

***Adult Education: An Overview
and Four Proposals for its
Improvement***

Sylvie SCHMELKES

AN OVERVIEW

- Learning is life-long and life-wide
 - Learning is a consequence of living
 - It is also the consequence of educational activities that are intentional and have clear objectives
 - In the case of adults, we refer to Adult Education (AE)
 - We want a society where adults have life-wide educational opportunities for lifelong learning
-
- Education is a basic human right of the human person, regardless of age
 - Human rights are guaranteed by States
 - States must guarantee the right of adult education

We want a society where States are committed to ensuring the right to lifelong education

- In spite of this AE is marginal in most countries
 - Illiteracy is still a problem that affect 780.000 adults around the world
 - There is scarcity of supply of adult education services which explains low coverage
 - Financing for adult education rarely exceeds 1% of educational budgets, particularly in developing countries
-
- Lack of demand for AE services is also a problem which explains low coverage
 - Attrition rates are high in adult education programs
 - In order to social demand for AE to exist, MOTIVATION is key
 - The first task for AE is to create a social demand for AE

The creation of a social demand for AE involves:

- Awareness of AE as a basic human right
- Engaging adults in the definition and design of AE programs
- Making evident the relationship between AE and the quality of life

However, since the relationship between AE and the quality of life is not immediately visible to adults in many cases, AE must be able to meet other needs throughout the educational competence:

- Feeling respected and valued, individually and collectively
- Experiencing that their knowledge, skills and values are appreciated by the adult educator and the fellow students
- Engaging in dialogue to read the world (Freire)
- Experiencing learning from others and contributing to others' learning
- An intercultural approach vs deficit approach

FOUR PROPOSALS

For improving the observance of AE as a basic human right:

1. A broad view of literacy
2. Literacy as a dependent variable of development
3. An intercultural approach to AE
4. RELEVANCE: The relationship between AE and the quality of life

I. A broad view of literacy

- Goal 4 of Education For All (achieving 50% improvement in the levels of adult literacy) has not been met – 774.000 illiterates in the world
- CONFINTEA reminds us that literacy is not a dichotomy, but a continuum
- A broad view of literacy is needed, which includes numeracy, computer literacy, second language learning for immigrants and language minority groups.
Learning to read the world
- Literacy is a life-long learning activity

- Literacy must be situated contextually and culturally. It must respond to written communication practices that are being carried out and can be developed. Written communication practices must be created and perceived as necessary – a first step in many cases towards adult literacy activities
- Literacy is best achieved when it is carried out in the native language.
The skills involved can be transferred to a second language

- Most of the world's illiterates live in non-literate environments
- This is why literacy itself does not necessarily represent the Initiation of AE activities

- It is often a requirement to begin with activities that will help make the environment literate and that will create the need for written communication practices

- What we have conceived as post-literacy may in fact need to precede literacy
- It is a post-literacy activities (livelihood) that may help make literacy meaningful to adults
- Pre-literacy AE programs are a condition for the success of literacy activities in non-literate environments

II. Literacy as a dependent variable of development

- Literacy has been conceived as a cause of development, illiteracy as one of the reasons for underdevelopment and poverty
- However, literacy is in fact a dependent variable of development
- What we need to improve literacy rates is to foster social and economic development
- When development is in process, literacy becomes necessary and literacy activities become possible

4th World Forum « LIFELONG LEARNING FOR ALL »
CMA – UNESCO, PARIS, February 5-6, 2015

- The meager results of literacy campaigns around the world have led to disenchantment with this approach because of the relapse into illiteracy due to the impossibilities of putting the newly-acquired literacy skills into practice

On the contrary

- When urbanization practices are in place
- When employment is expanding
- When agricultural techniques are being transformed
- When social organizations are being successful in their negotiations for improved living conditions and services
- When citizen participation finds adequate channels for expression and transformation

Then literacy becomes useful, important and potentially à life-long process.

- Literacy rates can only be improved if poverty diminishes, inequality is reduced and development takes place
- In non-literate environments, literacy should take place where other transformation are happening
- If literacy is the goal, then the struggle against poverty and the promotion of social and economic development must be part of the strategy

III. An intercultural approach to AE

- The world societies, communities, are diverse.
Diversity not only characterizes our world, but is also the fundamental component of cultural growth and enrichment
- We want a society where diversity is a source of learning, where different others are appreciated, and where it is possible to live together in peace
- Goal 3 of Education For All is about ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programs. Goal 4 speaks about achieving equitable access to basic and continuing education for adults. Both refer to making the right to education effective.

