

# **NEW SEEDS FOR A WORLD TO COME**

**POLICIES, PRACTICES AND LIVES  
IN ADULT EDUCATION AND LEARNING**

**10<sup>TH</sup> ESREA TRIENNIAL CONFERENCE**

edited by Laura Formenti, Andrea Galimberti and Gaia Del Negro



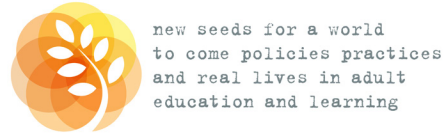
# **NEW SEEDS FOR A WORLD TO COME**

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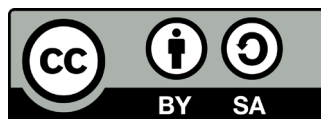
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# **Crisis in Adult Education of the Post-Pandemic Period. A Possible Model of Sustainable Welfare**

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Abstract - The problem that is relevant today both political and social pedagogical is that the current historical moment has undermined the three main variables of the labour system: stable employment, the willingness of women to take care within the family, the potential for expansion of welfare state programs. This paper aims to reflect empirically on the contribution that educational sciences can make to policy in the post-pandemic period, starting from the interesting reflections contained in the UNESCO 2021 report on the responsibility of the adult sphere in the educational process of the young generations, in order to build a new sustainable welfare model.

**KEYWORDS:** Education, welfare, community, adult, sustainability.

## **1. PREMISE**

Education, and especially the educational system for adults, which permeates the different spheres of knowledge and culture, must lead man to realize himself in dialogue with the world and in harmony with it; he must seek to make people aware of their roots and provide specific points of reference that allow them to define their place in the worlds and contexts with respect for human diversity and different abilities. Pedagogically understood values are always part of that filter that makes every interpretation possible, they are conditions and ways of access to the other and to his truth (Merrill, González Monteagudo, Nizinska, Galimberti, Ballesteros-Moscio, 2017)

In general, adult education, to date, represents the most interesting sphere of analysis of changes in professional identities, understood as a training process resulting from school and professional socializations. Here, the professional identity of adult educators began to be constructed during the socialization processes that took place over time. Sometimes, they were the result of socialization processes that occurred during their work as adult educators. In both cases, we are confronted with forms of education that traverse different contexts, from the formal to the non-formal and informal, tracing secondary socialization paths, or processes that are substantiated when a subject manages to integrate the formal social with the informal of groups, all within well-defined professional work contexts (Fraser, 2002).

The reference to the professionalism of the adult educator, here, looks not so much to the school context, which is certainly the most representative; it refers, instead, to the more practical social sphere, to the action of social cooperatives operating in the most complex territories. Their training, in fact, is characterized by well-defined university courses, and by an adequate apprenticeship training that puts them in a position to operate on the territory. Every educator should be able to understand the meaning of his/her action and why he/she is needed, in order to operate according to conscience (Bholinger, Haake, Helms Jørgensen, Toiviainen, Wallo, 2015). Training, however, is also based on profound socialization processes, which inevitably end up characterizing and differentiating skills and competences. One thinks, for example, of age differences, gender differences, and the historical moment in which a given context is passing through, as was the case in the pandemic period that has just passed. These are all elements that will be fundamental in our reflection.

## **2. ADULT LEARNING AND EDUCATION TODAY**

As also highlighted by the 2021 UNESCO Report “Adult learning and education play multiple roles. It helps people find their way through a range of issues and increases skills and agency. It allows people to take more responsibility for their future. It also helps adults understand and criticize 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 an education entangled with life. Adults are responsible for the world in which they live 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).

Looking to the horizon of 2050 and beyond it is possible to anticipate a set of profound changes in adult education. Some forecast that quite soon human lifespans could regularly exceed 100 years. Leaving the radical expansion of human longevity aside, the fact that so many already live longer lives further builds the case for continuing to rethink when education is meant to occur. In some areas four generations will be co-living in the same space-time in a way never seen in history. Cultural notions of adulthood and maturity will be tested. Habitual ways of living, and our relationships to work and leisure will change. Already, it is commonly acknowledged that jobs and the nature of employment can change dramatically over the span of a single individual’s working life. We need to recognize that civic and political life also change over a single lifespan and perhaps increasingly so in the future (Merrill, Vieira, Galimberti, Nizinska, 2020).

