

From lifelong education to lifelong learning

Discussion of some effects of today's neoliberal policies

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Abstract

When we think about current adult education in the context of the uneven and contradictory social and economic impact of globalization, it necessarily implies thinking about the transfer from the paradigm of lifelong education to the paradigm of lifelong learning. We shall examine the essential quality involved in the social significance and the political dimension of each of these paradigms, because, since the post-war period, both became innovative educational policy strategies capable of mobilizing and transforming society. We would like to stress the importance of re-thinking the role of adult education today in the light of the responsibilities shifting from the state to individuals, arising from the implications of this transition of paradigms: we do this by framing it in the context of the socio-productive restructuring movement, which speeded up the move from the so-called model of qualification, associated to social emancipation, to what is known as the model of competence (later competences), which is associated with individual empowerment. Therefore in this article we intend to question this new policy direction, which is associated with a conceptual and methodological shift in adult education practices, by using the prism of a critical sociology of education.

Keywords: adult education; lifelong education; qualifications for social emancipation; lifelong learning; competences for individual empowerment

First thoughts

This article addresses the establishment of an international discourse. We therefore briefly introduce definitions of basic concepts that will be discussed throughout the paper. The first main concept is *adult education*. We accept that this concept is pluralist: it is ideological as well as technical. The concept of adult education is mostly understood as a social and human right (Gadotti, 2011), approximating the UNESCO agenda. We follow those critical educators (Lima, 2003; Torres, 2008) who perceive the concept of *adult learning* as an expression that opposes the humanist-critical roots of the popular tradition of *adult education*. There has been a shift in paradigms from

lifelong education, where the concept of *education* is seen as a collective entity and a state obligation, to *lifelong learning*, where the concept of *learning* is seen as an individual entity and a personal duty. This has led to a loss in the broader view of adult education as a key issue related to social themes such as inequalities, power relations and political struggle for a better world for all. The research question guiding these reflections is: who gains most and who loses most in this conceptual and paradigmatic shift in the public policy agenda of adult education, especially in the European context? We shall now look at this issue in greater depth.

The main characteristics of adult education under the paradigm of lifelong education

In the history of modern systems of education the so-called world crisis in education which took place at the end of the 1960's would mark the beginning of a gradual shift in the understanding given to adult education, and in more general terms to the actual nature of education itself. In this way, the *lifelong education movement* that emerges at this time represents a real turning point in thinking about education, due both to its worldwide dimension as well as its socio-political stance. The instability of our economic, political and social reality, in the context of the crisis in the welfare state, and the central role played on the international stage by UNESCO in the area of education, is the basis for the context in which the *concept of lifelong education* is reintroduced in debates about education. We say re-introduction due to the fact that some of the key theoretical ideas about lifelong education actually date back to the early 20th century, based mainly on the theories of Dewey, Smith, Lindeman and Yeaxlee. Their work represents an indispensable legacy, even though they referred to another socio-political context and a different age, when central assumptions about adult education were forged, namely: the understanding that education does not end when a person leaves school, insofar as education fulfils the role of ensuring the viability of life in society, irrespective of age (Dewey, 1916); the idea that adult education, as a basic necessity to a country, must be expanded, insofar as it helps to build citizenship, and this is then perceived as universal and desirable throughout the life of its citizens (Smith, 1919); the growing importance given to experience in the learning process amongst adults, as well as the importance attached to discussion groups as an appropriate methodology for adult education (Lindeman, 1926); also the idea that human needs are part of the social fabric of a powerful socio-political system that is contained within a context of pedagogical action in adult education (Yeaxlee, 1929).

An interesting outcome of our research on the genealogy of concepts in adult education (Barros, 2011a) is that despite the intensity of these pioneering debates we should point out that there was a kind of gap between the 30's and the 50's as far as adult education's conceptual heritage is concerned, and this has helped to gauge the effective use of the *concept of lifelong education* in public debates on adult education. However, when it resurfaced in the sixties, the dominant understanding given to the *concept of lifelong education* comprises three basic dimensions: one is a severe criticism of the school model of formal education¹; a second dimension is related to the need to ensure a form of 'lifelong' education which keeps knowledge up to date and allows adults to keep up with technological developments in society (UNESCO, 1960); and a third dimension promotes equal educational opportunities and access to permanent and effective social promotion². These three dimensions create a concept and an ideal out of *lifelong education*, and indeed two of these fundamental dimensions lead us to think in humanistic terms about educational policies for adult education.

