

Volume 30 Issue 1

cjsae

the canadian journal for the study of adult education

la revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

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CJSAE Book Review

*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/  
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*  
Editor-in-Chief: Nancy Taber  
[www.cjsae-rceea.ca](http://www.cjsae-rceea.ca)

30,1 January/janvier 2018  
ISSN 1925-993X (online)

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L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes  
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# GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON ADULT EDUCATION AND LEARNING POLICY

Marcella Milana and Tom Nesbit (Eds.). Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, UK, 2015, 254 pages.

Marcella Milana and Tom Nesbit's edited collection provides a great overview of adult education policies in 10 countries across five regions and within five interstate and transnational organizations. It is an important contribution to the body of work on adult education policy. As the preface states, "Although comparative studies of national higher education policies...are fairly common, those that focus more specifically on adult education are far scarcer" (p. ix).

The book is divided into three parts, sandwiched between an introduction and a conclusion. Part 1 presents adult education policy in Scotland, the Czech Republic, the United States, Brazil, and Mexico (Chapters 2–6); Part 2 comprises Chapters 7–11 and the countries of Botswana, Ghana, Palestine, South Korea, and India; and Part 3 focuses on organizations' approaches to, and influences on, adult education policy—UNESCO, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, the European Union, and the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) (Chapters 12–16). The authors of each chapter have approached the exercise of reflecting on adult education policy differently. For example, some provide a more historical account of policy development, while others focus on a theme in policy, such as the relationship between higher education and adult education (e.g., Brazil: Chapter 5) or adult education policy in a context of war (e.g., Palestine: Chapter 9). Some chapters map the development of adult education policy alongside the development of a country as a whole (e.g., Botswana: Chapter 7). Comparability is not always easy given the radically different socio-politico-cultural realities of countries or the mandates and capabilities of different inter/transnational organizations.

In reflecting on the book in its entirety, you are left with the almost haptic sensation of the slipperiness of adult education policy; when you think you have it, it changes or moves slightly out of reach. What is adult education? It is clearly literacy, as is the case in Botswana (Chapter 7), Mexico (Chapter 6), or India (Chapter 11). But adult literacy has also been a part of the US policy context (Chapter 4) and in the many countries that have participated in the OECD's international evaluation of skills and competencies (Chapter 13). The UN considers these countries to have literacy rates of almost 100%.<sup>1</sup> Is adult education lifelong learning? Lifelong education? Skills training? Higher education for adults? As this book

1 See <http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx?queryid=166>.

indicates, it can be any one of these things. In Ghana (Chapter 8), adult education policy is divided into basic education, second-cycle education, non-formal education, inclusive and special education, tertiary education, and education management. As Foucault (1970) argued, classification is often arbitrary and always political. And there can be “strategic ambiguity” (Eisenberg, 1984) in refusing to define terms: common to the many policy documents across the countries and organizations represented in this text is the lack of a “shared, consensual definition of adult education” (p. 29); terms like *lifelong learning* or *basic education* go unexplained. This may not be accidental, as it could provide shelter against a decided lack of financial and programmatic commitment to adult education initiatives.

To better understand the policy arena, we need to examine what is driving adult education policy formation. The book makes evident the growing role of transnational organizations, such as the OECD and World Bank, and NGOs in shaping policy landscapes from Glasgow (Chapter 3) to Gaza (Chapter 9). And we need to move beyond the discursive: across the globe, it seems that Tuckett’s (of ICAE) pronouncement rings true: “[There is no end to the] gap between rhetorical commitments and practice that reaches all adults” (p. 214). Or as respected artists Public Enemy once put it, “Don’t believe the hype.”

There are common themes across many of the chapters. The first is that adult education, particularly lifelong learning, has become a growing policy focus—at least discursively. Second, that neo-liberal ideology and technological advancements are driving much of this focus. Third, that education for the labour market is the largest concern and that there has been a definite shift toward skills and competencies. Fourth, that the OECD—through its country reports, thematic reviews, and international assessments of skills—has become a key policy driver. And finally, that there is little cohesion to adult education policy and that it continues to be the “poor cousin” (Chapter 14) of children’s basic education, university education for youth, and other social initiatives; however, again, this depends on how adult education is defined or classified. It may fall under development for emerging economies (Chapters 5–9, 11), citizenship building (Chapters 7–10), even tourism (as in the case of Ghana). One gets the impression that adult education policy can remain hidden in ministries and documents not commonly associated with adult education.

Beyond creating a more educated populous with better survival chances in a turbulent economy, adult education policy also plays an important role in supporting self-determination, as in current-day Palestine (Chapter 9); furthering decolonization, as in newly independent Botswana in the 1960s and 1970s; and imbuing national pride, such as through the lifelong learning festival in Jecheon, South Korea, which attracted 2 million people in 2013 (Chapter 10). While adult education may have, lamentably for Nesbit (Chapter 17), become one of the many ways of “conditioning people to accept, rather than question, the status quo” (p. 244), I disagree that the book’s message is entirely pessimistic.

While every chapter provides a unique perspective on adult education policy, the collection has some limitations. Since only 10 countries are represented, the book gives only a partial look at global adult education policy. In addition, more direct comparisons between countries or organizations would have been interesting. Importantly, I wanted to see more analysis on the financial aspects of adult education policy. How is it reflected in the budgets of the countries or organizations profiled? How has this shifted? While monetary commitments are written about in a good portion of the chapters, more systematic and comparative analysis would have been informative. Finally, I was surprised to see women make up only 25% of the authors, given the predominance of women in the

field—particularly as practitioners but also in growing numbers in the academy, where women make up at least half of faculty.

Overall, it is a book worth consulting for a more holistic look at historical and current trends in adult education policy.

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### References

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