

Wildemeersch, Danny; Salling Olesen, Henning

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DIPF | Leibniz-Institut für Bildungsforschung und Bildungsinformation
Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung
E-Mail: pedocs@dipf.de
Internet: www.pedocs.de

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Editorial: The effects of policies for the education and learning of adults - from 'adult education' to 'lifelong learning', from 'emancipation' to 'empowerment'

Danny Wildemeersch

Leuven University, Belgium (danny.wildemeersch@ped.kuleuven.be)

Henning Salling Olesen

Roskilde University, Denmark (hso@ruc.dk)

Practices of adult education and learning have historically been closely related to policy arrangements – often by defining and reproducing the culture of local, regional or subcultural communities – but increasingly in the service of the consolidation of the nation states. Depending on political situations and institutional arrangements, the states in Europe have been involved in the promotion and institutional framing of adult education and learning. Today the role of the nation state is changing in many ways, and it also affects the role assigned to education and learning arrangements. Both policies at the supranational level and market forces have had an increasing influence on the understanding of what adult education/lifelong learning is about. The shifts in the meaning and use of central concepts in this field are illustrative of these changes.

In this issue we have intended to create a space for reflection on these policy transformations and their consequences. In a call for articles four questions were guiding contributors in addressing 'the work and effects of policies for the education and learning of adults'.

- How can we interpret the shift in policy vocabulary e.g. from 'education to learning', and from 'emancipation to empowerment'?
- What is the influence of transnational agencies and how has this inspired education policy at the national level?
- How is the role of the state in education and learning policies conceptualized? Are there differences in differing (local/national/international) contexts?
- What is the future role of the nation state in adult education?

We have four contributions answering (some of) these questions, by the way all by female authors. They come from different European backgrounds and refer to varied domains of adult education. Marcella Milana, originally from Italy, currently works in Denmark and the US and concentrates in her contribution on political globalization and the shift from adult education to lifelong learning. In order to understand the changes taking place today, she strongly emphasizes the global-local interconnectedness. Rosanna Barros is active in Portugal. She investigates the way concepts and

responsibilities of adult learners and their providers are currently being framed in policy texts of the European Union. A third contribution is by Karin Filander in Finland who presents the results of a qualitative research with different student generations in her own university. She shows how perceptions of adult education/lifelong learning in her university have changed from the beginning days in the sixties, till today. The last contribution in this thematic issue focuses on career guidance policies in Europe. It is written by Ingela Bergmo-Prvulovic from Sweden. The author observes the gradual shift of career guidance from a humanist towards a human capital discourse.

How can we interpret the shift in policy vocabulary?

Over the past decades there has been an important shift in vocabulary from adult (and continuing) education to lifelong learning. This change has pervaded conceptions of the field and practices of education. It has often been seen as a necessary consequence of a move to ‘knowledge societies’ - where the production, dissemination and acquisition of (new forms of) knowledge are considered a major source of wealth creation for societies and individuals. Reference to the knowledge society and the creation of wealth has then, to an important extent, (re)framed and (re)phrased the ‘enterprise’ of adult education and learning in economic terms.

In spite of differences in observations and accents, all authors in this issue remark that policy discourse inside and outside Europe has undergone a remarkable change from the eighties onwards. However, they do not refer to the concept of the knowledge society to explain the transformations that have occurred. They rather refer to the reality of the ‘neoliberal society’ to interpret the changes in policy frameworks and vocabularies. Milana draws our attention to the emergence of new ‘global imagineries’ about the role of lifelong learning both for the individual and for society. She refers to the ‘mantra of lifelong learning’ that, from the eighties onwards, has become increasingly prominent, in combination with a shift in global policy frameworks from welfare state approaches to marketization approaches. She however emphasizes that these changes are not simply the result of top-down decision-making, but are also influenced by specialized groups operating at grass-roots level, interacting with higher levels of policy making, both at the national and the international level. In line with Milana’s observations, yet with a more pessimistic note, Barros emphasizes how, over the past six decades, we have moved from ‘thirty glorious years’ to ‘thirty disastrous years’. She explains how the changes in the wider socio-economic context were reflected in the way concepts obtained new meanings or were replaced by other concepts that corresponded better with the new neoliberal politics that have become dominant from the nineties onwards.

