

LIFELONG LEARNING AND PRESCHOOL EDUCATION: ODD COUPLE OR ECLECTIC RELATIONSHIP?

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Abstract

Lifelong learning seems to be the key concept for educational policy in almost all developed and developing countries. National and international organisations put emphasis on lifelong learning, while at the same time the concept is equated with continuing vocational training in the majority of policy making texts. In this paper, we investigate the continuously evolving concept of lifelong learning and the relationship between lifelong learning and preschool education. In the first section of the paper we will define lifelong learning as a unifying project for all educational and learning activities. Based on Coombs and Ahmed's typology for educational activities, our analysis will lead to a definition of lifelong learning encompassing all levels and types of education. In the second section of the paper we will explore the location and significance of preschool education in lifelong learning, analyzing all possible ways and frameworks of learning in early childhood (family learning, kindergartens, non-formal educational activities) and their contribution to the making of a lifelong learner.

Key words: *lifelong learning, preschool education, kindergarten, educational continuum.*

Introduction

Although *lifelong learning* seems to be drawing much interest from national and international organisations and bodies, there is some confusion as to its scope and content, as P. K. Cross stated some years ago (Cross, 1981). The most common misconception is that of equating lifelong learning with adult education, which is understandable if we see this new concept as deriving mainly from the great humanistic tradition of adult education. Another misconception is that of equating lifelong learning with an anxious and continuous effort in order to “adapt human resources” to the demands of the labour market.

Given this confusion, lifelong learning and preschool education can truly create an odd couple. In the first section of this paper, we analyse the scope and the content of lifelong learning, trying to conceptualise the term as it is encountered in current scientific discourse. In the second part, we explore the relationship between lifelong learning and preschool education; in other words, we attempt to examine preschool education in the light of lifelong learning and to show that, nowadays, an eclectic relationship has developed between them.

Lifelong Learning: from Elliptic Views to a Unifying Project

The most common and widely used typology among scholars of lifelong learning concerning educational activities and institutions is Coombs' typology or, as it is also known, the Coombs and Ahmed typology. The reason that this typology appears as a reference under two different names is because it was P. H. Coombs who first described this typology (1968), but the detailed definition of its types was given six years later, in collaboration with M. Ahmed. Based on this typology, educational activities are divided into three types (Coombs and Ahmed, 1974, p.8): (a) *formal* education, which is defined as "the institutionalized, chronologically graded and hierarchically structured 'education system,' spanning lower primary school and the upper reaches of the university," (b) *non-formal* education, "any organised, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population, adults as well as children," and, (c) *informal* education, "the lifelong process by which every person acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experience and exposure to the environment – at home, at work, at play; from the example and attitudes of family and friends; from travel, reading newspapers and books; or by listening to the radio and viewing films or television." According to La Belle (1982, p.161-162), Coombs and Ahmed equate education with learning, thus allowing us to talk about education that is likely to occur in various settings, while these three types of education may exist simultaneously – sometimes in concert with one another and sometimes in conflict. The fact is that this typology attributes great significance to educational activities which, until then, had not drawn much attention, while at the same time it makes a clear distinction between the types that do not form part of the official educational system (i.e., non-formal and informal education). Moreover, we should note that through this typology, Coombs and Ahmed attribute a clearly educational – or, at any rate, learning – function to non-educational social institutions (such as family or play). These are the reasons, in our opinion, that this typology is widely used in the field of lifelong learning and adult education.

Despite the fact that sporadic references to the concept and term of lifelong learning were made in the early 20th century (for example see: Yaxlee, 1929), the first widely known reference that established it in the agenda of theorists, researchers and policy makers was UNESCO's "Learning to Be" Report (also known as the Faure Report, after Edgar Faure, who presided over the International Commission on the Development of Education). In the Faure Report (1972, p.182), it is explicitly stated that lifelong education is not a specific educational system, but a principle upon which is based the total reorganisation of the educational system. For the first time, all the educational and learning activities in which citizens, regardless of gender or age, take part are considered as a whole. Expressed by an organisation such as UNESCO, with a tradition in the humanistic dimension of education, against the backdrop of a post-war world, the proposal brought to the foreground for the first time the concept of a learning and educational *continuum* – which was more a vision or aim towards which educational systems had to strive, in order for "education to concern all citizens, throughout their lives." It is, in other words, a much broader idea than the self-evident concept that people are always learning throughout their entire lives; an idea that affects the commonly accepted notions concerning learning and education, as well as the structure of educational systems (of formal or non-formal education).

