

*Reviews and comments***RE-IMAGINING THE BENEFITS OF ADULT EDUCATION**

(Pepka Boyadjieva, Petya Ilieva-Trichkova, *Adult Education as Empowerment. Re-imagining Lifelong Learning through the Capability Approach, Recognition Theory and Common Goods Perspective*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2021)

The book *Adult Education as Empowerment...* makes a prominent contribution to the world known publishing house Palgrave Macmillan and its Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning by re-thinking the impact of adult education on individuals and societies. It enriches the discussion of the policies and practices of lifelong learning in Europe, building upon a rich theoretical background and an advanced mixed-methods empirical inquiry. The two authors, both researchers in the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, deploy an enhanced 'sociological imagination' to capture the relationships between social structure and individual agency in the study of adult education and lifelong learning more generally. The main focus of the book is placed on the empowering role of studying and learning beyond the compulsory age at the individual and societal levels.

The text is impressive with the width and depth of the theoretical perspectives it mobilises in order to conceptualise adult education and the benefits it brings for people and their communities in late modern societies. The authors start the analysis drawing from the capability approach to human development and then enrich their theoretical framework with the concepts of empowerment, recognition, social justice, social trust and public good. The result is a holistic picture of the 'lifelong learning hybrid' (the title of Chapter Two). The profound theoretical analysis in the second chapter offers an ambitious and powerful reappraisal of the contested concept of lifelong learning and its development amid the heterogeneous processes of social change in late modern societies. Each consecutive chapter brings in a new approach or theory which are not enacted as a competition but rather as sensitising concepts to illuminate different aspects of the agency–structure interplay in the

field of education. This is in line with the 'And' logic that the authors, following Beck and Kandinsky, argue to dominate in the conditions of global openness in present day risk societies that replace the 'Either-or logic' of early modernity.

The book in Chapter Three presents the proliferation of capability literature starting with the writings of its pioneers Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum and then reviews the progress made by numerous followers. The two authors pay due attention to the critiques of the capability approach and underline its heuristic potential, especially when applied to the study of education. The greatest advantage of the approach is that it offers a fuller and more sensitive understanding of the role of adult education than that of the human capital theory, highlighting the intrinsic effects that go beyond the instrumental function of rising individual employability. This analytical model – introducing a concept, tracking its development in time, presenting academic criticisms and then providing authors' responses, as well as possible avenues for future research and policy implications – is followed in all chapters demonstrating admirable analytical rigorosity.

Two concepts in particular deepen the analysis of the traditional sociological dilemma of agency and structure: empowerment and embeddedness and provide innovative insights to the exploration of the role of adult education. The first one 'empowerment' was first raised by radical social movements, notably women's movements in the 1970s in a challenge to the existing power structures. The authors emphasize its link with the 'agency' side of the dilemma, understanding it as processes of converting available resources into new capabilities thus widening the scope of individual choices. Valuable contribution to the

academic debate is the definition of “empowerment in and through (adult) education from a capability approach perspective, as an expansion of both agency (process freedom) and capabilities (opportunity freedom) which results in expanded/improved agency achievements and capabilities enabling people to gain control over their environment and improve their well-being” (p. 92). The understanding of empowerment as expanded agency serves as a basis for designing a theoretical model through which different patterns are derived from interview data from young learners in adult education. The authors delineate numerous patterns and sub-patterns which fall into two broad groupings of ‘realised’ and ‘unrealised’ empowerment. The analysis of the qualitative data does not keep the high level of the theoretical scrutiny of the book as the proposed patterns often overlap creating a fuzzy picture of the forms of empowerment of young people. Also, the descriptions of cases lack a discussion of their link with the resources and conversion factors available at the macro and meso levels of the social context which are clearly present in the model. This absence is counter balanced in the next chapter focusing on the social embeddedness.

The book successfully applies the embeddedness approach to explain the empowerment role of adult education. It differentiates the notion of mere ‘participation in education’ from the richer notion of the ‘capability to participate’ understanding it as the freedom to get involved in educational activities that the individual has reason to value. Bridging various factors of participation in adult education at different levels, the authors offer an integrative multilevel model of the capability to participate and employ it in the empirical analysis of the Adult Education survey (2016) of 29 countries. Despite the limitations of the data set, acknowledged by the authors, a sophisticated statistical analysis reveals significant cross-level interaction effects between individual and macro-level characteristics attesting to the idea that the capability to participate in adult education is embedded in the socio-economic, institutional, and cultural contexts in which one’s life unfolds. For example, women who live in countries with less selective education systems and higher levels of innovation and social trust tend to have higher capability to participate in non-formal and (to a lesser extent) formal education.

