Public Policy and the 'Sustainability' of Adult Education

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable growth and development are intrinsically linked with the ways societal problems are thought of and addressed in public and private policy. However, at times when social and economic crises have shown the fragility of existing institutions and policies, it is important to debate how sustainability is – and could be – integrated into educational policy studies. We therefore begin by summarising the conditions under which the concept entered political debate and how it has influenced educational research. We then argue for a rethinking of its ontology: this, we suggest, can shed new light on its relationships with adult education policy and social justice.

Keywords: *Sustainability - Policy - Education - Adult Education - Social Justice*

Politiche pubbliche e sostenibilitá dell'educazione degli adulti

I concetti di crescita e sviluppo sostenibili sono inseparabili dalla definizione dei problemi sociali a cui le politiche pubbliche dovrebbero dare risposta. Tuttavia, in tempi recenti profonde crisi sociali ed economiche stanno mostrando la fragilità sia delle attuali istituzioni sia delle politiche pubbliche. È pertanto necessario riflettere su come la 'sostenibilità' sia - o potrebbe essere – centrale nell'analisi delle politiche educative. Nel presente contributo si prendono brevemente in esame le condizioni che hanno portato ad attribuire una crescente centralità al concetto di sostenibilità nel dibattito politico, per poi considerarne le ricadute sulla ricerca educativa. Infine si sostiene la necessità di ripensare il fondamento ontologico stesso del concetto di sostenibilità per mostrarne le relazioni con le politiche di educazione degli adulti e la giustizia sociale.

Parole chiave: *Sostenibilità - Politiche - Educazione - Educazione degli adulti - Giustizia sociale*

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Sustainable growth and development, and the very idea of 'sustainability' as a core value, have increasingly permeated policy and practice in education, at both governmental and institutional levels. 'Sustainable' growth and development are intrinsically linked with the ways societal problems are thought of and addressed in public and private policies. But in a time where social, environmental and economic crises have shown the fragility of existing institutions and policies, it is imperative that we debate how sustainability is – and could be – integrated into educational policies, and to do so in the context of the different, social, cultural and environmental realities where, under the pressures of globalization, national and transnational levels of governance interact. As a result the very concepts – 'sustainable' and 'sustainability' – must be closely scrutinized to uncover the anatomy of policies and the conditions that shape them. In doing so, we must draw on concepts and methods from different disciplines (e.g., political science, sociology and cultural studies, as well as education), and identify strategies that could contribute to educational and learning opportunities that both promote sustainability and are in themselves sustainable.

The origins of 'sustainability'

Derived from the Latin *sustinere* (from *tenere*, to hold, and *sub*, up), 'sustain' was in use as a verb in medieval French, and derivations can be found in several Romance languages such as French (*soutenir*), Italian (*sostenere*), Portuguese (*suster*) or Spanish (*sostener*), and other languages such as English (*sustain*). As an adjective, 'sustainable', or noun, 'sustainability', the concept entered the vocabulary of environmental and social scientists from the United States of America and Europe when, in 1972, the Club of Rome (an informal network of politicians, businessman and scientists still active today) published *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows, Meadows & Randers, 1972). *The Limits to Growth* presented to a world-wide audience, for the first time, a computing model created to account for the relations between the diverse factors in development, and simulated alternative scenarios for growth, based also on resources available.

Over the subsequent forty years, *The Limits to Growth* has been the subject of critiques, rejections and positive re-assessments (Baldi, 2011); some (controversial) attention has been given to sustainable growth and development by activists, scientists, politicians, and inter-governmental organizations. The work of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), created by the United Nations in 1983 (and dissolved in 1987), played a part in this. In the WCED's report *Our Common Future* (United Nations, 1987) the concept of 'sustainable development' leads to a type of growth strategy that is not disconnected from environmental concerns, and thus "meet[s] present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (ibid., Section 4, Article 27). Helped by the United Nations' World Summit on the Environment, (Rio 1992), the concept diffused rapidly across the world. In Rio heads of states and governments, and representatives of non-governmental organizations from around the world, analyzed patterns of production of toxic components (e.g., tetraethyl lead found in gasoline) and of poisonous waste (e.g., radioactive material); considered alternative sources of energy to fossil fuels and how to make public transport more environmentally friendly through reducing pollution from vehicle emissions; and addressed the growing planetary scarcity of water. This led to the signing, within a few years, of the first of many international treaties on climate change (the Kyoto Protocol, 1997).

