Adult Education in the End of the Century: A Reflective Review from Portugal

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Abstract: *In this paper we review adult education policies in Portugal from 1974 until 1999, and we also try to provide a realistic portrait of the current situation. Our main aim is to give suggestions to guide researchers in this field of work.*

Introduction

To propose in this introduction to offer a general perspective on today's adult education would be an inglorious effort resulting in an absurd reduction. The traditional richness of this area of knowledge makes it impossible for us to consider all situations, events and possibilities. Nevertheless, and assuming the risk we want to avoid, it is possible to approach today's adult education using the proposals suggested by Peter Jarvis, which we find in several authors (Apps, 1985; Barros, 1974; Freire, 1985; Jarvis, 1989). In this approach, the various positions on adult education are located in a philosophical foundation that overcomes possible methodological reductions, and allows us to distinguish several educational perspectives. We see adult education as a political and cultural act that by itself can play a role in strengthening the chains of domination or breaking them in a liberatory way (Hall and Stock, 1985). We identify a hegemonic tendency that results from stressing the formal school system, which is based in teacher training as defined from an economic point of view, with a clear distinction between students and teachers. Opposed to this is a counter-hegemonic tendency that has to do with citizen's education, constructing different relationships in education, promoting innovation and developing a critical sense. These two major trends within the field of adult education help us to understand the reference point at which we stand, and the positions we assume, beyond speech differences, or methodological proposals. Our positions influence the analysis that we have done of the Portuguese adult education system. We sustain a critical perspective, because it is only by knowing deeply the system in which we move, that one gains the possibility to change it.

Adult Education in the Revolutionary Period (1974-76)

Portugal was ruled by a dictatorship regime from 1926 until 1974. It is easy to understand that after the revolution[1] the great majority of the population believed that all changes were possible. All tasks seemed urgent: to destroy the policies of the old regime; to replace them by new ones; in short, to build a new and fairer country.

Education was considered a very important tool for changing society, but on the other hand, a certain type of education had been one of the bases of the fascist regime (Carvalho, 1986; Cortesão, 1988). Being so, it was necessary to abandon the old educational structures and to reshape all educational systems (Teodoro, 1978). The state's visibility and authority were reduced in this period, which was characterised by a political struggle as different groups tried to achieve hegemony. For two years there was uncertainty about whether the revolutionary strategies of social transformation that would prevail. One can identify two major strategies (Stoer, 1986) supported by competing groups within the Movement of the Armed Forces (MFA). One was based in a centralised revolutionary direction, with the MFA leading the state apparatus and government. The other was based in an autonomous social movement and in the construction of a revolutionary alternative through local popular power. Political parties clearly opposed these two strategies. They wanted to institutionalise a pluralistic representative democracy and defended the end of the MFA. We shall look at some movements that occurred, namely, the movements and initiatives that were centrally controlled, and the response of the General-Directorate for Permanent Education (DGEP) to a strong emerging associative movement.

Mobilisations Centrally Controlled

  Military cultural campaigns. Created by the MFA, their aim was to show the Portuguese people that revolution was not only a coup d'état, but also an attempt to change Portuguese society profoundly (Almeida, 1981). The MFA, aware of its triumph in the social process triggered by the revolution it had led, intended now to assume the role of cultural promoter (Murteira, 1986). These campaigns went on from November 1974 until February 1975. They consisted of cultural activities – theatre, movie projections, etc. – and in public sessions, all destined to enlighten the people in political terms. Their targets were the rural inland populations to which the Lisbon revolution had come late. The results were not as expected. The military were often caught between the lack of political background, or the interest of the population, and their commitment to the old regime of right wing local bosses. This political heterogeneity and the lack of qualified MFA persons to do the work, contributed to the failure of their established aims (Almeida, 1981). Among the negative effects of these actions were the vain promises made to the populations and the absolute ignorance regarding the people's reality (Matos, 1979). In summary, none, or few, of the actions were taken for the population's interests (Cunhal, 1976). This cultural revolutionary movement mainly represents a naïve discovery made by the military about their own country-people. Also we should note the difficulties they met in taking the revolutionary ideals into traditional and forgotten communities.

  The civic student service. Created in 1975, this was a compulsory year for student's prior to their beginning university studies; they put themselves at the service of communities[2]. A significant number of students were sent to do basic adult education. The training programs were conducted locally with "disposable resources". There were recommendations to use Paulo Freire's methods[3], once it was understood that illiteracy was an issue, "not only as instruction, but as a means to awaken the personal conscience of the individual" (Matos, 1979, p. 27). The results were poor, even when we consider only quantitative aspects: in the great majority of the regions there were certified around 30% of the adults who joined the program (DGEP, 1975). We must remember, first of all, that this was a compulsory year. Second, these "adult educators" had no training at all. Finally, the main aim of this "program"

seemed to be to educate the young adults who wish to get a university education!