In combination with this contextual transformation, there has been a move from ‘emancipation’ to ‘empowerment’ as one of the main goals of educational endeavours. Whilst these terms may look synonymous, those working in the fields of adult education and learning are well aware of the significance: emancipation is past and empowerment is present. Emancipation relates to the (new) social movements of the sixties and the seventies that gave new direction to policies and practices in the field of education. Emancipation referred to the redistribution of opportunities on a collective level, renewing the social, democratic and cultural goals and brushing the dust off labour education, local activities, religious and cultural traditional institutions. Today, this orientation towards collective transformation has lost momentum and seems to some extent replaced by an emphasis on individual capacity to work and live up to

contemporary societal needs. Yet the question about ‘empowerment’ of people and local communities pops up again now and then. But the main education and learning agenda is connected with a notion of responsibility for one’s own self-development.

According to Bergmo-Prvulovic it comes down to the capacity to prepare continuously for change, for geographical and professional mobility and for instability in general. This shift from collective towards individualized responsibilities began to emerge in the eighties and became dominant by the turn of the century.

All contributors to this thematic issue make similar statements, yet, particularly Filander shows how in her own university the vocabulary on adult education has increasingly been influenced by the discourse on human resource development. According to her, adult education in Finland today is almost exclusively linked to human capital approaches and practices that locate development opportunities for adults in the sphere of working life. The social activism tradition in adult education, which has inspired adult (popular) education practices in many countries, is now articulated in Finland mainly by general educationalists.

What is the influence of transnational agencies?

That brings us to the second question: what has been the influence of transnational agencies in this shift in discourse and related policy? Processes of globalisation, dramatically speeding up from the eighties onwards, have strongly influenced policy definitions of development and prosperity, thereby transforming understandings of the way education could or should contribute to individual and collective welfare and well-being. Globalisation processes have appeared to support the reframing of adult education and learning in economic terms. The market, rather than the state, was expected to play the dominant role in the creation of wealth, prosperity in general and social mobility of the individuals in particular.

All authors in this thematic issue observe that international agencies have over the past decades played a prominent role in this shift in discourse and policy arrangements. The think-tanks of transnational agencies: the World Bank, UNESCO, WTO and the OECD, and the European Union have produced policy documents that gave direction to many of the changes that recently took place. These agencies are the main inspirers of ‘less state, more market’ strategies. They also are the architects of a new policy agenda for ‘lifelong and life wide learning’, while reinventing the vocabulary that is so prominent today in the policy contexts of the individual nation states in Europe. Both Marcella Milana and Rosanna Barros pay attention to the documents produced during the last fifty years by these agencies. They refer to the existence of two generations of political thinking, informing the understanding of lifelong education and lifelong learning, as pointed out by Kjell Rubenson (2008). The first generation is symbolised mainly by Faure’s Report for UNESCO ‘Learning to be’ (Faure et al., 1972), that propagated a radical humanist, emancipatory perspective on lifelong ‘education’. It represented a powerful plea for policies and practices of education that would stimulate learning across the lifespan and this in varied contexts, while simultaneously criticizing the dominant role attributed to formal schooling in modern education. The second generation, from the nineties onwards, is mostly inspired by documents such as the Delors memorandum on ‘Learning: the treasure within’ (UNESCO, 1994) and the OECD report on ‘Lifelong Learning for All’ (1996). The latter documents have been inspirational for recent policy measures and have given direction, though in differential ways, to human capital approaches to lifelong learning. UNESCO has tried to sustain a

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more humanistic dimension, whereas OECD has more markedly emphasized the economic role of lifelong learning. Also the European Union has been increasingly influential in defining the lifelong learning policy agenda. From 2000 onwards it has produced several documents on lifelong learning that basically refer to the 'Lisbon Strategy' (European Parliament, 2000) aiming at making the EU the most competitive region in the world.

