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Participatory democracy and marginalised groups

Introduction

Adult education and lifelong learning is today changing in Europe in terms of conceptualization, orientation and actual practice. The traditional school model, based on the teacher and the contents to be taught, had been questioned already in the eighties and nineties, but now is actually disappearing from the practices and the educational priorities, giving way to a social model, further dialogic and participatory. The voices of the participants in adult education are increasingly key to the current production of theories, practices and policies; those who used to be invisible or silenced are now recognized.

In 2001, the Conference “Women and Social Transformation” took place at the University of Barcelona. Feminist authors such as Judith Butler, the most cited in the field of gender studies, and other feminist academics shared the lectures, panels and round tables with non academic women like a Romaní illiterate grandmother, a woman who works in domestic cleaning, and a woman who works in textile manufacturing. They shared thoughts in open dialogue and discussed the women’s struggle in the 21st century. After the conference, Butler commented that, *it seemed to me that they also spoke to one another, and they addressed one another. They didn’t just speak about one another: this seems to me very, very important – so that, sometimes the academics were in the audience, listening to the non-academic women, and sometimes the non-academic women were in the audience, but they were also being spoken to* (Beck-Gernsheim, Butler, Puigvert, 2003, p.137). Judith Butler discussed with Emilia, a Gypsy illiterate grandmother, about her struggle as a woman in this society. *I believe this is a remarkable experience of empowerment; she cannot read but she has a lot to say and to do* (p.141), and continues stating, *throughout this conference we have been witnessing moments of transformation, which is not to deny serious disenfranchisement, it is instead to do something, to do something about it* (p.141). This is an example of how people who are socially and culturally silenced overcome barriers of exclusion in dialogic spaces of participation.

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. Women like Emilia did not need a few professional women to represent her voice. Emilia is illiterate but participate in a Romani Association of Women who discuss promote actions to overcome social and educational exclusion of Romani women. They know their situation and can dialogue with feminist scholars and contribute to both the definition of concrete actions for women and the creation of feminist theory. Together they have created the dialogic feminism, the feminism of all women (De Botton, Puigvert, Sánchez, 2005).

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 in Education of Adults, 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.

In this paper, I will analyze in which ways the DAE movement have led a shift within this tendency and how it opens up new opportunities for major participation of those groups who have remained on the margins of society. First, I will introduce recent developments in social and educational theories which are focused on identifying the major role played by dialogue in our societies. However, in this context, inequalities have not been eradicated yet, and there are still many social groups that remain on the margins of society because of their cultural background or their academic level. Second, I will exemplify the DAE experience through learning initiatives in adult education promoted by grassroots organizations with the goal to provide factual experiences with real solutions through effective education for all and overcoming inequalities from a strong social commitment. These initiatives have in common that they contribute to overcome cultural and educational barriers through dialogic learning. By means of transforming today's educational practices as educators and participants we will be able as a community to change social relations, the participation of those frequently marginalized groups in society and the lives of those that have been living, now live in our

communities and those yet to come. I thus argue that the struggle against social exclusion that many groups suffer may have a way out through the promotion of participatory democracy and collaborative educational practices. Finally, connecting theories, democratization processes and the DAE experience, this paper concludes that we need to work from dialogic theories and practices that have been shown to be able to reach all people, especially those who are still in the margins and do not participate. This paper is grounded in findings and reflections from research projects and experiences carried out with different traditionally marginalized groups such as the Romà, adult basic education learners, migrants and refugees, both in Spain and in Europe.

Dialogic societies, not without inequalities

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, immigrants and refugees or people with low levels of schooling, who are more likely to be unemployed, poor, and/or discriminated against. In order to find avenues for the overcoming of this situation we need to understand both, the changes in society and the mechanisms of inclusion.

Dialogue is today a significant element of society. *Dialogic actions are taking place in all social spheres tearing many of the traditional walls down. Societies are becoming dialogic and require the social sciences, which are sustained by their resources, to contribute to this dynamic that they want and are in the process of undertaking* (Flecha, Gómez & Puigvert, 2003, p.132). In the course of this dialogic turn of society more and more individuals, groups and organizations seek new and more direct ways of participation. Those changes affected many social spheres meaning the opening and increase of possibilities for all the population. *Dialogic modernity enables the equality of differences to come to fruition, allowing different people to live together in the same territory enjoying equal rights that will reinforce, rather than weaken, their respective identities* (p.131). The present social theories emphasize the importance that has for democracy and living together the creation of dialogic conditions as well as deliberation of all the actors on the aspects that affect them and build the society. Beck (1999) argues about the need to organize society from below, and how this is already taking place through the social movements; Touraine (2000) analyses possibilities for leaving together while immersed within a process of

globalization; Elster (1998) sets out the conditions for deliberative democracy; Butler (2003) defends reaching the margins and orient current feminism to the inclusion of all women's voices.

