WORLD PERSPECTIVES IN ADULT EDUCATION RESEARCH
Report of the Montreal International Seminar

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Abstract

The authors, who co-chaired the International Seminar on Research in Adult Education held in Montreal in September 1994, present a synthesis of the five major themes that were discussed: definitions and restructuring of the reality of organized adult learning, the organization of research, research themes and approaches, the agenda for the future considering the trends and the needs that were identified, and finally, international cooperation in research and the conditions for constructive cooperation. In the concluding paragraphs, the authors emphasize the wish of the participants that an invisible community of researchers be created and work in a spirit of goodwill and democratic intellectual cooperation.

The twenty participants[1] from different regions of the world who attended the Montreal International Seminar on Research in Adult Education have discussed, on the basis of their own analyses, the distinct trends in each region and the issues common to all regions. The purpose was less to form a global vision than to assess the emergence of new trends in the various contexts, to recognize the differences, to define the common challenges, to build a creative environment and to delineate the conditions that would allow a dialogue from different perspectives between equal actors.

In order to prepare the UNESCO International Seminar, trend analyses were made in Africa, Asia, Europe (both Western and Eastern) and North America, as well as in the Arab States and in Latin America. Then participants from each region as well as other international experts were asked beforehand, to contribute by writing papers which were used as a background to the discussions that were held in Montreal.

Five major themes have been examined:
1. diverse and shifting meanings of adult education: definitions and restructuring of the reality of organized learning,
2. the organization of research,
3. research themes and approaches,
4. the agenda for the future: trends and needs,
5. international cooperation.

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[1] Please refer to the end of the article for the list of participants.

The Diverse and Shifting Meanings of Adult Education:
Definitions and Restructuring of the
Reality of Organized Adult Learning

As an area of intervention and a focus for research, adult education is a reality that is perceived and structured differently by the various actors according to their specific contexts and historical circumstances at hand. Differences between regions are numerous.

In Africa and the Arab nations, in light of the urgency of basic training needs, adult education is perceived as literacy training, first and foremost. In the subregions of Asia in which economic growth is escalating, continuing education for adults is the primary focus of adult education rather than literacy training.

In regions dominated by political violence, popular education remains underground, hidden. In other regions the urgency of resolving practical survival issues takes precedence over both theoretical and basic research. There are also cases in which underground propaganda threatens any strides made towards democracy. And there are cases in which participation in government programs reduces research to a helpful but nonvital function, that is behaviourist assessments of results without a critical analysis of objectives and implicit diagnoses.

The concept of adult education also varies according to who requests it and who proposes programs: literacy training or continuing education on the one hand and the other forms of adult education on the other. The tension between the prevailing trends in adult education constitutes an important factor to take into account in forming an accurate overview of adult education and in attempting to understand the dynamics involved in each of the different regions.

An important task of research is to systematize and express the different and changing working definitions of adult education. It can be useful to examine the different patterns of dualization. In the present context of Latin America for instance, as the different educational formulas (structures) are finding a common ground in their contribution to the alleviation of poverty, the former dichotomy between formal and nonformal education is becoming less and less significant. It can also be useful to examine adult education in the very specific contexts where it is viewed only as a system and in the contexts where it is treated as an evolving reality that reflects adult life, thus making it possible for adult students to discover and take into account their own vision, areas of resistance, expectations and creativity.

Although the political economy of adult education is not the whole reality since the different educational and cultural projects of the various social actors also assume a role, it needs to be studied in each society. One of the key roles of research is precisely to understand significant changes. Thus, the transition from authoritarian regimes to more democratic forms of government in Southern Africa, Eastern Europe and Latin America transforms the context for adult

education. In a new phase of national reconstruction that involves both economic transformations and a consolidation of civil society, new issues emerge:

- A new dynamic is evolving between the public structures and the independent initiatives of nongovernmental groups. Oppositional educational practices are no longer at the forefront.
- The difficulty of applying what has been learned about popular education in the implementation of a new system of adult education and the transition from small-scale experiences to nation-wide policies.
- The predominance of training requests made by economic partners–requests that pertain to the economy and, more specifically, to the formal economy.
- In Eastern European countries, the new social order and political circumstances push adult education to endorse free market principles and to abandon its fundamental positions as a field of public interest.
- Social and sociological issues are becoming of prime interest in adult education research.

In the current phase, can we define an approach that integrates the various training areas into a new national policy while maintaining its critical dimension that is a capacity for ongoing critical thought?

