Responsibility, Participation and Social Justice in Adult Education

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In these times of crisis, and with changes sweeping through many areas of our social, political, working and economic lives, we would do well to consider how the concepts of responsibility, participation and social justice are being recast within the sphere of adult education. With the advance of neo-liberalism, the outlines by which we recognise these principles have been redefined. More than ever, they are understood in terms of processes of inclusion/exclusion, or the possibility/impossibility of participation, of operating as active citizens, as individuals engaged in the interpretation of the problems inherent in social injustice and the search for solutions (Sen, 2009), not to mention the abandonment of political responsibility in favour of ever greater responsibility on the individual (Mayo, 2014).

In *Lavoro futuro*, Ettore Gelpi decried the field of continuing education's almost total renunciation of its function as a source of creation, of its political and emancipatory duty to work towards greater social justice, and of its rootedness in the principle of education and training as a political project capable of transforming both society and the individual.

> Adult education in Europe seems to have gradually forgotten its history—a history of struggle, resistance, creativity—and become an instrument of power, used purely for the purposes of personal development and subject to the logic of the markets. The priority seems to be economic development, productivity and reinforcing the idea of 'citizenship', in all its ambiguity (since the unspoken objective is frequently that of avoiding social conflicts, rather than working to resolve their causes) (Gelpi, 2002, p. 160 [our own translation]).

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For this special edition of the journal Encyclopaideia, we have brought together eight articles presented at the third conference on "Equity, Social Justice and Adult Education and Learning Policy" organised by the ESREA Network on Policy Studies in Adult Education, which ran from 8–10 June 2017 at the University of Verona. Collectively, the essays address a broad cross-section of issues relating to responsibility, participation and social justice. They are guided by an implicit question: how much, and in what circumstances, is adult education still able to promote the emancipation of individuals and educational and social contexts, and to contribute to the attainment of social justice?

The European Commission has approached the challenge of ensuring that older adults are socially included and able to exercise all of their rights by introducing new policies on lifelong learning. Among the stated key development aims of the United Nations 2030 *Agenda for Sustainable Development* is the promotion of lifelong-learning opportunities for all. According to the *Incheon Declaration*—issued in respect to UNESCO's Sustainable Development goal 4—, this specific objective is engendered by a humanistic approach to development rooted in human rights and dignity, social justice and inclusion (World Education Forum, 2015). However, despite the fact that such guidelines, together with the UNESCO's 2015 *Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education*, insist that governments bear responsibility for promoting inclusive policies that guarantee the right to ongoing education for adults, the reality of the exclusion and social injustice faced by so many makes clear the extent to which these recommendations have been disregarded.

Ettore Gelpi's unmasking of the way adult education has been subsumed into a neo-liberal model, and harnessed to help muddy the concept of citizenship and the attendant failure to address the roots of social injustice, leads us directly to the concept of responsibility.

Who, or what agency, is prepared to assume responsibility for enabling individuals and communities to engage in the life of their society? Among the various labels attached to this concept, of particular interest for this discussion are those authors (Habermas, Apel, Young) who propose understanding responsibility in terms of "co-responsibility". In particular, the American philosopher Iris Young, with her model of "social connections" (2006), offers a valuable perspective in the battle against injustice. Her "social connection model" provides an invaluable theoretical framework for understanding a range of pro-justice activities engendered across diverse social movements. These groups, communities and associations forge links between societies, economies and the spheres of politics by re-appropriating economic activity as a way of participating in the life of society and criticising the systemic social injustice generated by an economic model based on growth and globalisation. Young (2006, p. 114) asserts that "Structural injustice exists when social processes put large categories of persons under a systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time as these processes enable others to dominate or have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising their capacities". Structural injustice can therefore be understood as the result of a variety of actions on the part of both individuals and institutions—actions that relate to their specific interests and objectives—within a system of shared norms and regulations. Every (legal or natural) person directly or indirectly involved in these processes bears responsibility for them, in the sense that he/she/it has helped given rise to them. This is not a direct "action-reaction" type of responsibility, but the responsibility of social actors operating within an interconnected structure.

If we are to achieve a model of adult education that is capable of contrasting the pervasive, dominant demands of neo-liberalism by restoring the role of the community/context, and the capacity of the individuals involved to make a difference, it is vital that we establish a perspective that reaffirms the importance of individual responsibility and participation in the creation of contexts of social justice.

The essays in this issue address the role of responsibility and participation as agents of social justice or injustice at a range of levels: the "macro" (policies adopted by certain countries in respect to adult populations), the "meso" (adult education services and programmes targeting vulnerable groups: migrants, prison inmates, people with disabilities, the elderly), and the "micro" (the educational relationship in the university setting as a mechanism for eliciting responsibility and involvement in the generation of field-specific skills and knowledge).

In their essay *State responsibility for fostering participation and social justice*, Rosanna Barros and Chiara Biasin consider policies adopted in Italy and Portugal in relation to low-skill adults, revealing how—despite throwing up occasional contradictions—these approaches attempt to preserve the social

and socially educative aspects of education to help safeguard the right to lifelong learning. In her text *Is it the taking part that counts? Access to lifelong learning opportunities in Germany's regime of dis/ability*, Silke Schreiber-Barsch is also concerned with education policy, demonstrating the potentialities of spatial theory in a reflection on policies of continuing education with adults with disabilities.

In their essay *Cinderella and other stories ... An exploration of practitioners' views on bringing Further Education out of the shadows*, Carol Thompson and Neil Hopkins reveal the status of further education as a sort of poor relation to traditional spheres of education, albeit one that is understood to have strategic value in terms of workforce development, and even considered to be a sort of panacea for social issues among sectors of the population at risk of marginalisation. In the essay *Building a Community Legacy Together (BCLT) – An Intergenerational Program for Youth and Older Adults Aimed at Promoting a More Equitable Society*, Barbara Baschiera presents a model devised jointly in the USA and Italy in which empowerment is founded on forms of intergenerational learning, particularly involving elderly people at risk of social segregation. Sarah Galloway meanwhile, in her essay *Social practices or functional skills? Comparing the contractual obligations for prison education providers*, focuses on education and training in the context of Scottish prisons, drawing comparisons with England and Wales and looking, in particular, at the role of adult education.

The essay by Ann Cowie and Jo-Ann Delaney, *Integration, inclusion or invisibility? Language education and citizenship for adult transnational migrants in the UK and Germany*, explores models of language education used with adult migrants in the United Kingdom and Germany, and the interaction between government policy and pedagogical practices in the field of adult education.

In the last two contributions, our attention shifts from such society-based contexts to university education. In *Reflections on the political nature within the teaching practice: novelty teachers' educational experiences* Patricia Hermocilla considers the political aspects of development of teachers' pedagogical knowledge base, and the experiences that underpin their practices. The closing contribution is *Responsibility, from the "me-first" culture to common life. An empirical study with young, female trainee teachers* by Paola Dusi and Antonia De Vita. This final essay explores how a sense of responsibility for education figures in the perceptions, beliefs and experiences of future teachers, considering the political dimension of the various meanings attributed to responsibility an inherent part both of adulthood itself, and of an educational skill set to be shared across generations.

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