict the possibility for ALE practice to be geared towards working for social advancement at the same time as encouraging individuals to improve on their knowledge and skills through lifelong learning.

What appears more important for advancing ALE practice is to create a meaningful space for ALE practitioners in Hong Kong to experiment with new ideas and approaches without being dictated and foreclosed by market needs. Cause-based programming to design "learning for action" courses that advocate for self, group and community interest groups in market-neglected areas of learning are waiting to be fulfilled. The focus of this article precludes any detailed exposition of learning areas open to Hong Kong ALE practitioners but some obviously relevant ones can be given as examples. Advocating for patient rights, climate justice and media literacy are some of the issues where learning gaps exist, and the learning needs in these aspects are pressing because the market will not pay for such kind of programmes to run without some dedicated intervention from ALE practitioners who will have to seek funding from alternative sources. One example of educating about patient rights is to equip the citizens of Hong Kong to be able to manoeuvre the complicated health care system where individuals are now required to share the burden of providing for their own medical and health care expenses through private insurance, co-payment and responsible self-care to reduce hospitalisation needs. The universal quest for carbon reduction to mitigate against its harmful effects on the environment and the path to attain net-zero emissions by 2050 are considered



achievable in a city like Hong Kong which has no manufacturing activities. However, the real struggle is to convince Hong Kong citizens that carbon reduction is not a deferred agenda but a pressing choice of the present as one public opinion survey had found that 80% of the local population does not perceive an urgency in tackling climate change [19]. Media literacy on the other hand is not a novel topic and it has been talked about a lot in schools with the introduction of the new senior secondary curriculum which aim to develop criticality and an evaluative understanding of various forms of media and their impacts, especially that of social media [20]. In the past, the adult learner segment has not been selected as a target recipient of media literacy education. This missing aspect of adult learning is essential in steering towards an informed consumption of news and to foreground the value of an unbiased media culture and responsible news reporting.

Instead of taking a short-term purview of political and public health crisis related issues affecting Hong Kong society in the past two years (2019 to present), the three learning areas indicated above are longstanding concerns that will affect future generations to come. As such, these issues are a lifetime's concern and thus fitting for adult educators to engage the community to tackle them by way of lifelong learning in line with the call to solve the "wicked problems" of humanity [4].

Returning to the point made earlier about the need for Hong Kong adult education to connect with global practice, justifications for doing so are apparent. The first consideration would be to influence the scope of programming. Learning from overseas is not something new to adult educators in Hong Kong. In the past, adult educators in Hong Kong had benefitted from various training programmes for adult educators offered by overseas universities. The evolution of present day forms of programme provision in Hong Kong's university professional and continuing education schools has entered a stage that would require infusion of new ideas and inspirations to lift it out from a vicious cycle of repetition and stagnation caused by catering to market needs only. Clearly there is a need to install the idea of learning that takes place as a group and which can contribute to societal advancement. A possible direction to add to local practice of ALE is to incorporate participatory approach in programming that is informed by successful cases and the latest research generated abroad. No doubt, the overseas adult education research community has strengths in theory development, research and praxis in participatory adult education. It is hoped that Hong Kong's process of integration into the ALE community can be assisted by like-minded peers who are willing to share their experiences.

By highlighting participatory adult education, it means going back to the very roots of adult education as espoused by Eduard Lindeman [21] following the original progressivist educational thinking of John Dewey and others, where the content of learning is based on problems and issues from the learner's own experience. This entails a different set of teaching and learning methods where learning is used to heighten learner's awareness about implications beyond the

individual and to project it to the needs of society. The strength of learning together in groups and the value of non-formal education are stressed all throughout Lindeman's seminal book, *Meaning of Adult Education*:

*"Small groups of aspiring adults who desire to keep their minds fresh and vigorous; who begin to learn by confronting pertinent situations; who dig down into the reservoirs of their secondary facts; who are led in the discussion by teachers who are also seekers after wisdom and not oracles: this constitute the setting for adult education the modern quest life's meaning" [21. P.42].*

