

Adult education in times of crisis and change: perspectives on access, learning careers and identities

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This book is dedicated *in memoriam*
of our colleagues and friends
Henrique M.A.C. Fonseca and Joaquim Luís Coimbra

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Chapter 14

Vito Balzano

Crisis in adult education of the post-pandemic period: A possible model of sustainable welfare

Introduction

The following question is posed for consideration: is it possible in the present day to measure policy actions on social issues from a pedagogical perspective? Moreover, to what extent can adult education serve as a conduit for this perspective? These are some of the questions that prompted the present institution of higher learning to initiate an investigation into perspectives in the post-pandemic period. It should be noted that this research is still in progress and has thus far only yielded preliminary findings. Consequently, the reflections obtained from this research are only partial. The objective is to provide a practical instrument that can be utilised by education professionals, educators within social cooperatives, and policymakers seeking to formulate novel concepts of assistance and welfare for families from diverse cultural backgrounds. The prevailing notion of welfare as a responsibility limited to the young or those with deficits is being challenged by the recognition of an equal need for all individuals, irrespective of cultural or age-related differences. In adult education, a cross-section has emerged that prompts

reflection on the issue of the sustainability of a novel concept of welfare. The present case study focuses on a specific locale in southern Italy, which is deemed a microcosm of a larger, more expansive phenomenon – Apulia (Balzano, 2017)¹.

The necessity to define context arises in circumstances where a search for meaning and significance is underway through the processes of communication, interpretation and knowledge. If we consider learning to be closely related to these processes, it follows that a theory of learning (adult, but not only) cannot avoid conceptualising context, just as a practice of learning and education cannot avoid contextualising. A notable distinction exists between the context and the reality in which communication occurs. It is not legitimate to conflate or confuse these two concepts: context is a cognitive construct, not a factual reality, and is subject to interpretation. It is important to recognise that context alludes to the knowledge possessed by the interlocutors, the assumptions and inferences they make unconsciously while communicating. This cognitive apparatus, while indispensable in comprehending the literal meaning of a given discourse, is malleable and manifold, necessitating a degree of consensus and coordination among its users. Consequently, context, being mental in nature, cannot be confined to the individual mind; rather, it attests to the existence of a mind as a complex system (Bholinger et al., 2015).

The contemporary political and social-pedagogical predicament is that the prevailing historical period has eroded the three fundamental components of the labour system: stable employment, women's propensity to care for family members, and the capacity for the expansion of welfare state initiatives. The contemporary concept of welfare that resonates with families is characterised by a pronounced emphasis on the analysis of the world of work. This is primarily due to the evolution of family structures, which have become detached from the traditional archetype (Joint Research

¹ For a more in-depth look at the situation in Puglia, and how this region has been defined as a model on a European scale of new approaches in social policies and welfare reforms, see the broader contribution Balzano V. (2017). *Educazione, persona e welfare. Il contributo della pedagogia nello sviluppo delle politiche sociali*. Bari: Progedit.

Centre, 2013; Kettunen & Petersen, 2011). The needs of different family forms are also subject to variation, with new forms emerging and existing forms being open to different experiences, and yet the same needs persist. This is undoubtedly a political issue, as has been acknowledged, but it is also a social issue, varying according to different social strata.

The pedagogical dimension of adult education today

Pedagogically understood values are always part of that filter that makes all interpretation possible; they are conditions and ways of accessing the other and its truth. Education, and particularly the adult education system, which permeates the various spheres of knowledge and culture, is instrumental in guiding individuals towards self-realisation through dialogue with the world and in harmony with it. It is imperative that education fosters awareness of individuals' roots and provides them with specific points of reference that enable them to define their place in various worlds and contexts while respecting human diversity and different abilities. This notion is further emphasised in the UNESCO Report 2021:

Adult learning and education play multiple roles. It helps people find their way through a range of problems and increases skills and agency. It enables people to take greater responsibility for their future. It also helps adults understand and critique changing paradigms and power relations and take steps to shape a just and sustainable world. A future-oriented approach should define adult education, as well as education always, as education intertwined with life. Adults are responsible for the world they live in and the world of the future. Responsibility for the future cannot simply be passed on to future generations. A shared ethic of intergenerational solidarity is needed (p. 115).

This chapter proposes a preliminary reflection on the transition from an education oriented to what happens, to one more focused on the individual,

on the sustainability of the events that characterise human reality. This is a crucial aspect that should not be underestimated when considering prospects for adult education and the measures that can be taken, albeit on a small scale, to address a human crisis that is already in progress. The UNESCO document also underscores the responsibility of adults as agents of the present and the future, entrusted with the responsibility of shaping their own lives and, consequently, the lives of their peers. This solidarity, which is a moral category proper to pedagogy, becomes shared, intergenerational knowledge, spanning different cultures and eras.