In later years, the term *lifelong education* was gradually replaced by the term *lifelong learning*, in which the emphasis shifted to the individual and the learning procedures in which he/she becomes involved, without these procedures necessarily being organized by the state or constituting an obligation of the state's. Most international organisations, such as the OECD, the World Bank and, eventually, the European Commission adopted this new term, but more in order to indicate the need for the continuous upgrading of the qualifications of human resources in a competitive globalised economy (see also Schuetze, 2006). The policies that are elaborated by these organisations, at least until the first signs of the current market economy crisis, aim primarily at meeting the economy's short-term needs, which, however, do not necessarily coincide with citizens' needs for learning and education. At the same time, precisely because the needs of the market are short-term, related policies concern mainly citizens who are economically active, i.e., the employed or

the unemployed who are being trained in order to become part of the labour market. Thus, the term lifelong learning and/or lifelong education introduced by UNESCO is used in an elliptic way in two senses: first, it does not concern all citizens, but mainly the economically active, and secondly it does not address all ages but only those that correspond to a person's working life. In other words, we could say that the unifying project introduced by the Faure Commission, through the integration of the three types of the Coombs and Ahmed typology and due essentially to the educational policies implemented over the past twenty years by most national and international organisations, becomes a tool that helps turn educational activities towards the needs of the economic field.

Therefore, we consider it necessary to point out that, contrary to public discourse or the discourse of policy makers, scholarly orientation about lifelong learning refers to a non-conventional viewpoint, in order to perceive, understand and plan all those processes that concern learning, education and the educated citizen – where the main difference lies in the concept of the *continuum*. Lifelong learning contains all those learning and educational activities, of very kind, content or grade that take place within formal, non-formal and informal frameworks and which are participated in by citizens of all ages and levels of education, at any phase of their biological or social cycle (Karalis, 2008, p.131). At the level of educational policy, this approach constitutes a set of proposals and measures for the reorganisation and the integration of particular types and forms of education. We consider that this transition from a traditional perception of learning and education, which is based on the concept of the *discrete* of the various forms and types of education, to the perception that we described and which is based on the concept of a *continuum*, is very close to a paradigmatic shift (Peters, 1998, p.105). Nonetheless, the question that needs an answer is: why is there a need today for a different perception of this kind, for a unifying project for all types and schemes of education? It is our view that the transition we described is directly linked to certain characteristic and structural features of late modernity, such as the separation of time and space, the need for a reflective appropriation of knowledge (Giddens, 1992), the constantly decreasing significance of tradition in the transmission of knowledge, skills and attitudes from one generation to the next. According to Edwards & Usher (2001), lifelong learning is the postmodern condition of education.

Preschool Education within the Framework of Lifelong Learning

It emerges, from the previous section, that current theoretical approaches to lifelong learning consider learning and education as continuous processes that extend over one's entire lifetime and cover the various aspects and dimensions of human activity. In this section, we will highlight the significance of preschool education, as seen through this approach. We should note that we use the term *preschool education* in the sense that Coombs and Ahmed refer to education, i.e., as including formal, non-formal and informal institutions. If at first sight it seems peculiar to deem that preschool education can include all the types of the Coombs and Ahmed typology, nevertheless we should mention that, at least in developed societies, it is not a rare phenomenon for a child up to the age of five to have had learning experiences in all three types (for example, kindergarten - formal education, day care centre - non-formal education, and family - informal education). In the following paragraphs we will try to look at the relationship between lifelong learning and preschool education, and highlight its significance and weight in the making of the lifelong learner.

First of all, in terms of educational policy, at least as regards international organizations, preschool education is now considered a part of lifelong learning. Besides the references one comes across in UNESCO's policy papers, the Faure Commission Report foremost among them, similar references can be found in similar reports by other international organisations, such as the OECD. Indeed, as is pointed out in these texts, access to lifelong learning is directly linked to access to early childhood programs: "high quality early childhood programmes give young children a strong start in lifelong learning. When made accessible to all, they also help strengthen social equity" (OECD, 2002, p.10). As we can see, equal access to early childhood programmes is no longer considered crucial merely in regard to children's progress in the formal educational system and to academic performance, but it is also the main factor in regard to equal access to lifelong learning. Indeed, the OECD uses three different indexes – and not simply the kindergarten enrolment