In education, the concept of sustainable development called first for a new attention towards environmental education as a subject matter, then for the need to re-consider nature and its

conservation as inseparable from societal matters - resulting in a later shift from environmental education towards education for sustainable development.

Ever since, although the increasing worldwide awareness about sustainable growth and development associated with international policies and actions has been primarily linked with environmental concerns, it has not been entirely independent of economic and societal matters. This is captured in the slogan "People, Planet, Profit", where *people* refers to society at large, *planet* to the natural environment, and *profit* to economic and financial prosperity (Fisk, 2010). Critical voices, however, have challenged this oversimplified model, proposing, for instance, an alternative ontology that focuses on people as human beings (rather than undifferentiated members of society), on the planet (as a physical and geographical as much as cultural construct), and on the temporal dimension of the potential long-term effects of human actions (e.g., so called 'inter-generational justice') (Seghezzo, 2009). It is such an ontology, which reconciles environmental and social justice models, that informs our understanding of the relations between sustainability and education policy, and what we see as sustainable growth and development of adult education and learning systems.

Researching sustainability in education

There is, of course, an ever-growing literature on sustainability in education. This is not independent of the 2005 launch of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) and the subsequent Bonn declaration (UNESCO, 2009). These emphasize participatory, critical teaching and learning methods that can motivate and empower learners to change their behaviour, and take action, and for sustainable development to be incorporated in policies – in Europe and the world. Accordingly, educationalists have mostly focussed on how subject-teachers work with the concept of sustainability in the classroom (Myers, 2012), or on how residual subjects (like sustainability or health) in school curricula could be "embraced more wholeheartedly by schools" (Simovska & Mannix McNamara, 2015, p. viii) in order to promote "healthy and sustainable actions in their students" (ibid., p. vii). Moreover educationalists have also examined the challenges education for sustainable development poses in terms of justice, environment, human rights, and citizenship, and the ways higher education institutions, and social or environmental professional and education organizations, treat and respond to them (McFarlane & Ogazon, 2011).

Sometimes – if rarely – the above strands of literature extend attention beyond the theory that informs educational praxis at institutional or individual level, and critically examines how educational policy development at national or international levels connect with social, economic and environmental crises. We believe that questioning the sustainability of existing conceptions of growth and prosperity – on which educational policy draws or that education policy reinforces – is equally important. This means addressing crucial questions such as: What conceptions of individual and societal growth and prosperity are embedded in educational reforms? To what extent do educational policies acknowledge the need for, and promote, changes in lifestyles and societies at large? What educational policies are developed to deal with the challenge of economic downturn, environmental disasters, increased poverty, and migration?

The ecology of education

In a wider sense the concept of sustainability may also be applied more directly to educational systems, the processes they frame and their relationships to society. Here sustainability involves questions of

balance between the structure, institutions and workings of educational systems, on the one hand, and the functions of these systems for different parts of and groups in society on the other (Archer, 1984). Lack of sustainability in this sense is common and takes many forms (Pretorius, 2014; Whitty et al., 1998). For instance, a public school system may have social justice as one of its official objectives but at the same time distribute resources mostly on the basis of average student achievement. This can result in schools concentrating resources mainly on high-achieving students and leave the lowest achievers behind. Or a market based higher education system with institutions at different levels in terms of teaching and research may become dominated by struggles for academic recognition and funding to such a degree that the broader mission of providing quality higher education for a broad segment of the population is undermined. Or the management of an education system may become so bureaucratic that the system is unable to respond to new needs for learning and skills that emerge in labour markets or society. The specific character of such problems depend on the historical trajectories and the dominant policy priorities in given societies, but at a more general level they represent failings in the 'ecology' of educational systems and institutions. They signal lack of sustainability because, if not corrected, they lead to the erosion, and in the end the breakdown, of educational logics.