Learning is an everyday event that is social in nature in that it takes place with other people; it is too dependent because the setting provides tools (computers, maps, scoops) that facilitate and especially structure the cognitive process. Ultimately, what determines learning is the interaction with the setting in relation to its social and tool-dependent nature. Interactions among people, with tools and with the environment are pivotal, whilst taking into account the situation and the interests, needs and prior knowledge of the adults involved. Education is defined as the process of acting in the real world through social practices and relationships. The focus of attention shifts from the individual mind to the entire learning situation, where the assumption of beliefs, values and knowledge is not a subjective fact but rather arises from participation in a community or culture. The act of contextualisation entails the ability to discern the contemporary moment, which is informed by the historical context.

In the context of liquid modernity, for instance, there has been a proliferation of forms, needs and opportunities for learning that engender plural and discordant theories. These theories must be integrated and applied to learning, encompassing a variety of rational, psychological, behavioural, embedded, spiritual, or holistic approaches in different contexts of knowledge construction. Conventional problem-solving methodologies prove inadequate in this regard; effective adult educators must possess the capacity to interpret the context and discern whether the requisite learning is elementary, intricate, intricate, or chaotic. The concept under discussion is that of complexity

theory, a theoretical framework capable of connecting individual learning with systems of interactions, and constraints with possibilities.

A recurrent theme within our discourse is the notion of complexity theory, which guides the examination of contemporary adult learning practices, with a particular focus on adult education in the present age. Indeed, in recent decades, the principle of lifelong learning has become central to educational policy formulation around the world. For instance, the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) calls upon member states to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (Boeren, 2019, p. 37). Adult learning and education are characterised by a robust emancipatory tradition, as evidenced by its capacity to empower individuals and foster active citizenship. Nevertheless, this has been eroded in recent years by an excessive focus on the vocational and skills dimensions of lifelong learning. This paradigm shift has effectively transformed a previously recognised “right” for adults, particularly those who had previously experienced barriers to education, into a mandatory obligation for the majority. This is primarily due to the growing societal expectation for individuals to maintain their employability and relevance in a rapidly changing global landscape. This has resulted in a constant cycle of qualification and retraining (Carretero Gomez, Vuorikar & Punie, 2017; Elfert, 2019). A particularly noteworthy aspect of these passages is the emphasis on pedagogical approaches tailored to meet the needs of adults facing educational challenges. The notion of providing support to individuals is repeatedly emphasised, in contrast to the prevailing welfare policies in Europe and Italy.

In light of our ongoing collaboration with Apulian cooperatives during the pandemic period, it became evident that there was a pressing educational need to establish supportive pathways, which extend beyond the confines of conventional schooling. The role of educators must be recognised beyond the confines of the school environment, encompassing a broader societal impact. It is imperative to acknowledge that numerous families need assistance within the educational sector, as opposed to the economic domain.

Towards an inevitable transformative process

It is imperative that a transformative process is initiated with a view to revising educational processes and learning practices, rendering the process more flexible and open to the diversity of the world of work. Adult learning and education must evolve significantly between generations. In the context of evolving economies and societies, adult education must evolve to encompass far more than lifelong learning for labour market purposes. Opportunities for career change and retraining must be integrated with a comprehensive reform of educational systems, emphasising the establishment of multiple and adaptable pathways. Rather than adopting a reactive or adaptive approach, as seen in the introduction of labour markets, technology, or environmental factors, adult education must be reconceptualised around learning that is truly transformative. In this regard, it is worthwhile to re-examine the theory of Mezirow, who posits that learning is a conscious, critical, and reflective process through which adults construct new or updated interpretations of meanings attributed to past experiences or thoughts to guide the present and direct future action (Merrill et al., 2019). The focus is not on the addition of new experiences or the integration of more contemporary content; rather, it is on the adult's capacity to reinterpret a remote experience based on a novel set of meanings. In this regard, the author distinguishes between four forms of learning. The former pertains to the adjustment or updating of behaviours, knowledge, and attitudes through the utilisation of existing meaning schemas. In contrast, the latter involves the creation of meaning schemas through the transformation of existing ones, albeit without presupposing an actual change in viewpoints. Transformative learning, on the other hand, occurs through the transformation of meaning perspectives, which is defined as "consisting of becoming aware, through reflection and critique, of the specific assumptions on which a distorted or incomplete meaning perspective is based and transforming it through a reorganization of meaning" (Merrill et al, 2020, p. 87). Meaning perspectives can be defined as "patterns of expectations that filter perception and cognition [...] the perceptual and conceptual codes

