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# Lifelong-learning in retrospect

Among the educational paradigms that bestrew the history of education, "lifelong education" occupies a peculiar place. It pursues in its several variants a great wealth and a great variety of aims and espouses a wide range of causes. Its legitimations reach from simple corrections to educational and social policy to all-embracing innovatory or even revolutionary inspirations; its societal aims range from radical-egalitarian to conservatory and confirming the existing order; its target groups embrace the young and the old, the workers and the retired; its structural models reach from a network of liberal adult education programmes to work-based or work-related schemes for professional training (the present "corporate learning" sector) to models that embrace all education and training.

The explanation for this potential to represent so many and different, if not contradictory, legitimations and to serve so many interests lies in the nature of the lifelong paradigm variants itself: they accommodate a series of existing and new concepts and have thus become hybrids that have an amazing capacity to mobilise the most diverse interests and to adapt to new needs and trends. But at the same time that is their great weakness: they risk losing their soul in the process and estranging those who conceived them.

In short, this is what has happened to the three main lifelong learning concepts that will be discussed in the following and this is perhaps also one of the main reasons why none of them has made it to the top of the political agenda. Worse still: those elements that have reached political maturity and that have indeed been implemented, are at best much reduced versions of the original concepts. Not one of the intergovernmental organisations that participated in their birth has given its lifelong learning model a substantive place in its own programme - a fact that is sometimes bitterly commented on by those who were its "founding fathers". Thus Paul

Lengrand, one of the key persons who conceived the Unesco lifelong education thinking, observes that "no significant change has since been operated in Unesco's programmes" and that, if there have been changes, they were rather of the negative kind (Lengrand, 1994, p.115).

In the following, the history and the development of the "lifelong learning" concept in its several main configurations will be briefly retraced and a few comments made as to their role in present international and national educational policy. Inevitably, a brief representation of such a diversified and complex part of educational history risks being incomplete and partial. The following text focuses on the relevant policies of three intergovernmental organisations, all three based in Europe, that are active in the field of education: the Council of Europe, UNESCO and the OECD.

## A brief excursion into the history of an idea

The genesis of the concept of lifelong learning is in itself an interesting example of the simultaneous appearance of new ideas: in the early 1970s, a variety of educational policy concepts saw the light of day that had in common the principle of learning as a lifelong activity, not restricted to the first stage of a human being's existence. The idea as such that life and learning go - or should go - together was not new. It goes back to the earliest known texts that have guided humanity. The Old Testament, the Koran, the Talmud and many other sacred books are, to varying degrees, explicit about the need for man to learn throughout all his life.

The 19th century saw the first organised movements that advocated and promoted learning for adults in out-of-school environments. Gruntvig, the "father of the folk high school", laid the foundations in Denmark for an emancipatory, liberal



model based largely on voluntarism that rapidly spread throughout Scandinavia. In the major industrialised European nations, movements in favour of educational programmes for the new industrial working class sprang up.

The main thrust of these initiatives was not to prepare adults for their working tasks. Their legitimisation was primarily cultural, social and, indirectly, political: giving the new workers access to culture, endowing them with the knowledge and insight needed to take their destiny in their own hands, vis-à-vis their employers and vis-à-vis administration and bureaucracy. "Social and cultural emancipation", "cultural power", a "democratic and popular culture", "a new humanism" were among the catchwords of the "popular education" and "workers education" movements. Naturally, they were mostly situated to the left of the political spectrum and often closely associated with the trade unions and with the new left-wing political parties - if the initiative did not come entirely from these sources.

Adaptation to work and work-related goals played at best a secondary role - and more often than not no role at all. The only link with adults' working life concerned the ability of workers to defend their interests. The frequent association with the emerging trade union movement fitted within this context. On the other hand, employers at that time showed little sign of initiative or even interest in adult education as a means to maintain or improve professional qualifications.

The connection with formal education is another element that did not occupy an important place in these early concepts. Certainly, many of the activities that were organised in the framework of adult or popular education could be termed "educational". Occasionally, attempts were made to improve the participants' mastery of the basic skills, reading, writing and numeracy in particular. But there was in most cases no explicit intention to complement initial education and training, nor was there an all-embracing education concept.

The development of adult education has in the course of history been strongly determined by specific social and eco-

nomical factors: industrialisation and the creation of massive housing complexes for industrial workers and miners in the 19th century, the great economic crisis in the twenties and thirties, and in Anglo-Saxon countries the return of millions of demobilised young people from the war. The latter case is interesting in two respects. On the one hand because it led to the return of great numbers of young people to formal education after the interruption of the war-years. For the first time the universities had to deal with students whose experience, whose family situation and whose age differed from that of their customary clientele. On the other hand, those who returned had to be made familiar with new techniques and competences, due to the fantastic technological progress that had been achieved during the war period. Thus for the first time experience was gained with "second chance" or "recurrent" education and for the first time the need for organised retraining of workers was recognised.