Dialogue is in fact increasingly present in our social relations, from the intimacy of our homes to the high political spheres. The former hierarchies in the family, in which the father or the elder used to decide, have been substituted by negotiations and consensus within the couple or the family members. The same is true for the school, the media, or the government. We often find school councils or boards in which the diverse members of the community are represented and have somehow a say in decision-making. Learners and their families often ask teachers and staff for explanations about procedures and methodologies. In the information society, while there is a clear dialogic tendency, there is also a polarization of social inequality, and educational failure in one of the main indicators of exclusion. Adult education needs to use the increased dialogue possibilities to bridge the gap of social, cultural and economic inequality.

The creation of spaces for dialogic interaction create opportunities for marginalized groups to overcome social, cultural and educational barriers that exclude them from fully participating in the labour market, further education and other social spheres. Participation, in adult education, means the engagement of the adult participant (learner) in the process of taking decisions, assessing and defining goals in the organization where democratic adult education takes place. International organizations such as UNESCO reminds us that everywhere in the world, adult education and specially literacy should be a gateway to fuller participation in social, cultural, political and economic life.

Freire and Horton (1990) pose several questions on behalf of the right of people to take history into their hands. He declares that processes of social transformation imply change in the way of producing economically but also, *greater participation of the masses of the people in the process of power* (p.97). hooks (2003) states that democratic educators have to work to find ways to teach and share knowledge in a manner that does not reinforce existing structures of domination such those of race, gender, class, religion, culture or sexual orientation.

When educators have a lack of confidence regarding the success of the majority of the actions towards vulnerable groups (ethnic minorities, women, people in risk of social exclusion, etc) the results tend to be reproductions of the prior inequality situation, therefore all the actions fail. In adult education, the scholastic model creates a vicious circle that harms the vulnerable groups

quite the opposite to be educational actions, which end up being compensatory and reproductive training. Educators believe that the learners have very little interest in participating in those programs and there is no egalitarian dialogue between educator and learner. The amount of bureaucracy promotes learners to adapt their needs to the system instead of the system adapting to their demands and needs.

Opposite, the social model of adult education emerge from the grass roots and people's demands and promote participatory democracy in the learning centres. In this case, the main aim is not compensate but to reach maximum learning. Adult learning centres with a dialogic orientation are achieving greater success and increasing learners' participation, not only in the school but also in their local communities. Dialogic learning (Flecha, 2000), grounded in principles such as egalitarian dialogue, transformation, instrumental dimension and solidarity, responds to the interests, needs and competencies of the participants involved in the learning process – rather than the interests of educators and other professionals. Learning is de-bureaucratized because all people take part in the creation of knowledge. Learners can participate in decision-making, attend at any time during the day and during holidays. Knowledge is built among all on the basis of egalitarian dialogue and shared experience.

DAE movement

Spanish adult education is going today through a process of democratization, following the same tendency of society. Participants are organizing themselves and demanding to share with teachers and administrators the decision making about their education. Therefore new channels and projects that foster the radicalization of democracy are emerging. As a result of many years of work within the field of adult education toward the democratization of education and culture DAE movement appears to represent the interest of those people whose lack of academic studies among other barriers has excluded them from many positions in society. In particular, adult education needs to recognize the need to recover its radical democratic basis by promoting experiences that overcome social exclusion by gender, ethnicity, culture, class or academic level amongst others.

Democratic adult education has radicalized adult education not only in the organization and management of the learning centres but also in the teaching and learning process. Democratic Adult Education carries out the above described social model of adult education. Again, it

consists of including the learners' voice in the decision making places, in the management and the assessment processes. More and more, public decisions are carried out by means of deliberative processes where citizens affected by the decisions take part on them even if they are not experts on the subject (Habermas, 1984). In order to legitimize the decisions depends on the inclusion of all the voices in the dialogic process. The future of adult education is being dreamed and reinvented by the organizations and learners.

The DAE movement in Spain is a network of adult and cultural education associations, educators, researchers and university professors who defend a social model of adult education. CONFAPEA (Confederation of Participants Associations) is one of the main pieces of DAE. CONFAPEA is an umbrella organization at the Spanish national level composed by associations of adult learners who struggle for a more democratic adult education, one in which participants can have a say in the schools they attend and in the educational programs targeted to them. The experiences gathered in the different associations that compose CONFAPEA have demonstrated that the participation in dialogic spaces leads people to change their social and educational horizons and to increase their participation in their learning centre, in the community, etc.