to form, constrain, and distort the way we think, believe, and feel, as well as the how, what, and why of our learning" (Grotlüschen, Nienkemper & Duncker-Euringer, 2020, p. 34–35). The fundamental premise of transformative theory is predicated on a constructivist paradigm of learning, wherein frames of reference serve as the foundational construct. During personal, formative historical and cultural-historical events, adults construct perceptions, expectations, behaviours, values, desires, relationships, and the "boundary structures" of their individual meaning systems, through which experiences are assimilated. In Knowles' andragogy, experiential baggage is identified as a defining characteristic of the adult and their unique learning style. Conversely, Mezirow's perspective asserts that the past can impose limitations on future learning, as individuals tend to attribute old meanings to new experiences through routinised habits of expectation. Consequently, critical reflection emerges as the privileged mode for attributing a different meaning to past or present experience, thereby conferring upon its coherence and thus enabling its interpretation, re-focusing of the meaning system.

In transformative theory, moreover, a few characteristics of reflection can be traced back to Dewey's thought as well as Freire's approach, even allowing glimpses of some echoes of the debate of the 1980s: the acquisition of awareness, the capacity for emotional distancing and cognitive objectification, doubt and questioning of beliefs and assertions inherited from personal history, tradition, and authority. Reflection is defined as a conscious process of evaluation, whereby assumptions are revisited, even distorted ones, through the negotiation of meanings and their analytical and synthetic elaboration. In this regard, three types of meaning perspectives can be distinguished: epistemological, relating to the ways in which the adult knows, acquires knowledge; sociolinguistic, relating to the linguistic, social, and cultural influences of life contexts; and psychological, relating to the adult's concept and image of selves as well as emotional and imaginative patterns. It is therefore the function of critical reflection to enable adults to overcome the distortions and errors of these frames of reference that uncritically result in the adult "seeing reality in a way that arbitrarily limits what is included,

prevents differentiation, hinders other approaches to viewing reality, or does not facilitate the integration of experience" (Vuorikari et al., 2016, p. 90). However, it is not a spontaneous act of adults, but rather the outcome of a long and complex process that generally begins when an event, encounter, or situation leads adults to question the habitual assumptions underlying their own perspectives of meaning because those perspectives turn out to be no longer suitable for interpreting what happened. The transformative dynamic commences with a disorienting dilemma and progresses through nine stages that encompass moments of self-analysis, self-assessment, comparison with others, exploration of new options, confidence-building, construction of new skills, and attempts until an integration of meaning perspectives. The product of reflection on these premises, which extends beyond mere content review and encompasses metacognitive processes, aligns with the act of learning itself. Reflection is not merely a goal of learning, but rather "the central dynamic of problem solving, problem posing and the transformation of meaning schemas and meaning perspectives" (Merrill et al., 2017, p. 38).

An analysis of the mechanisms through which reflexive reframing action occurs reveals a distinction between critical reflection on assumptions (CRA) and critical self-reflection on assumptions (CSRA). The implementation of this process may be facilitated by a trainer or conducted autonomously, with the resultant insights being communicated to others as well as to adults themselves. The forms of critical self-reflection involved are distinguished into four privileged domains: the first is narrative, applied by adults about her/himself; the second is systemic, concerning social norms, workplaces, organisations, and life contexts; the third is therapeutic, concerning deep individual dynamics; and finally, epistemic, about the ways in which thinking works and the operational consequences of them.

What prospects for welfare in the post-Covid-19 era

It has been demonstrated that it is of particular importance to reflect on innovation and the role it plays, or could play, as an orientation and guideline

for the future of humanity. Pedagogical discourse, both within and beyond the field of adult education, has historically underplayed the significance of future-oriented reflection. The future of a nation, a continent, or a society is seldom deliberated upon in these contexts. The prevailing discourse appears to be one of a present-oriented nature, with the future being marginalised and, at best, a topic of discussion (Fejes, 2019). However, in the initial phase of the global spread of the Sars-Cov-2 virus, the future became a pivotal element in our discourses, our lives, and our collective reflections, compelling us to pause and reflect. This period has provided a significant and unique opportunity for reflection. On the one hand, the future calls us back to the category of innovation; on the other, it questions us about adult education and the meaning of a field of knowledge that must find alternative paths to those normally followed if it is to survive the evolution of knowledge. In light of our experiences, studies, accounts, and investigations, it is evident that we stand at a critical juncture, akin to the disciplines that interrogate education. The question that arises is whether to prioritise human agency or to entrust decision-making to machines.