- This is to take place in a diverse world, with multiple cultures and contexts
- The target is complex and there are no simple solutions
- One-size fits all programs do not work. Massive homogeneous programs cannot be effective
- AE must combat homogenizing an uniform programs and, on the contrary, foster diversity.

- In order to meet the diversity, AE programs have to be decentralized and diversified, and planned or at least adapted at the bottom and not a the top
- They have to take into account contextual and cultural realities and respond to the needs of specific groups of students
- Cultural and contextual conditions should constitute the starting point for designing educational activities.

**4th World Forum « LIFELONG LEARNING FOR ALL »
CMA – UNESCO, PARIS, February 5-6, 2015**

- **Diversity is also present within each group of students, particularly in multicultural environments**
- **AE activities should offer the opportunity of learning from others and offering what one knows, knows how to do, and values, to others**
- **The intercultural approach implies an authentic appreciation of cultural differences**
- **Both programs and educators have to be convinced that different cultures and their representatives not only deserve respect, but also have the potential of making cultural learning possible for others**
- **The intercultural approach makes of diversity a pedagogical advantage.**

Among the implications of taking an intercultural approach to AE are the following:

- Relating educational activities to previous knowledge, skills and values for students
- Relating educational activities to the specific context, not to limit students to it, but to start out from and return to – demonstrate that what is learned allows for a better understanding of the specific context and enhances the capacity of transforming it for personal and common wellbeing
- Taking the language and culture of the students seriously into account. Using the mother tongue and making culture a part of educational content and a reference point for new subject matter
- Promoting cultural dialogue and mutual learning activities.

(A parenthesis on the use of Information and Communication Technology)

- ICTs are powerful instruments for strengthening learning and for diversifying delivery
- ICTs are also very potent instruments for operating learning communities among both students and educators
- But they should not be used to uniform programs. They have to be considered as instruments to enhance diversity
- Face-to-face contact with the adult educator and with other AE students is an integral part of AE and should never be completely eliminated, though it can be substantially reduced.

IV. RELEVANCE: The relationship between AE and the quality of life

- The relevance of AE programs is needed to attract students, to get them to remain in programs, and to achieve impact
- Relevance is a way towards overcoming the marginal nature of AE
- Relevance is defined as the perceived and actual usefulness of program for personal and social transformation
- The first question in planning AE should regard which aspect of reality needs to be transformed.
Only the second question deals with how education can contribute to that transformation.

- AE has to be related to the quality of live, individually and collectively
- Quality of live is culturally relative.
It also depends of context, role in society, stage in the life cycle
- But there are certain universals that have to do with the satisfaction of basic needs and with the quality of satisfaction.

**4th World Forum « LIFELONG LEARNING FOR ALL »
CMA – UNESCO, PARIS, February 5-6, 2015**

Basic needs refer to:

- Survival needs; health, nourishment, access to drinking water, clothing, housing, electricity
- Basic social services, including education for children and youth
- Basic human rights. Personal security; life without violence; life without discrimination; freedom of thought, of expression, of transit; participation in the cultural, political and scientific life of the community; earning wages or producing income sufficient for living in dignity; living in a healthy environment
- Social basic needs – the transformation of environmental, economic, political, social and cultural conditions for the daily life of the community and for its future based on shared visions and aspirations.

Relevant AE must also go beyond basic needs.

- Appreciation and creation of art and beauty
- Strengthening of the sense of belonging, including the appreciation of one's own culture and language
- The capacity of discovering and being awed by knowledge not necessarily related to immediate experience but that allows for a better understanding of ourselves, our past, our possible future, and the natural and social world we live in
- The satisfying use of spare time
- The expansion of human capabilities, freedom of choice, agency

These purposes and others are indispensable elements of the quality of life, the object of impact of AE.

FINAL WORDS

- Four proposals for improving quality of AE
- Equity is a cross-cutting concern of AE and it is related to quality. Special efforts are needed to reach the poorest with quality programs. Equity must be understood not as sameness, but as giving to each what each one needs in order to achieve expected results.

Quality is measured through outcomes, but the quality of outcomes depends on the quality of:

- Inputs
 - educational agents, curriculum and educational materials, learning conditions in general
- Processes
 - Relationships between the educational agent and the students, between the students and with the natural and social world around them
 - Pedagogy and the way pedagogical knowledge and know how is brought to bear on AE. Participatory methodologies are quality processes.
- Education is not the only requirement for transforming reality or improving the quality of live
- Thus, public policies have to be more inter-sectoral, and AE programs should become an integral part of programs in other agencies and institutions whose role is precisely to transform and improve reality and quality of live.