### Conclusion

Around the world, the COVID-19 crisis has made the road to recovery for ALE less predictable. On the one hand there lies the potential for ALE to support community-level learning about infection control, to mobilise community action for local pandemic responses, and to address unemployment challenges through training and skills-upgrading subsidies<sup>3</sup>. But on the other, will the need to upskill, reskill or train for new occupations exacerbate the already biased focus of AE towards workplace learning? Labour market policy research suggests that retraining is the way forward for the post-COVID 19 economy [22]. So far, little is known about how the post-COVID employment market will evolve and which skills will enable learners to flourish in the new economy although governments in Singapore and Hong Kong have at the very early onset of the pandemic designated funds for retraining in their COVID-19 relief packages<sup>4</sup>. Advice is however wanting for guidance to learners on which new skills areas will be needed by the economy but this may be too much to expect given that learning preference has traditionally been considered the individual's own choice. As to the impact of the pandemic on ALE practitioner's coping strategy, many of them will likely orient their programme development to meet employment-related upskilling needs where new funding is expected to be targeted at.

The market for learning will likely require a longer period of time to recover and this will have impacts on several aspects, such as: motivation of learners, livelihood of teachers, financial health of institutions, and the very notion of adult learning for restoring social connectivity. Faced with this challenge, it will only increase the difficulty for institutions to try out new initiatives in the short term. However, both Boeren [23] and Brown [24] have taken the view that the efforts of adult educators should be committed to community and workplace developments in an equal manner. The rebuilding of societal networks and community solidarity as well as learning about how to become informed and engaged members of a

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<sup>3</sup> See DVV International, *Reaction to coronavirus pandemic*; 2020 at: <https://www.dvv-international.de/en/our-work/reaction-to-corona-pandemic>

<sup>4</sup> See KPMG, *Singapore and Hong Kong government and institution measures in response to COVID-19*; 2020 at: <https://home.kpmg/xx/en/home/insights/2020/04/hong-kong-sar-china-government-and-institution-measures-in-response-to-covid.html>

society are no less important than keeping oneself employed. The argument for transforming ALE practice in Hong Kong is therefore supported despite the changing circumstance arising from COVID-19 intermission and its repercussions.

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**Аннотация.** Обучение и образование взрослых в Гонконге менее представлены широкому экспертному сообществу практиков сферы образования взрослых из-за отсутствия обменов с коллегами. Существует лишь небольшое количество штатных специалистов данной отрасли, работающих, в основном, в университетских центрах непрерывного образования, однако прослеживается и более многочисленная группа нестандартных или альтернативных специалистов. По сути, все выделяемые типы сотрудников отрасли консервативны в своих взглядах и принимают стратегии, которые соответствуют потребностям рынка и приоритетам, установленным государственными финансирующими организациями. В условиях неолиберальной парадигмы, которая

гармонизировала обучение и образование взрослых во всем мире, доминирующая форма индивидуальных траекторий затрудняет продвижение группового обучения для развития общества. Специалисты сферы образования взрослых не являются исключением и, как выяснилось в ходе изучения, склоняются в пользу бихевиористских/узких прогрессивистских понятий расширения возможностей обучающегося для экономической и личной выгоды. Учитывая вновь возникшие энтузиазм и запрос к образованию взрослых на реакцию на общественные вызовы, автор данной статьи рассматривает социально значимые области, такие как пропаганда здорового образа жизни, изменение климата, медиаграмотность, которые могут выиграть от развития сферы непрерывного образования. Принимая во внимание перечисленные аспекты, специалистам рекомендуется внедрить методы содействия групповому обучению в формализованные и неформализованные программы и курсы для взрослой аудитории. Принятие исходного понятия прогрессивистской философии в образовании взрослых работающими в данной сфере позволит сделать практику обучения и образования взрослых инклюзивной, актуальной и социально ответственной. В условиях продолжающейся пандемии COVID-19 еще более актуальной представляется необходимость применения сбалансированного практического подхода, который позволит трансформировать навыки индивида и подготовиться к «постковидным» экономическим реалиям. Также важной остается проблематика развития социальных связей, которые помогли бы сделать общество более прогрессивным и выступить в противовес неолиберальному индивидуалистическому подходу к обучению взрослых.

**Ключевые слова:** образование взрослых, обучение и образование взрослых, ценности, Гонконг, непрерывное образование, философия образования

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