The new eco-consciousnesses and the reframed humanism called are examples of new educational concerns which need to be encountered by learners of all ages, regardless of age. As the twenty-first century progresses, educational policies will need to shift their focus to the whole of life and pay special attention to adults and the elderly. A second dimension, which is part of the best tradition of lifelong learning, concerns the idea of the participation and inclusion of vulnerable groups who are so often excluded from educational opportunities (Bode, 2007). Participation and inclusion go together with emancipatory visions of adult education, which includes an appreciation of informal learning – the knowledge and capabilities acquired outside formal schooling settings.

Adult education policy will need to recognize informal learning across the lifespan as part of prioritizing inclusion and participation. Finally, those engaging with adult education need to grapple with the ways that participation is increasingly mediated and enabled through digital means. While younger generations have exposure to the digital world from early ages, older generations will also need these tools to continue developing and building knowledge. Adult education should promote broad access to digital media and should strongly support open access and open-source movement agendas (Merrill, Nizinska, Galimberti, Eneau, Sanojca Samiri Bezzan, 2019). Strengthening scientific literacy and combating all forms of misinformation are central elements of any adult education strategy for the present and the future.

### **3. WHAT EDUCATION IS STILL POSSIBLE TODAY?**

In recent decades, the principle of lifelong learning has become central to the formulation of educational policies around the world. SDG4, for example, calls on us to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (Grotlüschen, Nienkemper, Duncker-Euringer, 2020). There is a strong emancipatory tradition of adult learning and education, which is reflected in the potential it unleashes for individuals and what it means for citizen participation in general. However, in recent years this has been reduced by an over-focus on the professional dimensions and skills of lifelong learning. In essence, what was one of the most important “rights” of adults – especially those who had not had full access to education before in their lives – has become for many an “obligation” as people have become required to keep up to date and employable. The result is a permanent logic of skilling and reskilling.

Adult learning and education must look very different between a generation. As our economies and societies change, adult education will have to extend far beyond lifelong learning for labour market purposes (Boeren, 2019). Opportunities

for career change and retraining must be linked to a broader reform of all education systems that emphasizes the creation of multiple and flexible pathways. Like education in all fields, rather than being reactive or adaptive (whether to change in labour markets, technology, or the environment), adult education needs to be reconceptualized around learning that is truly transformative.

As more and more people live longer and healthier lives, the ways that education is entangled with life will change. Educational needs, priorities and modalities change when there are shifts in the balance between youth and the elderly, in the proportion of people in the working-age population, as well as in the kinds of caregiving and care work (waged and unwaged) that is undertaken, by whom, and when. In fact, these issues shine a bright light on the basic assumptions our societies make on what it means to produce value (Fejes, 2019).

The work carried out by a few social cooperatives goes exactly in this direction, that is, trying to chart new, and in some ways innovative, paths of action with respect to adult education. Entire generations of adults, today, seem to be increasingly harnessed in ways and attitudes that do not belong to them, caught in a vice that looks more to what they must appear than to what they must be. Children, in fact, are thrown into all kinds of activities that can occupy time that otherwise adults would not be able to fill (Ostrouch-Kaminska, Vieira, 2015). This is what some cooperatives do, with afternoon courses and activities of all kinds, to ward off the process of youth dispersion that characterises modern society.

All this framework, which acts as a pathfinder for proposing a new idea of sustainable welfare, sees a greater urgency today, in the aftermath of the covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing post-pandemic period that has defined a true global crisis in the educational spheres. Adult education has been strongly affected by this crisis, which has been repeatedly emphasised by professionals, and has looked to school and out-of-school institutions for a way out (Balzano, 2020). Where the state has evidently failed, unprepared for an unprecedented health and socio-economic crisis, some institutions have tried to put a stop to it. The sciences of education, however, can now provide tools and knowledge that are useful for politics to act concretely: the example of some activities here in Puglia is emblematic. With the University of Bari, in fact, we have started an activity of support and monitoring in the Capitanata area to try to understand which actions and which tools, in the field of educational support and welfare, can be sustainable. There are no definitive results yet, but we can certainly draw an initial reflection on what is happening, waiting to collect more incisive data as soon as school starts again.