The decades after the war have on the other hand witnessed the strong expansion and the institutionalisation of the pre-war liberal adult education efforts. The study circles in the Scandinavian countries and the "Volkshochschulen" in Germany became organised, recognised, and on the whole publicly financed undertakings of adult education. In England, adult and further education witnessed an enormous expansion. From predominantly voluntary undertakings many of them now became semi-public and received public support. With public money came minimum rules and regulations as to programmes, admission of participants and possibly accreditation. Remuneration of teachers and "animateurs" had to respect public scales. In all respects a certain "rapprochement" took place with formal education that made it possible to envisage a common policy framework for all education, initial and adult, formal and informal.

## The new paradigms

The 1960s led to much debate and reflection on the future of adult education, on the merits of what existed and on the best way to satisfy the rapidly increasing needs. Planning and rationalisation had

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become standard features of the policy making scene and the conditions had been created for assigning to adult education a well-defined place in overall educational, cultural and socioeconomic policy-making. Parallel to pertinent efforts undertaken at the national levels, the major intergovernmental organisations were faced with the challenge of bringing more coherence into their own programmes and in particular of outlining a new relationship between education and training on the one hand and their activities in the social, cultural and economic domains on the other. Their member countries expected them to come up with new ideas and concepts that would establish the necessary coherence.

It is in this context that the three major lifelong learning paradigms that still guide all relevant thinking were developed by the Council of Europe, UNESCO and the OECD. Each of these organisations had its own reasons, its own constituencies, its own focal points as to policy making in these sectors. It is with hindsight remarkable that all three developed almost at the same time a lifelong learning concept that pursued the same global purposes.

The **Council of Europe** had in the 1960s introduced the theme of permanent education (‘éducation permanente’) in its programmes and it was soon called on to play a major role in the organisation’s educational, cultural and political activities. In one of its publications on permanent education it is said that “the introduction of the general theme of permanent education during the CCC’s (Council for Cultural Cooperation) general policy debate in 1966 marked a turning point in the history of educational policy within the Council of Europe framework” (Council of Europe 1970, p. 9). The Council had in the preceding years attempted, not very successfully, to accelerate the harmonisation and adaptation of the traditional educational systems of Member countries. Permanent education was seen as a “fundamentally new and comprehensive concept ... an overall educational pattern capable of meeting the rapidly increasing and ever more diversified educational needs of every individual, young and adult, in the new European society” - a target that had proved to be beyond the reach of initial educational systems as they

had failed to effectively meet the needs of a large proportion of their pupils, in part due to an insufficient diversity of their programme offer.

The three principles or “fundamentals” of the new Council of Europe policy were “equalisation”, “participation” and “globalization”. Permanent education was expected to represent a more effective strategy than the current educational system for promoting equality of educational opportunity; it would be organised with the full agreement and participation of the participants and it would bring together theory and practice, knowledge and competence, learning and doing (see the just quoted 1970 publication and also: Council of Europe, 1977 and Council of Europe, 1978).

**UNESCO** faced from its worldwide membership a similar demand for a mobilising global educational policy concept. Its developing member countries witnessed a rapidly widening educational gap between a growing part of their younger generations and a largely illiterate adult population. On behalf of democracy and of their economic development, ways and means had to be found to equip at least a large part of the adult population with a minimum of knowledge and competence. On the other hand, the organisation’s educational, scientific, socio-political and cultural programmes had followed separate developments and the need was felt for a common conceptual framework.

The strongest impulse for the organisation’s policy and activities in the domain of lifelong education was provided by “Learning to Be”, the report of the International Commission on the Development of Education under the chairmanship of Edgar Faure (Faure, 1972). The report’s philosophy was to a large extent the work of its brilliant chairman and it distinctly bears his mark. However, it also built on earlier UNESCO work. Several major international conferences had been organised on adult education (i.a. Elsenaur, as early as 1949, and Montreal, 1960). They had laid the conceptual foundations and prepared the ground for a new, comprehensive policy concept that could inspire and guide UNESCO’s entire educational programme, while at the same time allowing it to establish the organic connec-



tion with its scientific, cultural and socio-political activities.