For adult education the balance is often especially delicate. Adult education is generally the least institutionalized sector of educational systems, because the need for systematic provision in this field was recognized later than, for instance, secondary and higher education, because adult education is generally part-time, and because participants are living lives as adults, which of course include work and family obligations. Establishing specific structures and institutions for adult education, run by professional adult educators, and getting these recognized as part of the overall educational system, is necessary to provide stable opportunities for adult learning. But institutionalization also involves the risk of separating education from the life situations and experiences of adult learners, thus 'colonizing the lifeworld' (Habermas, 1981), which severely limits adult education's potential for developing a broad spectrum of vocational, social and personal capacities. A balance between institutional and non-institutional logics is essential to the sustainability of adult education systems. It should be noted, however, that balance here does not mean harmonious continuity. Change, innovation, and even conflict, are necessary elements in social progress, in education as elsewhere. But it is important that all actors consider the overall 'ecology' of adult education and strive to make this sustainable.

Education policy for sustainable and just societies

Since *The Limits to Growth,* neoliberal principles have strongly conditioned socio-economic development word-wide and remain a common source of inspiration for attempts by national governments to reform their education systems, as well as for international organizations (e.g., the World Bank) proposing global agendas for education. Social and economic crises that have hit individual countries (e.g., Argentina) or entire regions (e.g., Europe), however, have over time shown the limits and inherent failings of such principles. Educational policies based on them, such as the privatization of public higher education, often have educational ecologies (in the sense outlined above) and have been openly resisted by students, teachers and large sectors of society, as for instance in the United Kingdom or Colombia. In parallel, analysis five years into the latest global financial crisis of governments' responses, pinpoints a renewed reliance on skills as the panacea "to work through the crisis and reposition the national economy for a post-crisis world" (Brown, 2013, p. 690).

However, when we restrict attention to Europe (where the Guest editors reside), we learned from the media that the recession was 'technically over' more than two years ago, when the economies of Germany and France, two of the largest economies in this region, had returned to growth (McHugh, 2013, para. 1). But we also learned from an influential group of European economists that - rather than actual economic recovery - "the euro area may be experiencing since early 2013 a prolonged pause in the recession" (CEPR, 2014, para. 3). In the meantime, we have observed the tightening of austerity policies in most if not all European countries; while a glance at available statistics points out the increased social inequality associated with economic imbalances. A year ago (2013), according to EUROSTAT, one in five of the more than half a billion people living within the European Union was aged 65 or more, and presumably retired or close to retirement; one out of ten was unemployed (spring 2014); while one in every hundred inhabits in 2013 were seeking asylum or refugee status, due to war, political crisis and/or poor economic conditions experienced in their home countries - and since then migration has only increased.

In other words, Seghetto's (2009) argument for re-thinking sustainability in terms of its alternative ontology (person, place and permanence) sheds a new and different light on the links between sustainability, education policy and social justice (including 'inter-generational justice').

Although social justice is often referred to in education policy, no overarching agreement exists on what social justice means in this field. An important foundation is a theory of justice which includes the relations between the political, social, and economic institutions characteristic of democratic societies and their members (Rawls, 1971; 2005[1993]). In a nutshell, justice builds on two principles of fairness that guide these relations. First, it should be based on recognition of equal individual rights and liberties. Second, it must be grounded on unequal social and economic treatment as the primary means to guarantee equality of opportunity to socio-economic positions. To put it differently, unequal social and economic treatment is 'fair' only when it favours greater benefits for the least privileged members of society. Albeit that much discussion in education rests on these principles, some argue for a dichotomization of discourses in favour of education policy that stresses either redistribution of resources or recognition of cultural diversity in support of a fair society (Tarozzi, forthcoming). Others, in contrast, alert us to the risks of a false antithesis, as social justice builds on both redistribution and recognition (Fraser, 1998, p. 1). Notwithstanding the links between redistribution and recognition, the challenges of social and economic crises, migration, climate change and biodiversity, underline the urgent need to connect social justice concerns to the sustainability of societies and lifestyles – and for education policies that can contribute to this.