Looking at the work and effects of policies, we should underline that the main international body to have an effective role in the promotion of the *lifelong education paradigm* was UNESCO. Under its patronage several documents were produced, among which stands out the influential Report coordinated by Edgar Faure et al. (1972) *Learning to Be – the world of education today and tomorrow*. The *concept of lifelong education* that was developed has implications for the entire educational process, and includes all its forms, expressions and moments in order to ensure the implementation of an innovative strategy in the global education of children and young people, and to prepare adults to pursue their autonomy and freedom with a sense of social justice. *Lifelong education* is understood, in this context, as an educational project that is continuously inter-relating with the individual as well as the social dimension of education, and is aimed at the construction of a ‘new man’, and the offer of a humanist system of collective values. This vision of *lifelong education* contains explicitly political choices and represents a project which has an ideological nature, a utopia (Faure et al., 1972, p. 143). Since then the understanding given to the *concept of lifelong education* would become more and more clearly linked with the political dimension of education (Lengrand, 1989; Lima, 2003). The concept is now commonly associated with, on the one hand the restructuring of school systems, and on the other hand, the drafting of social transformation projects. In other words, associated with *lifelong education* is a new vision and interpretation, both with respect to the educational process at the various levels of education, as well as to the perception of a common destiny for mankind.

Given that the *lifelong education movement* has developed within a global framework of strong criticism and opposition to the school model, it is no wonder that the repercussions in the field of the discursive and pedagogical practices of formal adult education would be profound. Besides, this period corresponded to an expansion, unprecedented in the history of adult education, particularly with regard to its non-formal and informal characteristics: in fact it went against the two structural axes that characterize the whole school model - the spatial and the temporal axis. In this way it reached beyond the public space of the school with regard to its educational practices, and stepped outside the temporal constraints of the inflexible logic of a school education by introducing the possibility of negotiating schedules and timetables with a degree of flexibility. The aim was to allow education to be present at all stages of life (UNESCO, 1976). In the Faure Report it says in relation to this that ‘the educational enterprise will only become efficient, just and human by undergoing radical changes affecting the essence of educational action, as well as the time and place for education’ (Faure et al., 1972, p. 142). This alternative understanding of the concept of education assumes, in the same way, a break with what this report calls ‘preconceived ideas about instruction –it was for the young and took place in schools– prevented people generally from conceiving of lifelong education in normal educational terms’ (ibid., p. 142).

The role of the school with regard to *lifelong education* changes completely, to the extent that the basic education that is acquired there is now perceived as only a prelude, and whose aim is as follows: to provide adults with the best means to communicate with each other; to promote the ability to obtain information independently; and to create a more cohesive society where individuals can communicate, work and live cooperatively with each other. So, *lifelong education* represents a lever to change the entire understanding of the modern concept of education. We can safely emphasize that the *lifelong education approach*, with regard to the restructuring of school systems and the entire educational process, aims to reunite what the school system of education has locked up. For this to be achieved, a restructuring of this nature would involve at least

two different consequences: first, the separation between the idea of education and the idea of there being a right age to learn; and second, the total loss of significance for the notion of success and failure at school, with a focus now only on personal growth and the creation of a path towards ‘learning to be’.

The political dimension of education, which has been recognized and debated vigorously with regard to *lifelong education*, now represents its most significant contribution in the light of a critical sociology of education (Giroux & McLaren, 1997; Mészáros, 2005; Zinn & Macedo, 2007), by proposing a theoretical path as well as a plan of action, in this case related to the vision of building a new society, a *learning society* and a new type of city, the *educational city*. We believe this vision is in fact the essence of the *paradigm of lifelong education* and also of what is understood as adult education in the Faure Report. The established political and educational agenda is based on a theory of action with clear objectives of social transformation, and these are progressively examined throughout the report. This new society, the society of learning, will only make sense in the context of this new understanding given to education, which is seen not only as school education but as *lifelong education*. Twenty-one principles and recommendations are presented in this document, and these show the way forward to make the ‘today and tomorrow’s’ reality as close as possible to the idealized utopia. Thus, in the report Faure defends his point of view from a firm political-ideological positioning that leaves no doubts about the nature of social transformation behind this vision, that ‘it is out of the question for education to be confined, as in the past, to training the leaders of tomorrow’s society (...) education is no longer the privilege of an elite’ (Faure et al., 1972, p. 160). The effect of such policies on adult education and learning clearly means social emancipation for all.