"Learning to Be" had in 1970 been preceded by Lengrand's "An Introduction to Lifelong Learning" (Lengrand, 1970), a work that had set the tone and outlined the main contours that the Faure report was to elaborate. The philosophy on which "Learning to Be" is constructed can best be characterised as a "new humanism" that is rooted in man's innate desire to learn and that makes it possible to work towards a new, more humane society, alongside the lofty ideas that had inspired the creation of the Organisation. The concept agreed with UNESCO's general political and socio-cultural mission and in particular with its commitment to world understanding and peace, to cultural and scientific advancement for the benefit of humanity and to internationalism as a means to bar nationalism from becoming once more the cause of conflict and war. It brought together the UNESCO member states, developed and developing, South and North, representing a wide range of political régimes, around an idealistic and mobilising concept to which they could all subscribe. The aims were indeed formulated in a sufficiently global and flexible way to be acceptable to countries at different stages of economic and cultural development and with different political régimes.

**OECD's** "Recurrent Education: a strategy for lifelong learning" (Kallen and Bengtsson, 1973) had, according to the subtitle, a more modest thrust: it defined recurrent education (the term was used by the Swedish U'68 Commission and made internationally known by Olof Palme, at the time Minister of Education in Sweden) as a strategy, the essence of which consists in spreading educational lower case opportunities over the individual's lifetime, in such a way that they are available when needed (see for this: G. Papadopoulos, 1994, p. 113).

The recurrent education paradigm was advocated as an alternative to the ever-lengthening period of initial education that kept young people in school - and away from "real" life until at least late adolescence. OECD's concept was strongly inspired by the wish to break this cycle of uninterrupted initial education

and also by the massive evidence of its ineffectiveness and its rising cost with disappointingly low returns - evidence that the Organisation's reports on education had done much to corroborate.

Criticism of the existing school system did indeed play a large role in the OECD thinking. Much of education's inefficiency was due, so it was thought, to the "information-rich but action poor" nature of the school (the expression had been borrowed from Coleman's publications). Alternation between education and work or other activity was therefore an essential element of the proposed new strategy.

In line with OECD's overall mission, recurrent education had a strong economic connotation. It made it possible to bring initial formal education and adult and on-the-job training together in one single policy framework whose aims related to a common set of educational, economic and social objectives. A more flexible relationship between education and training on the one hand and work on the other, that would enable education and training to be attuned to the real needs of the labour market and of individuals, was seen as one of its main outcomes.

Such a policy of recurrent education would require a gradual, but in the long term radical change of educational policy in favour of organising all postcompulsory education in such a way as to allow for alternations between education/training and work and for effective return to education, formal or informal, when needed. The report stressed, however, that besides work, also leisure and retirement should be given a place and that recurrent learning should also serve to improve their quality. Recurrent education would thus remedy some of the main shortcomings of the educational system while at the same time "offer a full-scale educational alternative that would fit the needs of future society" (op.cit. p. 7).

## **The early 1970's: balance of the past and blueprints for the future**

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the early 1970s had a parallel in the contemporaneity of a multitude of highly critical publications about formal education. Much of this directly inspired and influenced the thinking about new concepts and policies for lifelong learning.

The system's poor record in promoting equality of educational opportunity had - for the USA - already been demonstrated by Coleman. Jencks later brought convincing evidence of the weak impact of the school as compared to pupils' SES\* and innate aptitude on occupational status and on income. His work has often been used as an argument against more investment in education and against costly educational reforms (Jencks, 1972).

In Europe, Husén's research had largely yielded the same conclusions, but it had also made it possible to identify the specific school variables that promote educational performance and thus helped to justify educational reform, (see Husén, 1974).

Nevertheless, the basic message of all relevant publications was that initial education, however well funded and however well organised, had a low capacity to attain its goals, whether equality of opportunity, teaching knowledge, skills and competences or qualifying for the labour market.

The school had also come under attack from other quarters. A key thrust of these criticisms was aimed at the school as the institution that pretended to have a monopoly of knowledge transfer that it had since long lost. The school, it was further said, was an instrument of indoctrination and of oppression of spontaneity in the hands of States that were obsessed by the need to teach children respect for the law, disciplined behaviour and other virtues that its “good” citizens should possess. School tended to perpetuate the existing social hierarchies, to train the docile labour force that the employers wanted. It killed children's initiative and innate curiosity. One of the authors, Paul Goodman, called his early relevant analysis “Compulsory Miseducation” (Goodman, 1962, reprint 1972). He quotes Einstein who said that “It is in fact nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of enquiry”.

