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Participatory democracy and marginalised groups

ABSTRACT:

A Romaní illiterate grandmother, a woman who works in domestic cleaning, and other non academic women participated in a Conference on Women and Social Transformation together with Judith Butler, the most cited feminist author internationally, and other feminist academics. In a lecture addressed by Jürgen Habermas at the University of Barcelona a participant from a learning centre who attended the event raised a question. The smiles of contempt of that academic audience froze when the German author said “this is a brilliant and intelligent question”. According to contemporary social sciences, dialogue takes place when all participants, regardless of their academic or cultural background, are listened and count. Participatory democracy is grounded in this kind of dialogue. The Romaní grandmother and the adult learner participate in an association and a learning centre in which people like them are the protagonists and their voices are not represented by others. In Spain, the participants (learners) in adult education have organized themselves in a movement for Democratic Adult Education (DAE) that includes participants associations, educators and researchers. The DAE movement is lead by CONFAPEA, the Confederation of Participants Associations, and works to meet the needs of all citizens. Research on participation in adult education had shown that the lifelong learning provision is often mostly addressed to people who already participate; therefore, some people are permanently left at the margins. In current society education, and the possibility to learn throughout life, is key to avoid social exclusion. However there are old and new social groups that suffer this exclusion in Europe, such as the Romà and recent immigrants. The DAE movement have in turn promoted learning initiatives such as the dialogic literary gatherings, in which people who had never read a book start by reading and enjoying Kafka, Joyce and Cervantes, overcoming cultural and educational barriers through dialogic learning. We need to work from the theories and practices that demonstrate that are able to reach all people, especially those who are still in the margins and do not participate.

It is thus an honour for us to participate in the Celebration of the 10th Anniversary of the Slovenian Lifelong Learning Week, providing our shared work for learners' recognition, effective education for all, and overcoming inequalities from a strong social commitment.