index – to measure this access (ages 3, 4 and 5), in order to highlight how important this access is up until enrolling in kindergarten. In this way, the demand for equal participation in lifelong learning becomes a demand for universal access in preschool education, a fact that increases the heretofore acceptance and importance of the institution of preschool education. These policy axes are not limited to the level of international organisations, but constitute a part of certain national policies: for example, strengthening family education and expanding preschool education is a basic principle of China's lifelong learning policy (Guo-Dong, 1994, p. 274); preschool education is considered to be the basis for the lifelong learning policy in Australia (Chapman, Gaff, Toomey and Aspin, 2005); while in Italy, an attempt was made by law to redesign and integrate the Italian school system with vocational training and higher education (Alberici, 1998, p.237). However, this is not yet taking place on a wide scale: for example, in Greece, lifelong learning policy essentially coincides with adult educational policies and, to a large degree, with continuing vocational training (Karalis and Vergidis, 2004).

As for scientific research concerning the preschool age, thirty years after the introduction of the Coombs and Ahmed typology, it appears that the informal aspect of preschool education is receiving more and more recognition. This is especially true of the role of the family as an institution with an educational dimension, since *family learning* is constantly developing as a field of systematic research in the light of lifelong learning. As Cotton points out (1998, p.ii): “decades of research indicates that when parents take an active part in their children's education, it has a positive impact on their children's academic achievement, attitudes towards learning and school, confidence as a learner... parents can also help children develop the lifelong learning skills and attitudes they will need in a rapidly changing society.” Moreover, in this paper, Cotton (o.c., p.2) describes certain lifelong learning attitudes (interest in learning new things, confidence in ability to learn, motivation for seeking new learning opportunities, willingness to be responsible for their own learning, learning from mistakes, persistence in tasks, openness to constructive criticism and patience). Furthermore, Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson (2004, p.62), from the point of view of early childhood research, state that they noticed certain paradigmatic shifts within the view of development and learning and that, moreover, play and learn are dimensions that stimulate each other and could be seen as an indivisible entirety, which helps children create an understanding of their surrounding world in a lifelong process.

A large number of theoretical and research papers of the past few years place more and more emphasis on the importance of preschool education in the making of the lifelong learner (see, for example, Propp, 2005; Boyle Swiniarski, 2006). Obviously this is not a recent invention, since it was more or less commonplace in Educational Sciences, but the difference nowadays is that these references are not limited to generalised descriptions, but stress more and more how the lifelong learner is constituted from the very first phases of his/her life, a question that Adult Education has been researching for the past thirty years, by examining the features of adult learners and the prerequisites for their effective learning. Obviously, in the light of viewing learning and education as a continuum (which we referred to at length in the previous section), the learning subject is now considered an integral and multidimensional entity, a continuum that evolves in time, i.e., throughout its entire lifetime.

It is expected that these viewings will also influence the organization and, perhaps, the mission of preschool education, and especially its formal part (kindergarten). Similarly to other sectors of formal education, preschool education is under more and more pressure to adopt practices that originate in the area of non-formal adult education: “passive school” is slowly giving way to “active school” and to the recognition of children's different learning styles (Wroczynski, 1974), while today the development of metacognitive skills (Schraw and Moshman, 1995) is considered much more important than in the recent past. Thus, to the traditional mission of preschool education, that of child's overall development is added nowadays the challenge of preparing the lifelong learner. This will obviously require preschool education to reorganise and adapt, as have all the other institutions of the educational continuum, if we are to speak in terms of the lifelong learning paradigmatic shift. However, this challenge for preschool education and the other educational institutions of formal education does not mean a loss of its leading role, nor a limiting of its autonomy; on the contrary, it means the reinforcement of its significance within the context

of an educational continuum as it is taking shape. After all, the need for formal education not to become a kind of antechamber or preface to lifelong learning was underscored long ago, and first of all by the lifelong learning theorists (Legrand, 1989).

Conclusions

Even though lifelong learning policies tend to be assessed by the percentages of adults that take part in educational activities (Himmelstrup, 1981), nevertheless the structure of the educational continuum seems inconceivable without that safe first step which is preschool education. This first step is crucial in the making of the lifelong learner, since, as we have shown, important habits and attitudes that are typical of the lifelong learner are formed at that age.

If, therefore, one rejects this distorted and unscientific identification of lifelong learning with the continuing training of employees and, instead, attributes to it the humanistic content we examined in the first part of this paper, then lifelong learning and preschool education develop an eclectic relationship, in the sense that the institution of preschool education is of immeasurable significance and importance for the continuum of lifelong learning.

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