Most interesting results come from the application of the notion of recognition to the role of adult education. The analysis takes into account both strands of the theory: the one pursued by Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth that relates recognition to self-realisation and identity construction and the one suggested by Nancy Fraser who perceives recognition as a matter of justice. Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova argue that recognition is a vital human need and inequalities in recognition are as important for human development as inequalities in income and wealth. The authors underline the role of adult education in reducing inequalities in recognition and supply convincing empirical evidence for such effects from several quantitative surveys and a qualitative study. The analysis in Chapter Six concentrates on measuring the ways participation in adult non-formal education is influenced by the individual’s belief that learning has a positive individual effect increasing one’s self-confidence. The finding that the effect of adult education on developing a full subjectivity is greater among those with low educational level than among those with university education has significant implications for demonstrating the value of designing more inclusive education and employment programmes. The authors recognise the need for more elaborate survey instruments in future inquiries. We should also highlight the potential of more in-depth qualitative studies of informal learning that takes place throughout one’s biography for the enrichment of our understanding of recognition inequalities.

Another major contribution of the book comes from the introduction of the political economic perspective. Through this lens and building on the already discussed concepts of the capability approach and recognition theory, the authors create a theoretical model of the role of adult and higher education differentiating between the instrumental, intrinsic and transformative/empowerment impact on individuals and society as a whole. The available empirical data do not allow the full implementation of the model in statistical analysis, so it should be treated as a normative notion about the holistic value of education. Still, working with the 2016 Adult Education Survey, Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova manage to reveal the complex character of adults’ motivation to participate in

non-formal education which includes aspirations for personal/non-job related aspirations besides the goal of improving one's employability. The argument that education represents an important private good is further complemented with the assertion that adult education contributes to social equity as a major public good.

Social justice is another complex and challenging concept which the authors apply to the domain of adult education. In their theoretical considerations they focus on inclusion and fairness and contemplate three main questions: social justice for whom, social justice where, and social justice to what. When these aspects are subjected to empirical analysis, the authors develop composite indexes of inclusion and fairness of educational participation. The results demonstrate the variety of country levels of inclusiveness and fairness of non-formal education. What is more, they notice that the most inclusive countries are not always the fairest, and vice versa (p. 226). Non-formal education has been found in more countries to be more inclusive for the employed than for the unemployed adults while the trend concerning fairness in unemployed adults' representation has been discovered to be towards an increase in all countries.

The impact of adult education on the societal level can be measured through the perspective of social trust – a key ingredient of social cohesion. The two authors are among the first to empirically study the association between adult non-formal education and social trust. They explore the extent to which education influences trust in different social contexts and then look at how this influence is reduced by educational inequalities. Thus the poorly educated people display a lower degree of trust, both in terms of impersonal and institutional trust, than the better educated. The conclusion from the statistical analysis is that participation in work-related training is positively associated with social trust. Furthermore, the text contributes to the conceptualisation of adult education as a common good – a beloved research field of Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova. The final chapter of the book brings the theoretical discussion to an upmost level relating the notion of the common good to many of the concepts that emerged in the previous chapters, knitting them together in a delicate cobweb. The authors, however, do not remain on the general level of explaining adult education as an indispensable value for social

development but proceed to examine its manifestations in different socio-economic, political and cultural contexts, offering a refined Index of Adult Education as Common Good. The multi-level analysis finds out that democratic countries, countries with low levels of economic inequalities and those with high levels of social trust provide more favourable opportunities for the realisation of adult education as a common good. Their more general conclusion has significant policy implications – achieving this mission depends heavily on the social commitment of the state and each of the public, private and non-profit suppliers to provide accessible and affordable educational opportunities to adults on an equal basis (p. 284).

The achievements of the book in explaining the role of adult education for individuals and society are due to a great extent to the successful implementation of mixed-methods research which is gaining popularity in social sciences. The analysis is based on quantitative data of six large-scale international surveys and one national study (the Bulgarian Universities Ranking System) as well as qualitative data gathered in a comparative cross-country Horizon 2020 project, titled Encouraging Lifelong Learning for an Inclusive and Vibrant Europe. The authors demonstrate advanced skills for data processing and analysis and high ability to present the results in a way that is comprehensible to the general public. The book clearly defines the advantages and limitations of the applied methodological approach, as the authors scrupulously discuss both the choice of methodology and the reliability of the conclusions and the possible future research courses in the field. Working with such a volume of empirical material, which covers a large number of studied countries, and applying comparative analysis allow the explication of both common and country specific aspects of the social impact of adult education.

The book *Adult Education as Empowerment...* makes an original contribution to the field of comparative education studies and wider academic scholarship. It is a stimulating read for both graduate students and experienced researchers, as well as for practitioners like policy-makers, non-profit education providers and street-level professionals helping them reflect on their daily work.

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