#### **4. A NEW SUSTAINABLE WELFARE SYSTEM**

Improvisations and experiments in times of challenge and interruption – from the COVID-19 pandemic to education in times of other emergencies – have demonstrated the determination, commitment, and resourcefulness of adults, in many of the professions most involved. For example, because many school systems realized that personal needs and social well-being had to come first, testing was postponed, coverage requirements for curriculum content were suspended, and classroom interactions focused on authentic learning and well-being. During COVID, work has become more visible publicly, particularly to the masses. The high levels of specialist knowledge and pedagogical commitment required of adults were simultaneously assessed and examined by many.

Cultivating the social dimension of learning, for example, has also implied the sustainability of citizenship education in an increasingly interconnected world to enable individuals to care for each other, embrace other perspectives and experiences, and engage in responsible practices towards the environment and our shared natural resources. Digital media alone cannot achieve these ends. Participatory and engaged learning is needed in different contexts (Carretero Gomez, Vuorikari, Punie, 2017).

Starting from the 80s the “paradigm of standardisation” proper of Fordism has undergone a radical change which has contributed, following Kuhn’s interpretation of paradigmatic dynamics, to a ‘revolutionary transformation of vision’ not only of work but also of a person’s entire life. Starting from the working context, a person’s existence has been shaken and subverted by technological changes so disruptive to mark a discontinuity from the past and so deep to revolutionise the pre-existent paradigms. These changes, because of their disruptiveness and depth, have determined the beginning of a revolution which has the name of Fourth Industrial Revolution -Industry 4.0- and which has been defined through the paradigm of flexibility and innovation connected to the digitalisation of operative activities and to the remote control of production and of the flow of material.

This revolution seems to have left behind several areas of the human development sphere, and the social sciences have highlighted this very well. Welfare reforms, declined according to an idea of the welfare of the person, have clashed with economic difficulties, global crises, which have highlighted their profound limits. Welfare, although declined according to the socio-economic sphere, cannot today disregard the pedagogical datum, which becomes fundamental to support a new idea of welfare based on the person (Balzano, 2017).

Sustainability is always at the centre of the European agenda in the various human fields: from the environment to the economy, politics is invested with a responsibility that is often greater than the people who should implement it. Welfare is the tool with the highest sustainability, the one that could pull the strings of a new educational idea, starting with adult education: the individual citizen's sense of responsibility is built over the long term, towards that process of social citizenship to which each person should strive (Elfert, 2019 - Evans, Kurantowicz, Villegas, 2015).

In the current globalised world, distances seem to have been shortened by new technologies, welfare differences between states are such as to make the Western model of life appear as the only attractive one (Ferrera, Hemerijck, 2003). Recent trajectories do not necessarily imply the disappearance of the old, but rather overlap with them, giving rise to new and complicated intertwining models. In addition, the old and new factors of attraction and expulsion interact with each other. In this context, on the one hand it seems that a sovereignty current is prevailing considering political choices and personal behaviours, thus opposing the transfer of powers and competences from the national state to an international entity. On the other, as regards the migratory phenomenon, personalism and the desire to value others become the appropriate settings for recognising the intrinsic characteristics of man, humanity, and competences (Kettunen, Petersen, 2011).

It is therefore necessary to start again from a community work, understood as a proposal for a new model of community welfare and social intervention, has recently become a topic of great interest in the social and educational fields. In this perspective, community development is an approach that promotes the construction of social bonds within a given territorial context, in order to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of the community and the people who live in it.

In this perspective, it is the context that should become capacitating so that it can express - and contribute to forming - the subjects’ internal capabilities. Since these coordinates, it is easier to understand why in community work great attention is paid to the social contexts in which to activate non-formal or informal educational processes (Sechrist, 2019). In other words, the aim is to cultivate contexts capable of fostering emancipation through the enhancement of relational resources. In this framework, emancipation and capacitation are the two key concepts of community welfare aimed at promoting social justice and democratic participation. The capacitation process in fact is a fundamental precondition of the capacity to aspire those fuels deep democracy.

In this perspective we find the sustainability of a new, different welfare that opens to the more practical social sphere, in the contexts of communities that daily face the onset of relational and training difficulties, the decline of the figure of the adult and the inability to react to the educational difficulties of our time.

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