DGEP, or the Administration Serving Popular Initiatives

The period in question was characterised by a certain climate of generalised euphoria. In this context, there arose hundreds of small groups, co-operative societies and cultural centres. Most of these groups had no legal existence. Nevertheless, they performed a number of activities, from basic adult education to cultural animation. In this way was born a spontaneous popular associative movement that assumed typical forms of mass mobilisation and direct democracy (Lima, 1994b).

  From January 1976 on, the DGEP tried to follow and serve the emerging associative movement (Melo, 1983). The main actions of this department were briefly as follows (Melo and Benavente, 1978). First of all, they established ways to support (monetary, pedagogical and technical) the existing associations who wished to do some work in adult education. But in order to give that support the associations had to be legalised. So, legal mechanisms were created to ensure that these informal groups would be considered "popular education associations". In July 1976, the DGEP maintained regular contact with more or less 500 of these associations. This work with popular associations was crucial to the "formation of a new type of educator and a new type of education" Norbeck (1983, p. 8). Furthermore, Norbeck states that only these associations should constitute the base of education for development in a Portuguese democratic tradition. Summarising some of the important features of this period: *i)* the focus of the action were the base groups and communities that mobilised their resources (Falcão, 1987), that is, non formal education; *ii)* the Portuguese adult education system was created by these base groups, *iii)* adult education was viewed as a "liberatory process that aims at the population's autonomy and not its dependency" (Melo and Benavente, 1978, p. 99). Finally we must stress that this focus on popular education was possible only because a certain "emptiness" of power existed in this period.

Adult Education in the Rebuilding of the State (1976-79)

The implementation of a pluralistic representative democracy in Portugal changed once again the so-

cial and educational scene. In July 1976, the military Revolutionary Council was dissolved and the Socialist Party, winner of the elections, formed the first constitutional government. What were the effects on education and adult education?

The building of a democratic system implied a sudden cut with the revolutionary policies. The persons identified with popular education were dismissed and the DGEP was left with no qualified personnel (Silva, 1990). On a broader level of analysis, a redefinition of education was made by the introduction of new forms of administrative and economic rationality (Stoer, 1982). The "new" Portuguese State, traditional and autocratic, began by giving little attention to the people's social and cultural rights (Silva, 1990). Also we have to stress the reconstruction of a strong centralism (Lima, 1994a), with a consequence of abandoning local initiatives. There is no doubt that the first constitutional government marked the end of the period of radical educational reforms (Stoer and Dale, 1999) – normalisation was the rule and popular education associations were left without any kind of support. On the other hand, this marginality may have forced the emancipation of such associations which now had to work under a democratic system – much different from a revolutionary one. Paradoxically, this status of outsider brought some advantages to these groups. The lack of attention that the administration paid to them allowed for actions that otherwise would have been stopped, and also gave them the opportunity to avoid bureaucracy (Norbeck, 1983). The same kind of arguments are valid for the whole sector of adult education, since central initiatives had been often substituted by local community initiatives (Lima, 1994b). Finally we must emphasise that such associations represented a step forward towards democracy, through participant popular classes and the rules that guided their actions (Belchior, 1990).

The National Plan of Illiteracy
and Basic Adult Education (1980-85)

Following a proposal made by the Communist Party, a 1979 law made the Government responsible for developing a national plan to eliminate illiteracy – the PNAEBA. Also, it was to develop several areas of adult education. The task of constructing and leading the plan was assigned to the DGEP. The PNAEBA consisted of seven different major programs. Five of them were (DGEP, 1979): i) the

creation of an Institute of Adult Education; ii) the organisation of a network of cultural and permanent education centres; iii) the implementation of integrated plans for educational and cultural development; iv) illiteracy and adult basic education; and v) support for popular education.

The Institute of Adult Education never appeared. Only four cultural and permanent education centres were created at experimental level, but they soon disappeared. The support for popular education was limited to some monetary help, and that decreased over the years (DGEA, 1986). The impact of literacy programs on improving illiteracy rates was 0,75% to 1,6% (Sousa, 1986). The participants became younger and training programs were disconnected from community reality (Nogueira, 1996b). Finally, there were some interesting results in the implementation of territorial integrated development plans. The territorial approaches allowed for the appearance of participatory practices and endogenous development. The PNAEBA was a good plan that generated poor results. There was never enough resources to put it into action (DGEA, 1986) and this meant simply that there was not the political will to guarantee success. But new theories and forms of intervention arose (Nogueira, 1996a), and it was demonstrated that there was a "capital of knowledge, experiences and ideas, capable of promoting the integrated and autonomous development of an educational field" (Lima, 1996a, p. 68).