While adult education must be understood as a separate and distinct part of the educational scene, it cannot be analyzed in isolation, unrelated to childhood education (i.e., school) or to the cultural environment. Seen from this perspective, studies focusing on adult education can provide critical insights into broader educational and cultural issues. For example, in today's information society, literacy training is no longer analyzed as part of an epistemological framework or as a deficit related to the past but as a developmental process that builds on the strengths of the learners' subcultures and as a prerequisite for the future. This is a research task that goes far beyond the field of adult education. The same can be said about the trend in some adult education studies and practices to redefine education, not as a transfer of knowledge and skills, but as a communicative process or dialogue between people, as a sharing of genuine competencies and expertise.

The current global context raises major questions that must be addressed in this regard by researchers in the field of adult education: the urgency and priority of basic knowledge for all in a context where *poverty* constantly increases; *urbanization*, which obliges us to confront phenomena that relate to the masses; *globalization* of the economy, with the major problems of competition and exclusion; and *democratization*, the overriding aspiration to social justice and to *participation of the civil society*.

In order to be creative and to play a part in the major political stakes, one of the great challenges facing researchers in adult education consists in learning anew to *listen*, to adequately *describe* reality (which may not be evident on the

surface), to *interpret* differently, and to *communicate* these new interpretations of reality more effectively.

The Organization of Research

The organization of adult education research is changing in all the regions. In addition to the *agents* currently involved, namely government departments, universities and NGOs, new ones have come into the picture: international organizations, small private or independent businesses, research institutes independent from universities, organizations or institutions not traditionally identified with adult education such as the armed forces, health services, telecasters, the industrial sector, and others. However, the dissemination of research findings produced by these new organizations remains extremely limited.

In the past, the often *marginal and devalued status* of adult education research has been stressed. This situation can be explained by adult education research's self-imposed isolation from the scientific disciplines, a weak definition of the fields of practice and research, as well as overly close ties with sectoral, if not sectarian practices in adult education. However, changes are occurring in certain regions. Spain for example, has initiated a major shift consisting in *opening up adult education* to an interdisciplinary approach or dialogue with the world of education, in partnership with the State and with other communities, and to encourage publication in social science journals. This openness in adult education research–which becomes possible only at a more advanced stage of research, after its goals have been identified and its specificity defined–has resulted in increased *involvement* in the scientific community and in decision-making processes, diversified financing, and a *diversification* of methods, objects of research, actors, research sites and publications. These changes are occurring however, at the risk of adult education research being *absorbed* by the more dominant economic sectors, and of losing its *status* and *value* as research which has access to funding and publication, as is the case with action research or participatory research.

In Central and Eastern Europe the change takes a different direction. Adult education research which was relatively well developed in the socialist era, finds itself in a deep crisis: decreases in the extent of research projects, cuts in government funds and the closing of significant institutions are some of the many changes. Research activities now depend on the interest of individuals and on their capacity to find funds.

As one can see in these few examples, the infrastructure of research is unequal. Moreover, the gap between North and South and between East and West is enormous considering the availability of material resources, the access to documentation and to data banks, the means of dissemination and the opportunity to influence the design and organization of new data banks. Finally, the incorporation in these data banks, of the research done in the South and the East is not certain.

Many issues regarding the organization of adult education research are emerging as significant in different regions of the world: should adult education as a research discipline be abandoned or does this area of research have an undeniable social relevance?

How should we respond to the research from other disciplines that has an impact on adult education? How should we deal with the division of labour between research and practice? How can we ensure that research centres have the autonomy and critical distance essential for high quality research?

Research Topics and Approaches

The socio-economic and political context of a country influences the structure and development of its adult education institutions and programs and influences the choice of research topics and perspectives. Moreover, we are witnessing a certain internationalization of contexts, the globalization of economies and therefore of the major industrial cultures, as well as the growing weight of policies established by multilateral agencies (e.g., structural adjustment programs).

In such a context, do we manage to take external influences into account when determining the orientation of our research?

Partners, particularly those who are funding research, undeniably influence the choice of research topics (e.g., through emphasis on evaluations or on studies of the labour force and employment). Nevertheless, the situation is not similar everywhere; the impact of political contexts varies and is rarely absolute. The orientation of cultural industries, of new technologies also involves contradictions, and there is resistance. In short, there are gaps to be explored.