The fundamental issue that must be addressed prior to embarking on a reflection on the concepts recalled is the context, beyond and beyond disciplines and knowledge, in which innovation and adult education, as well as contemporary social policies, must be situated. The focus is on innovation within the context of the social economy. It is important to note that innovation encompasses not only the development of products and processes within the domains of knowledge and human enterprise, but also the realm of social innovation. The discussion surrounding social innovation can diverge significantly from the conventional discourse on innovation. In challenging and disruptive times, such as the present moment during the global pandemic and educational disruption, improvisations and experiments have been demonstrated by adults in various professions, highlighting their determination, commitment, and resourcefulness. For instance, as numerous school systems recognised the primacy of personal needs and social well-being, testing was postponed, coverage requirements for curriculum

content were suspended, and classroom interactions were directed towards authentic learning and well-being.

During the period of the pandemic, the work became more visible to the public. The elevated standards of specialised knowledge and pedagogical dedication demanded of adults have been subject to concurrent appreciation and scrutiny. The cultivation of the social dimension of learning, for instance, has entailed the sustainability of citizenship education in an increasingly interconnected world. This enables individuals to care for one another, embrace other perspectives and experiences, and engage in responsible practices towards the environment and our shared natural resources. It is evident that digital media alone cannot achieve these ends. Participatory and engaged learning is required in a variety of contexts. The pernicious intrusion of the virus into our territories has affected three fundamental spheres of individual and social life: health, economy, and education. The repercussions of the virus have been exacerbated by the pre-existing injustices, inequalities, and delays within these spheres. The economic blockade and enforced isolation measures have resulted in a significant escalation of these issues. It is imperative to consider the prevalence of multi-problem poverty, encompassing both historical and contemporary manifestations. A significant proportion of these cases are associated with the elevated levels of stress experienced by housebound parents, who are confronted with a multitude of pressing concerns. Additionally, the issue of school delay, impacting at least one-fifth of the student population, is of considerable concern. This figure amounts to over 1.6 million children. 000 children lacking or deficient in the necessary distance learning devices); of behavioural problems and regression syndromes; of sleep disorders, sudden changes in mood, feelings of airlessness, irritability, states of anxiety, dispersiveness, poor concentration, apathy, closure, and noncommunication; of regressions for those with psychiatric disorders (think e. g. autistic children); of abandoned disabled people; of anti-conservative acts, domestic violence; of abuse, mistreatment and loosening of guardianships for children. Furthermore, the aforementioned factors cause lockdowns for social, health

and judicial services with possible negative “zero removal” effects. In such scenarios, the realm of education appears to have deviated from its primary function, which is to assume a proactive and creative role in swiftly conceiving and constructing mechanisms capable of addressing and, as far as feasible, averting the “collateral damage” that affects all socio-psycho-pedagogical dimensions of individuals and relationships. The disciplinary frameworks of the pedagogical, social, psychological, philosophical, and anthropological sciences have not been engaged in a timely manner to rethink some of the foundational paradigms of the human sciences with their interpretative devices, nor to revise the organisational forms of services. Consequently, a predominant medicalisation approach to the crisis has emerged, entrusting the interpretation and prediction of outcomes to virological, infectious, and epidemiological methodologies alone.

We therefore arrived at preliminary conclusions regarding the impact of social cooperatives in the Apulian region, focusing on three pressing issues:

1. The pervasive disregard of politics (at various levels) for a sector encompassing more than nine million children and adolescents, and for the direct management of state schools alone, there are 800,000 teachers, over 40,000 school sites, and almost 370,000 classrooms. The education system is regarded as a cost rather than an investment in the future.
2. Secondly, the concept of family support measures leading to comprehensive childcare is overstated, while the positive aspects of intense “domestic relations” are overestimated and the necessity for education, learning, and socialisation in educational settings with adults and peers is underestimated. A mandate of “exceptional resilience” was placed on parental responsibilities, and yet, despite everything, the role of grandparents was acknowledged.
3. Overestimation of the effectiveness of distance education in the face of the emergence of the tool's significant limitations with respect to educational and social needs.