Among different strands of research that deal with these issues, adopting disciplinary and inter-disciplinary approaches, two examples are worth mentioning here. One strand, typically informed by a 'capability approach' (Sen, 1989; Nussbaum & Sen, 1993; Nussbaum, 2000), questions predominant paradigms in policy debates on human development, placing an emphasis on the 'substantive freedoms' to (for instance) participate in economic exchanges or engage in political actions, rather than on utilitarian aspects or mere access to resources. Such a way of thinking about human and societal well-being is found, for instance, in investigations of lifelong learning policies contesting conventional thinking about the links between education, work and the economy, or in studies about migrants' experiences of adaption to new lives that question the conditions for full realization of a good life in the host country. These often foresee new policy directions and prompt ideas about 'reversing policy-making optics' (Livingstone, 2012) and valuing the abundance of – and not wasting – available

versatile knowledge. This requires policy and programme priorities that challenge the very problems which led to the current crisis, and encourage economic and ecological change for global sustainability.

The second strand of research focuses on the challenge that the links between education and sustainability pose at the institutional level, including in terms of adopted pedagogies. These studies question the very purpose and nature of educational institutions and how they respond to the policy agenda on sustainability (Blewitt & Cullingford, 2004). In doing so, they also tease out socio-environmental relations from the perspective of social justice. What emerge are transformative approaches to re-thinking teaching and learning of (and about) the relations between environmental degradation and social conflicts (Misiaszek, 2012). Thus, for instance, we see the opportunity that the re-ordering of environmental priorities offers

> to think[ing] more carefully about pedagogy and how under global and postcolonial conditions, theory can and should inform the practice of education for a sustainable future. (Matthews, 2011, p 236)

The links between sustainability, education policy and social justice are under continuous construction and differ across socio-cultural and geo-political contexts. Investigations into these may be differently labelled as education policy, lifelong learning, eco-pedagogy, or social justice research, to mention just a few. Some links are also emerging from the work of adult education scholars in North America and Europe, whose different (and complementary) approaches to research can help to deepen our understandings both of the interrelations between sustainability, education policy and social justice, and of their worldwide relevance. We hope the contributions presented in this FOCUS issue will provide a basis for further scientific reflection on the role of education policy for the sustainable prosperity of individuals, their immediate communities, and society at large, in accordance with the principles of (inter-generational) justice. Specifically, the articles deal with the discursive potential of sustainability as a consensus-builder in otherwise contestable political processes (Suzanne Smythe), the sustainability of national policies in the context of prolonged absence of political consensus (Marcella Milana & Lesley McBain) and the need for rethinking top-down policy-making processes (Rosanna Barros), the links between education, work and the economy in multicultural societies (Susan Webb), and more – or less – democratic forms of governance (Carlos Tames Vargas). Bi-lingual abstracts introduce each of these contributions in more detail.

None of the contributions to this FOCUS issue addresses what might be considered sustainability in its 'traditional' sense – that is, as closely linked to the global physical environment and its finite resources. In some cases, the authors make reference to sustainability, either as an explicit term used in the policy that constitutes the case under investigation or a conceptual tool guiding their analysis (Smythe; Barros; Webb). In other cases (Milana & McBain; Tames Vargas), explicit reference to sustainability as such is more sporadic. We believe that the analytical discussion and research findings on policy developments presented here are vital for a rounded understanding of sustainability in adult education.