Artificial boundaries are often imposed on research in adult education, and sometimes those boundaries are self-imposed. In certain regions, there are attempts to cross epistemological and traditional institutional boundaries. Up to now, the adult education researchers have often wavered between open and closed attitudes towards researchers from other fields. The new trend is towards openness through both intra- and interdisciplinary dialogue, through exchanges between researchers in the different sectors of education, labour and culture. In certain regions, researchers tend to participate in multidisciplinary teams, which enables them to approach certain themes differently. This nevertheless requires that the core researchers in adult education have an identity, a sense of questioning, and a capacity for dialogue regarding diverse theoretical perspectives.

There are also endeavours to involve other sectors of education in various adult education experiences and vice versa, to access general or vocational training through popular education, or to access popular education through technical training practices or surveys of the needs of working-class groups and communities.

Tensions have been observed between the growing presence of professional researchers and the desire for greater involvement on the part of practitioners. Tensions also have developed between a vertical management approach and a cooperative approach among researchers and practitioners who are encouraged to participate in critical reflection on their work. Tensions finally can be found between more global perspectives (historical, political and philosophical) or more academic perspectives and narrow objectives aimed at improving practice.

A number of changes have been noted in research topics and perspectives. Here are a few examples.

- The meaning and conditions underlying the act and ways of learning in various contexts.
- The sociological conditions of adult learning and teaching instead of investigating only psychological conditions.
- The transfer of concerns from delivery or intervention agents to learners and their needs.
- A shift from taking inventories or measuring cultural deficits to recognizing differentiated knowledge.
- Criticism and transformation of evaluative research.
- A shift in focus from statistics on illiteracy to cultural research and to observation of various concrete communication strategies.
- A contribution to systematizing knowledge that basic environments have created.
- Adult education and the reinforcement of civil society.
- The development of areas for research on gender, age or cultural discrimination.
- The transformation of research findings into action plans.
- The shift from traditional teaching functions to preparing conditions that are conducive to independent learning.
- The integration of adult education into broader perspectives where childhood education, participation in later education and cultural environments are related to each other. Adult education in various countries is therefore viewed from each country's own perspectives and consequently a number of models of continuing education that have emerged.
- Problems related to adult education, the labour market, and unemployment in economies in transition.
- The gender factor in several of these issues.

However, some areas are clearly underanalyzed, namely,

- the political dimensions of private life;
- cultural, feminist and hybrid identity;
- the content and richness of "popular knowledge";
- cultural inequalities;
- age discrimination;
- the new learning needs of adults in the economies in transition;
- alternatives to adult basic education, for example, Koranic schools;

- the theoretical foundations of adult education;
- the division of the roles and functions in adult education between the state, the social partners and the participants;
- the adult learning process in different contexts; women's and the elderly's learning processes;
- the learning strategies of the illiterate who learns mathematics;
- the motivation for research: the process of selecting research topics/problems and perspectives.

Agenda for the Future: Towards an International Dialogue and Significant Research

Three major aspects were treated under the theme "trends and future needs": the need for an international dialogue; the need for more significant research through a change in attitudes and in research methods; and finally some research topics that could have an international reach.

An International Dialogue

Certain conditions are required to initiate an international dialogue and to develop significant research in all the regions of the world. These conditions can be stated as follows.

1. Adequate access to information.
2. Skills to participate in the development and design of databases; improvements in the ways data base information is organized and critical questioning of the information that is available; criteria to establish who decides what information is available or relevant.
3. Clear rules for international recognition of research; for example, what qualifies research as "scientific", thereby giving it academic or intellectual status?
4. A network of globally connected researchers (that was referred to as the "invisible community" of researchers).
5. Dialogue among the various regions of the world; and recognition of the diversity of research contexts.

Significant Research

Pertaining to the development of more significant international research, there are needs for a change in research attitudes as well as research methods. In particular there are needs to:

1. Achieve better results: need to improve research techniques/methods.
2. Break down barriers while maintaining the distinct identity of adult education.

3. Consider ethical problems in research including the impact of imposing or integrating researchers values from other disciplines on the values held by researchers in adult education.
4. Critical evaluation of the research completed to date: need to question old assumptions, assess the results, and query whether there is a link between the results and our assumptions.
5. Critically review the approaches used in comparative research with reference to the communication and dialogue model.
6. Clarify what adult education can achieve; currently too much is expected of adult education.
7. Discover links between the development approach and the practical reality of adult education (education versus training).
8. Link more closely researchers and practitioners.
9. Assess the new developing terminology and to respond to it.