Of the many proposals for radical change, “Deschooling Society” by Ivan Illich (I. Illich, 1970) is probably the best known. Its radical message has somewhat obscured his proposals, some of which are still relevant, such as his concept of educational networks. But Illich's optimism as to man's desire to learn - an optimism shared, for that matter, by many authors of radical blueprints for education - and as to his ability to meet the right people and create himself the necessary conditions for learning, was widely thought to border on utopia - although in our time of the Internet some of Illich's thinking may appear less unrealistic.

Few critics went as far as Jencks, who concludes his “Inequality” with the memorable statement (that he has often been criticised for in a USA where this was considered as crypto-communism): “If we want to move beyond this tradition (i.e. of counting on the school to contribute to economic equality) we will have to establish political control over the economic institutions that shape our society. This is what other countries usually call socialism...”, (op.cit. p. 265).

The 1960s and early 1970s had also witnessed much fundamental reform of initial education. Many countries passed new legislation and many global proposals for reform were made: the “Rahmengesetz” in the FRG, the “Loi d'Orientation” in France, the “Contourennota” in the Netherlands, the report of the Ottosen Committee in Norway and the already mentioned final report of U'68 in Sweden. The principle of lifelong education was espoused by all of them - as in England, where it had already figured in the 1944 Education Act.

## **What happened to lifelong education?**

The new theorems were on the whole well accepted by policy makers in the most developed countries, who saw here a way out from further lengthening and increasing costs of initial education as well as a means to better adapt education to the needs of the labour market. The developing countries were impressed by the logic of “Learning to Be” that responded

\* Editorial note  
SES: Social-Economic Status



to their demand for a wholly new approach to education in the framework of overall development.

But as a matter of fact, little haste was made with the translation into educational policies. From the OECD side it is reported that the Conference of European Ministers of Education held in Berne in 1973 endorsed the general principle of recurrent education, an endorsement that was confirmed in Stockholm in 1975. But after that little progress was made and whatever had been achieved "was still of a piecemeal nature, unevenly spread across the countries" (Papadopoulos, 1994, p. 115).

In UNESCO a similar development can be observed. Successive General Conferences have endorsed the concept of permanent education, but it has rapidly been reduced to a few specific dimensions, literacy programmes in the developing countries and support to "traditional" adult education in particular (see Lengrand, op.cit. p. 125).

The Council of Europe has in its general approach perhaps remained most faithful to the "éducation permanente" philosophy, but in its programmes the more traditional and established sectors of education have over the years got the upper hand and in its original connotation the concept has in a way been shelved.

Nevertheless, like the Loch Ness monster, lifelong education and its equivalents regularly make their appearance in international policy statements primarily to place in a wider perspective and to give broader conceptual backing to the many "piecemeal" programmes that have indeed been promoted.

Listing these partial implementations of the lifelong learning concept is beyond the scope of this article. It may help to see in what ways the present adult education programmes of all kinds do not on the whole correspond to the original concepts:

□ little progress has been made with the osmosis between education and training on the one hand and cultural and social development on the other. The only sector in which this osmosis has long since largely been achieved is that of traditional,

"liberal" adult education programmes, in particular those that focus on community development;

□ the liberating, emancipatory and politically progressive aims of lifelong education -that were admittedly not explicitly espoused by the international organisations, nor by most of their member countries- have made way for more "realistic" ones that serve to maintain and improve the existing social systems, but are not set on introducing any radical change;

□ little has become of the idea of "recurrency". The universities have missed the opportunity to reorganise their teaching so as to make real "recurrency" possible and to open their doors to new clientèle (Kallen, 1980).

Other essential elements of a lifelong learning policy are missing. Thus legislation on paid educational leave has been passed in only a few countries and it has been made conditional on professional training. Little has been done in terms of the harmonisation of credentials and the diploma from formal education still has a quasi-monopoly in terms of access to qualified employment.

The political and the economic climate of the 1990s is very different from that of the 1960s. It is not favourable to the somewhat utopian, idealistic philosophy of the earlier lifelong learning paradigms. It is propitious for plainly work and employment related "lifelong training" programmes, preferably private and with little claim on public money. "Corporate learning" is rapidly gaining ground. An exception is made where acute social problems are concerned that threaten the social climate, such as youth unemployment. Here the public hand itself takes the initiative and organises and finances programmes that allow a "return" to education.

A good dose of optimism and tolerance is needed to endorse the view that the concepts of lifelong learning have nevertheless survived unscathed. Admittedly, the general idea has caught on, in policy makers' statements and also in many education and training programmes. But the connotation has to my mind profoundly

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changed. In a way this was to be expected, considering the change in political climate of the past decades and the evolution of the economies of the developed countries towards a liberal model:

the generous and encompassing concept of lifelong education as it was conceived in the early stages no longer fits the present-day efficiency-oriented “no non-sense” market economies.

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