An example of participatory democratic initiative promoted through CONFAPEA is the Annual Literacy Learners Conference. These conferences are a dialogic space for critical reflection that helps adult learners break free from social stereotypes and fosters their later involvement in public dialogues. Participants in adult basic education speak up about their own interests, needs, and rights and promote solidarity with other human beings who have been also silenced. The Literacy Learners Conference, in contrast to the traditional conferences, involves and empowers the learners by organizing, leading, attending and actively participating in the event. This kind of conference not only promotes the transformation of traditional educational practices in which the educators teach the learners but also that both learn in cooperation. Educators, practitioners and representatives of the public administration attend the conference to learn from the learners' contributions. They take part in the process by giving support to the learners and not replacing their voices. There are several committees set up for the event that arrange the contents, location of the conference, reception, registration, protocol, group discussion, and media. Throughout the consensus process the learners define the agenda of the conference with presentations, discussion groups and experiences. This experience was spread to a European level through the Socrates project *Trobada*, which means *Encounter* (FACEPA, 2002), holding

five conferences in the same year in the following European countries: Germany, Spain, France, Hungary, and Italy. A participant expressed: *Because we haven't had access to education, we have been widely excluded from those places where our voice can be listened to in order to decide what and how we want to learn.*

Another initiative promoted by the DAE movement is the Dialogic Literary Gatherings, which are reading circles that focus on classic literature and target adult learners who do not have academic background. Through this experience, adults who never read a book come to read, discuss, and enjoy books by authors such as Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Émile Zola, and Federico García Lorca. A participant in one of these gatherings expressed: *When a person expresses himself and explains the feelings that a book has brought him to say, think, and feel, this really moves me. In the literary circle I learn much more than in the books themselves . . . I learn from the people, and I know I have also contributed, like everybody else.* Usually, low literate, working class people have been excluded from the great written works, although many of these works actually talk about the lives of common people. In the Dialogic Literary Gatherings, adults with limited reading skills demonstrate that they do not have limited knowledge or intellectual capacity for learning, reflection and discussion. They show high motivation to accessing domains often considered to be “for the educated” or “for the elite”. As a consequence, many start voicing their opinions and turn more active in their communities and in the very Adult Education movement, which is created and promoted by themselves. The dialogic learning in the literary gatherings thus promotes both literacy skills and social transformation.

The participants in CONFAPEA also promoted the creation of the Multicultural Group (through the Catalan federation of participants). This group was created with the aim of including the voices of the people from different cultural groups (i.e. immigrant groups and Romà) into the public debate of intercultural education, as well as establishing a space where people from different cultures could share their demands and worries about adult education and their situation in the host countries. This initiative was also supported through a collaborative European project entitled *Who Speaks; The voices of immigrants on adult education* (FACEPA, 2001-2003) funded by the European Commission. They started from the need to document the educative processes of new immigrants and refugees adults that participate in democratic processes of adult education. The great challenge and need was how to include immigrant people in the organization of adult education, attending their needs and real demands. The only way was by setting a dialogic space in which their voices count.

Conclusions

Participatory democracy cannot be imposed as a set of principles coming from above. It must start within the will of people's dreams and desires. New social movements and the people that compose them are not just refashioning private spheres and private identities, but are contributing to the transformation of public's spheres, democracy and, citizenship. Democratic adult education implies democratizing the management spaces, the curriculum, the organization itself and promoting a wide participation of participants (learners), who in fact are the end-users of educational programs.

DAE empowers adult education learners' voices not by means of using their voice, but rather by means of letting participants speak and participate. It means to provide the space and the attention to what they have to say about their education. In the current information society, social movements have a main role in promoting active citizenship and the definition of new forms of governance: from our schools to our local agencies, citizens' participation can develop egalitarian social policies grounded in democratic experiences.

Finally, it is everybody's responsibility to contribute to gradually less silenced people and focus more on the ones that can make decisions about their lives and their education. In particular, adult education needs to recognize the need to recover its radical democratic basis by promoting experiences that overcome social exclusion by gender, race, culture and class. At its best, a critical adult education offers to learners and educators by working together, in equality, the path to make a better society where nobody is left apart. By means of embracing democracy, social justice and citizenship I can say that "another adult education is possible". This adult education would be the result of joined efforts from around the globe.

One thing I like the most is that everyone respects each other's opinion, and when somebody talks there is no contradictory gesture, not a laughing face, or showing distaste.

(Participant of the Dialogic Literary Circle)

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