The papers were selected from among those presented at the Conference on *Interrogating Sustainability in Adult Learning Policy: European and Global Perspectives* held at Aalborg University, Denmark, on 18-20 June 2014. The conference was organized by the Network on Policy Studies in Adult Education, a research-based group of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA). Our thanks also go to the members of the scientific committee and conference

participants who made our encounter in Aalborg such a fruitful opportunity to debate sustainability and adult education policy.

'Open Access' and Sustainability

Speaking of sustainability, we cannot be silent about the perverse effects of recent publishing policies by universities, national ministries, and even the European Commission, which favour the publication of scientific contributions in 'ranked' journals that 'count' for audit purposes, and/or via 'gold open access' often implying payment of fees to publishing houses by authors to make their work available to larger audiences. These in turn increase citations that 'count' for audit purposes. The dark side of these developments is not only that the producers and authors of scientific work, who often provide much unpaid labour in reviewing, editing and marketing, will increasingly also have to find funds to make their work public. It is also that the value of research publications remains locked in a system where books and articles are valued as products that can be counted, while the ideas, analyses and designs these books and articles convey to readers are outside the focus of valuation. In this system, research – including educational research – is measured by outputs rather than outcomes, and there is a risk of a steep increase in the number of published and recognized publications being combined with a decrease in the contribution of these publications to educational practice.

A thoughtful review of the conditions for open source publishing and the pros and cons that come with it appeared in the *Editorial: Encyclopaideia 2.0* of this journal (Vol. XVIII, No. 38, 2014, p. 1-8). None of the guest editors or contributors to this FOCUS issue lives or works in Italy, and we could have chosen a number of different venues to host our work. However, we opted for this Journal, as we think that individual professional career choices and shared political and cultural choices are equally important. Accordingly, we approached a journal that has recently moved to gold open access publishing while not charging authors or their institutions, and that while enjoying a nationally-based reputation is international in scope and intent. So we would like to thank the journal's Editor in-chief and Associate editors for agreeing to host this FOCUS issue. Moreover, we are very grateful to the reviewers for their valuable contribution.

The articles

The articles that follow this introductory essay investigate public policy and the sustainability of adult education. Despite the adoption of different perspectives and specific lenses, a major concern that cuts across all contributions is *economic* sustainability. This is addressed through a variety of critical approaches to economic growth and development, and linked only indirectly to other forms of sustainability. The latter are though more evident in the final contribution, but in all contributions, *environmental* sustainability as such remains in the background.

More specifically, the article by Suzanne Smythe that opens this collection reports on a policy case study in British Columbia, Canada. This shows the contradictions between the stated scope for public funding of literacy programs and what is perceived by educational providers; contradictions that saw the positive appeal of the 'sustainability' concept employed in an appeasement of civil society by the government of British Columbia to legitimate the spending of public money on hosting the Olympic games.

Marcella Milana and Lesley McBain present a comparative analysis of party ideologies that feed into the legal debate around the public financing of adult education in the United States of America. In so doing, the article brings to light and discusses the positive and negative features of economic sustainability's increasingly pervasive role in shaping adult education (particularly as for employment only).

In the next article, Rosanna Barros presents a policy study of the recognition of prior learning in Portugal, and questions the sustainability of top-down decision making processes: in this case, the focus is on the individual level of the actors participating in the system.

Susan Webb's contribution draws on the capability approach in an analysis of skilled migration in Australia. She shows how migrants whose skills are not recognized by employers and have limited access to further education adapt in various ways to fulfill their aspirations for a good life.

Finally, Carlos Tames Vargas focuses explicitly on social participatory sustainability in education policy. He analyses a recent Basque Country law on lifelong learning, and the many actors that - together with Basque policy makers - were involved in its development, though to different degrees. In so doing, he argues for the need to better sustain (or alter) the current policy-making system so to increase possibilities for democratic, bottom-up, approaches in policy-making and policy implementation.

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