The Effects of Neo-Liberal Politics
(1986-1999)

In 1985 the Social Democrat Party – in Portugal, a right wing one – won the elections and promoted neo-liberal politics until 1995. In 1986 a major reform in education began, and after the defeat of humanist sectors in the reform committees, adult education become severely diminished as a system. In the past we can characterise as ambiguous the attitude of the State towards associative movements, popular education or local structures intervention. Now, it became clear that the tendencies to privatisation in education – not investment – would be justified by the needs of modernisation (Lima, 1994a). We witnessed the transference of technocratic and rational perspectives to educational and social policies. The obsession with efficacy and efficiency, visible in the discourses that overvalue evaluation, rigor and results, started to define the "education that counts" (Lima, 1996b, p. 289). That

is, formal education, one that is susceptible to quantitative orientations. Of course, adult education – especially the one that emphasises processes and not products – was therefore defined as the education to combat and exclude.

Adult Education in the 1986 Educational Reform
In this context , there began the destruction of the existing adult education system, which was still trying to emerged. Reform practically ignored adult education. The areas of territorial approaches and community development were forgotten (Nogueira, 1996b); the whole field of social and educational intervention was practically absent (Comissão de Reforma do Sistema Educativo, 1988). The departments that handled adult education were transformed into small units with no power or means to do significant work. The final stroke was given when adult education become subordinated to two existing departments: the Department of Basic Education and the Department of Secondary Education – that is, adult education was entirely placed under schooling.

The "New" Adult Education
Adult education in the 1990s has two major components: professional training and recurrent education. The latter is defined by alternating periods of study with other kind of activities, usually professional ones (DGEP, 1979). In its broader concept, it could be a tool for change (DGEA, 1986). This was the concept originally defended by the Portuguese administration. However, after the 86 reform the concept adopted was a strict one: second opportunity education, aiming solely at compensating the failures generated in the traditional educational system (DGEE, 1991). This kind of adult education does not represent a tool to combat social exclusion, nor present alternative strategies and processes towards liberation. Its main goals are disguised: the "new format" does not improve the cultural and economic situation of its beneficiaries, who mainly need a certificate to guarantee professional stability, but not social change (Sancho, 1996). In the meantime, what happened to the associations for adult education? Freedom from State control represents today an "open space" where non-formal processes can take place, at the local level. There are a significant number of projects seeking to integrate educational and cultural animation dimensions, and promote local development. Its work is based on participatory

models because the associative dimension is suitable for such active models (Lima, 1994c).

Adult Education in Portugal can now be characterised by two different realities. 1) Official adult education, diminished as a whole, and almost absent. 2) The marginal network of State-independent organisations that use interesting non-formal practices – even if universities and research centres ignore or deprecate this reality.

After the elections of 1995, won by the Socialist Party, the Ministry of Education gathered a team of experts with the specific task of redefining the whole system of adult education. They have been working since 1997. The documents produced by this team[4] are very good, but there are no signs of real actions taking place.

Conclusions
It is obvious that, until now, the Portuguese administration has failed in promoting meaningful national policies to build a strong system of adult education. We must not wait for that day when some government will perform this task. After this reflective review, it is our opinion that Portuguese researchers should be aware of our future needs. These are: 1) A turn to integrated projects at regional or local level. 2) Universities should assume their responsibilities as regards the communities where they exist, assuring that research programs are designed to study projects undertaken by base groups, (thus ending the traditional separation between action and reflection), and that projects in which participatory research is used as a tool to changing social reality are promoted. 3) Put pressure on the official institutions and the teams of experts to carry out promised structures and plans. 4. Clarify the true meaning of adult education, an urgent task in a country where the authorities promote such a narrow concept of adult education.

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Notes

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[1] Throughout the paper, the word "revolution" refers to the coup d'état of April 25th, 1974. Revolution is a process. The complete political analysis of the events that took place in these two years is a huge task. Clearly it does not belong in this paper. Hence we choose to simplify, even if some times we lose some precision with it.

[2] Of course, this "one more year" represented an opportunity to delay the solution of a simple problem: 14,000 students without a place in the university system.

[3] Paulo Freire's methods were accepted in that period, although often used in deviating forms and with some dogmatism and predetermined objectives (Stoer and Dale, 1999).

[4] Melo, A.; Queirós, A. M.; Silva, A. S.; Salgado, L.; Rothes, L. & Ribeiro, M., (1998). *Uma Aposta Educativa na Participação de Todos. Documento de estratégia para o desenvolvimento da educação de adultos.* Lisboa: Ministério da Educação.