The two central notions coming to the fore in many of the policy documents produced by these agencies are 'empowerment' and 'social cohesion'. Above we mentioned how empowerment became connected to the individual capacity to work and manage life in any given life context. Yet, this does not explain why 'social cohesion' is such an important notion nowadays? Policy makers are aware, in part through the influence of grassroots organisations (see UNESCO, 1998), that society needs also 'a glue that holds them together' (Putnam, 2000). A society which celebrates only individual interest neglects the necessary processes of identification with and trust in those institutions which safeguard that society. In response to the symptoms of this risk in the form of 'parallel societies' social cohesion has become key in the vocabulary of present-day policy makers also when they refer to 'lifelong and lifewide learning'. Or, in the words of Delors: Adult and continuing education are not only about learning to do, learning to become and learning to be, but definitely also about "learning to live together" (UNESCO, 1994).

How is the role of the state in education and learning policies conceptualized?

The authors of the four contributions to this policy issue do not give direct answers to this question. They seem to suggest that the transnational agencies are particularly influential in giving direction to the policies of the separate nation states. It definitely cannot be denied that this is the case. However, the question whether this is a unilateral or a multilateral dynamics is not answered univocally by the different contributors. And we also think that the question needs to be considered not only in relation to supra-state policies but also in relation to the policy processes inside the nation state. Milana points to the role societal actors can play in influencing state politics, seeing the current nation state as a 'bargaining state' or a 'network' state. This concept creates space for a diversity of actors, collectives rather than individuals, to influence the decision making of the state. Such influence by non-state actors is hardly a new phenomenon. The construction of the welfare state after the second world war was in many European countries a clear example of how civil society organisations were co-producers of policies, thereby creating stability and loyalty in the interest of the state and its citizens. And in other cases civil society organisations have actually contributed to transform authoritarian states – and recently to question the unity of existing states (Belgium, Spain, UK?). This observation about the influence of local actors in the political decision making of the state, makes clear that individual nation states are not simply the executors of uniform, standardized policies directed by the transnational agencies. It also suggests that there are still opportunities and spaces for the local to play a role in the global and that it is not the global that directs the local one-sidedly. What is new however is that the actors operating in the current bargaining or network society are often much more volatile, given the instability of the economic, political and social conditions of societies today, also in countries where well established institutional bargaining arrangements exist – like the Nordic labour market model or the chamber organisations in Austria.

What is the future role of the nation state in adult education?

This brings us to the last question by which we invited policy researchers to reflect on the way adult education/lifelong learning today is being shaped. Not unexpectedly, the contributors predominantly make a historical analysis of the changes that have taken place. They do not engage in grand narratives about future policy orientations and practices of adult education and learning. This may also be seen as a sign of the times we live in. However, given the observation that in network societies, local actors can still play an important role in co-producing national policies, it may be important for adult education actors to move away from the adaptive and defensive strategies into which they seem to have positioned themselves currently. Apart from the fact that neo-liberal politics has captured the agenda of lifelong learning – the broadening of the perspective to many societal arenas and all ages and stages of individual lives also opens new opportunities for learning policies. Therefore, it could be relevant to reverse the last question mentioned above and ask ourselves: what is the future role of adult education in the nation state? The answers are not obvious. They will need a lot of realism and pragmatism, as opposed to the unrealistic imaginaries of the competitive, market driven politics and policies which have recently proven to create misery for many and unjust wealth for just a few. They will also not point to past times of institution building by educational means. The new opportunities should rather be found in the need for creative experimenting and, for making public those ‘matters of concern’ (Latour, 2004) that have become reduced to privatized responsibilities. Adult education can contribute to such experiments by creating spaces, where education and learning are again connected to societal issues, under the inspiration of old and new values such as democracy, social justice, sustainability, freedom, responsibility, equality and solidarity. We assume that this contribution will not be located nicely within educational institutions and organizations, but will rather have their arena in workplaces, in local communities, in single-cause actions and the (new) social movements which have actually to some extent become mainstreamed in new broader concerns for environment, gender relations and social justice.

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