Notwithstanding the determiners, it is this author's conviction that an endeavour to mobilise the educational prowess of the scientific community, in conjunction with the voluminous social resources, both formal and informal, inherent within our nation, may yet be instigated in the forthcoming months. Beyond the success of the extraordinary measures of economic support to families in mitigating hardship and discontent on the material level, there is still time to bridge the significant educational gap, to address the challenge of relational goods that also have a strong economic value, and to effectively counter the extensive intangible poverty that has worsened in the last six months. However, this will require a concerted effort on the part of institutions and the social fabric, as well as a significant contribution from the human sciences and professionals engaged in the educational sector. The question arises as to whether teachers, professional educators, social workers, psychologists and entertainers will be able to provide a counterbalance to the significant efforts of doctors, nurses, social and health workers providing intensive and home care to patients with the virus.

This initial stage of conclusions unveils an intriguing pedagogical paradigm, centring on the concept of citizenship in a social context (Balzano, 2020; Marshall, 1964). It explores the potential of citizenship to serve as the pivotal theme in the contemporary evolution of adult education. The citizenship debate, in fact, initiates us to the final step in this reflection: social sustainability, a new welfare system that can cope with today's difficulties. The question that arises is whether it is possible to consider a new sustainable welfare system in the immediate future. It is my belief that a precise answer to this question is elusive, and that it is equally challenging to formulate a definitive affirmative or negative response. Drawing from the extant research in this domain, particularly in the Italian context, and more specifically in Puglia, a region in southern Italy, it is posited that the viability of such a proposal is contingent upon the empowerment of the adult sphere, and more specifically from four essential elements:

1. The individual, the pedagogical focus of the affirmation of a series of rights and conventions.

2. The family, as the primary educational institution.
3. The school as the fundamental educational pole of openness for the citizen of the future.
4. The relationship that forms the basis of human relationships and represents the fundamental challenge for the future of adult education.

An interesting key to interpretation leads us towards the evolution of a well-known model, that of proximity welfare. Proximity welfare can be defined as a system that indicates a set of interventions and measures resulting from an analysis of needs that is developed on a territorial proximity dimension. This system envisages the protagonism of the beneficiaries themselves in the co-definition of services. It is widely acknowledged among experts that proximity welfare played a pivotal role in mitigating the repercussions of the economic and social crisis by employing innovative approaches and making inroads into uncharted domains of intervention (Bode, 2007). For instance, collaboration with the Third Sector and civil society facilitated the timely management of national measures such as "shopping vouchers". The present research is aligned with this approach, examining the role of third sector support for primary educational agencies: the family and school. Other instances of innovation in this regard include activities directed towards the school population during periods of school closures and distance learning. In contexts where public intervention is historically deficient, there has been a substitution of the third sector, which is commendable in the context of emergency situations, but not in terms of a comprehensive understanding of the third sector's role. In the post-pandemic era, there is an opportunity for a shift in perspective, moving away from the notion of the third sector as a low-cost service provider, thus overcoming the current logic of procurement. The development of this concept necessitates the affirmation of the political and advocacy role, the co-planning and co-design confirmed by the third sector code, the strengthening of public welfare in terms of professional and economic resources to overcome territorial differences, and the presence of integrated public-private networks. A new and adequate public-private

capacity building as a function of a new governance arrangement at the various levels of government is also proposed.

As we await the results of the research and reflect on the significant and important data concerning the validity of the practical action of social cooperatives in an Italian territory, it is important to emphasise the potential of similar projects to provide a comprehensive scope within the human educational sector, which is increasingly in trouble. We are confronted with a novel paradigm of institutional collaboration and cooperation between the private and public sectors, representing a paradigm of educational innovation with the potential to chart new courses of action in the face of the educational crisis of the third millennium.

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Emerging from a conference by the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) in Portugal, this book offers an insightful reflection of adult education's evolution in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring themes of access, learning approaches, identity, and digital pedagogy. It critically addresses the shift towards digital learning and its implications on social interaction, pedagogical practices, and the educator–learner dynamic. The narrative spans across diverse contexts, including higher education, community education, vocational learning, and informal learning environments, highlighting the pandemic's exacerbation of social inequalities and the nuanced effects on gender, ethnicity, and age. Through empirical research and reflective analysis, the book interrogates the potential of digital technologies in fostering inclusive and accessible learning experiences, while also considering the challenges of maintaining a sense of community and identity in virtual spaces. It not only assesses the immediate responses to the pandemic but also projects future implications and possibilities for adult education, aiming to inform practice, policy, and research. The book stands as a testament to the enduring significance of adult education in navigating times of crisis and change, advocating for a more equitable and responsive educational landscape.