Research Topics Having an International Reach

Numerous topics could contribute significantly to the corpus of knowledge in adult education, including studies of:
1. Factors and processes that influence the quality of learning.
2. Recent global history of adult education in the various regions of the world and in various countries, from 1960 to 1990, and past Jomtien.
3. Parallel and coexisting adult education systems and relationships between them, actual and potential.
4. Cultural approaches to adult learning: indigenous knowledge, cultural styles of learning; learning outside formal settings.
5. "New partnerships" with government, business, NGOs, and others, from the point of view of equity, accessibility and supply.
6. The role of adult education in developing civil society.
7. Different ethical bases–value systems–for curriculum development in adult education.
8. The potential for using new media and information systems in adult education.
9. Past research on adult education, its uneven development and dissemination world wide.
10. Different models for capacity building within countries and regions: networks, publications, seminars, training.
11. Different theoretical frameworks of adult education and learning.

International Cooperation

North/South and East/West relations in the area of research, training and information are criticized.

One of the major problems, which has been variously described, concerns the ethnocentricity of the research that is conducted with the northern and the western means and ways of doing things. This is evident everywhere in the theories and methodologies referred to, in the institutions involved, financing, codes of communication, the use of English in scientific matters, copyrights, distribution of scientific publications, criteria and "rituals" of attributing value to research.

Nevertheless, there are possibilities for change, especially in the current context of free trade as it pertains to information, and new communications practices (e.g., electronic highway, electronic mail).

Conditions for International Cooperation

For international cooperation to be a constructive dialogue between actors who are equal but different, a certain number of conditions must be met.

- Adult education practices and the context must provide the starting point for the research that is being carried out rather than an artificial definition of topics.
- An open attitude must be adopted toward the research traditions of the countries involved, which must be acknowledged and respected.
- When materials and tools are suggested, room must be made for criticism with respect to the reality of the country in question.
- Recognition must be given to the aspirations of nations in the Southern Hemisphere to develop their own theories, which are based on their own daily reality.
- The competence of researchers from the Southern Hemisphere must be acknowledged, even if their ways of working do not correspond to those of researchers from the Northern Hemisphere.
- "Fashions" in research topics must be avoided, as they can create discontinuity in research activities.
- Lastly, two temptations must be avoided: first, that of creating a distance between research and practice by involving researchers not familiar with local practices (i.e., the process of decontextualization); and second, activism; i.e., making action a priority over research.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are among the proposals for change in global relationships of intellectual cooperation.

- Invest in the development of infrastructures in the Southern Hemisphere and in the former socialist countries that foster exchanges of information, as well as improving access to documentation, research networks, and training, and the dissemination of research results (capacity building).

- Be receptive to the styles of researchers who value dedication, commitment, solidarity.
- Support research findings that help promote and broaden democratic debate.
- Facilitate the creation of local or regional research networks outside the universities.
- Encourage comparative research within a communicative context, and more specifically, introduce international projects within which interested countries could participate.
- Promote and disseminate research findings from the Southern Hemisphere.
- Find more effective and economical means of communicating and disseminating information.
- Foster an ongoing dialogue between governments and researchers and among researchers themselves.
- Analyze those projects where intellectual cooperation proved successful.
- Devote a seminar (at the UNESCO Institute for Education) to the theme of cooperative international research in adult education.
- Promote regional exchanges in the Southern and Eastern Hemispheres.
- Support the acquisition and use of new technology in the development of an "invisible community" of researchers.
- Examine the possibility of developing intellectual cooperation in adult education within the various UNESCO chairs.
- Change the criteria for allocation of research funds.
- Create budget items for research in UNESCO regional offices and improve the publicizing of funding sources in UNESCO publications.
- Finally, facilitate translation of scientific works into national languages.

Conclusion

Having reviewed the major trends in current research, the participants stressed the importance of promoting more *critical research* and "counter-research" that question the assumptions of acquired knowledge, more *contextual research* that takes into account regional, cultural and historical differences, and more *cooperative research* at the international level, not in order to create a standard universal vision but rather to create an "invisible community" of researchers representing the world's different regions and perspectives, all working together in a spirit of goodwill and democratic intellectual cooperation.

The challenge at hand is a major one: to help build a shared body of knowledge in adult education, one which respects both society and the individual, which strengthens global solidarity while respecting distinct cultural identities. In other

words, it is through democratic processes that we must build the body of knowledge in adult education.

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