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(Editors)

Perspectives on Adult Education in Portugal

University of Minho
Unit for Adult Education
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PERSPECTIVES ON ADULT EDUCATION
IN PORTUGAL

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PREFACE

In Portugal, the lack of a historical tradition of adult education, understood as public policy or social movement, or even as a specific sector in the sphere of a national system of education, brings about numerous consequences. In relation to the latter, the worst are related to the low rates of literacy and of basic education of the adult population. This reality can be seen in the attitude towards the value of lifelong education; in the negative impacts of a family background with little schooling and the schooling of the younger generations; in the indispensable cultural conditions towards social and economic development of the country and the deepening of its democracy, not only in strictly political terms.

Although, in these last three decades, a long and complex road has been travelled, the truth is that many deficits and gaps still remain. In spite of adult education having appeared, on some occasions, to the politicians responsible, to the educators/trainers and even to the students/trainees, as a somewhat important sector, it has almost always been forgotten or even substituted for one of its constituted fields, like second-chance education or, more recently, vocational training. In this way, after the democratic revolution of 25th April 1974, a new hope seemed to have been born and, in this context, many community projects and popular initiatives were developed, some changes occurred through State initiatives. However, only incidentally was adult education considered urgent in terms of educational policy, or even as an object of continuous social policies on the part of the State, capable of developing a public sector with medium and long-term objectives, with a capacity of conceiving policies, of mobilizing funds for initiatives of the public, private and third sectors and, specially, of supporting popular associations and social movements. The democratization of the political regime and its formal institutions revealed to be more easily reached than the social, educational and cultural democratization.
Contradictorily (or maybe resulting from the depreciation to which adult education has been subjected in what public policies are concerned), one of those consequences is the lack of academic research and its corresponding scarcity of available literature, particularly in English, capable of critically studying obstacles and problems, in the recent past and the present, and of giving information on them to a wider public. In spite of the recent increase of Portuguese academic production on adult education, internationally disseminated in chapters and collective works and in journals, the knowledge that our colleagues and European students have about the situation and the perspectives of adult education in Portugal is generally very rare and superficial.

This volume tries to gather research data and critical information on the position of adult education in Portugal throughout the last thirty years, attributing particular relevance to the last decade, in which the influence of the European Union has had in the sector assumes particular prominence. The reader will find, here, a critical examination, sometimes a disenchanted one, but never a fatalistic or pessimistic one. He/she will also find data and comments, probably more hopeful ones in relation to tendencies and innovations underway with very high democratic and educational potential.

As a whole, the seven chapters gathered together here are also a possible expression of the advances and reversals, of the advantages and the obstacles, of the decisions and the hesitations, in short, the tensions and the contradictions that marked the last decades. This is also a book about the difficult relationship of the Portuguese State with a sector that, in many circumstances, it marginalized, a sector that, after 1986, found, in the programmes of a European State, an important instrument for its development, but not always bound with the participation of everyone, in particular with the adults themselves, and only occasionally a promoter of the democratization of the educational and training processes.

We hope that the papers produced by the authors, in spite of the difficulties related to the translations of the texts, which assume, in social sciences, a great centrality, will result in greater international knowledge of the perspectives of adult education in Portugal. And, we also hope, will result in the reinforcement of European co-operation in terms of training and of research, involving a country that was delivered, by authoritarian political elites, which were unengaged with the education of their fellow citizens, to an undemocratic condition throughout a large part of last century (1926-1974), and which is now confronted with educational and democratic citizenship challenges of great magnitude.

A last word of thanks to the authors and also to the participants in the Project "Supporting the Development of New Learning Pathways for Adults", funded by the SOCRATES Programme – Grundtvig 4, implemented between 2002 and 2004, which gathered researchers from various institutions that are members of the international consortium, European Research and Development Institutes of Adult Education: Ergon KEK (ERGON Vocational Training Centre), from Greece, VOCB (Flemish Support and Development Agency for Adult Basic Education), from Belgium, KFV/DRDC (Danish Research and Development Centre for Adult Education), from Denmark, DIE (German Institute for Adult Education), from Germany, CREA – University of Barcelona (Centre de Recerca Social i Educativa of the University of Barcelona), from Spain, NIACE (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education), from the United Kingdom, LPIA (Latvian Adult Education Association), from Latvia, and the Unit for Adult Education of the University of Minho, from Portugal.

It was in this context that the first versions of some chapters gathered in this book were written, to which were added three other texts that, in our view, favoured a closer characterization of the Portuguese reality of adult education. The opportunity opened up by that Project to share the study of the Portuguese situation and to debate the subject in various international seminars represented, without a doubt, a great impulse to the preparation of this book that, we hope, will be valuable reading for all who are interested in adult education, not only in Portugal but also in the European Union.

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