According to *lifelong education*, the idea of the educational city, which is part of the underlying vision of the learning society, is based on the principle that when we accept that education will increasingly become a primal need of each individual we will have to invest all our efforts to broaden and expand its scope mostly in two necessary directions: first to develop other types of schools, polytechnics and universities which benefit from other forms of teaching, as well as from other types of educational relationships, and which are constructed from existing models; and secondly, the creation of other types of institutions in the city, both public and private, which will be able to embrace an educational role in the various institutional dimensions of city life by maximising the existing educational potential in local communities. It is in this sense that the city can also be understood as being educational. This is a deliberate comparison with the Athenian educational ideal of a *paideia*, and in this way the educational city represents ‘a school for civic sentiment and fellow-feeling’ (Faure et al., 1972, p. 162).

In Faure’s report the vision of the educational city and a learning society, which is a vehicle for social transformation whose fundamental purpose is to democratize education and democracy itself, is as important today as it was then. According to this political-philosophical perspective a truly democratic education is the basis for guaranteeing ‘man’s right to be’ (ibid., p. 162). But the goal of democratizing education implies changing the traditional bases of the relationship between society, the state and education. All layers of society, and particularly those referring to the political, economic and family spheres are called on to make a real contribution, because, in this perspective, a society of learning, besides being democratic, also needs to be mutually supportive, and in this context it is assumed that ‘the fight against ignorance is as important as the fight against hunger’ (Faure et al., 1972, p. 235). Lastly, this learning society is not only a democratic and supportive movement but is also pacifist in nature.

Its proposed path of action will reverse mankind's warlike propensity. The plan is manifestly utopian but it doesn't diminish its power of action. We think the utopian vision is simply reinforcing the underlying principle of today's educational debate (still). That is to say, as Paulo Freire put it, it is the torch which lights the way towards the creation of a more 'human' society.

However, mostly on account of its somewhat ideological slant, the *concept of lifelong education* has created controversies, divisions, schools of thought, and counterclaims, and disagreements. This has led to a general reflection about education on an international scale, as well as to the very particular interpretation given to literacy and adult education as part of a liberating project (Freire, 1975; Gadotti, 2001; Gelpi, 1983). Nevertheless, and despite its utopian branding, *lifelong education* has actually made its way into the public educational policy-making process. It did so on the back of UNESCO (1985, 1997), which in some ways helped to put it on the global stage and partly explains the sociological and historical importance that the *lifelong education perspective* has attained, as Lima has stated in this respect, 'we need only to remember that lifelong education as a *continuum* between the education of children, young people and adults, is seen in certain countries as cornerstone work of the welfare state, and which goes hand in hand with other social policies and also redistributive policies' (Lima, 2003, p. 129).

As so many of its minor failings have been pointed out and given that forty years have passed since Faure's Report, allowing us time to step back and look critically, it is not difficult to understand that many of the promises of *lifelong education* have not been kept: they have remained dormant, with much of their transforming power untapped, both in terms of national systems of education, as well as with regard to society itself (Comissão Europeia, 1995; UNESCO, 1996, 2009a, 2009b; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2009). In the words of one of lifelong education's foremost advocates: 'from the theoretical point of view the principle [of lifelong education] has progressed considerably, but in practice the situation is less impressive (...) it does not appear that the set of traditional structures has in fact been substantially modified' (Lengrand, 1989, p. 9). Yet despite these promising discursive practices, with regard to the actual educational practices a fundamentally school-based logic has persisted.

There is no single reason behind a change in the world of education since those times, especially since it has been the humanistic approach to *lifelong education* that has surrounded the issue. But the growing *fin-de-siècle* dominance of a public discourse about a pragmatic approach to social and educational policies, inevitably linked to private groups interested in taking advantage of the crisis in the welfare state in core countries in order to expand the market, would constitute a powerful force for change (Sousa Santos, 2005). What we have here is for the most part an ideologically constructed crisis which draws attention to the difficulty of putting the political principles of *lifelong education* into practice, and invariably points to the economic unsustainability of a *lifelong education for all*. Alongside the transformation in the socio-economic climate caused by the oil crisis, a new global swing to the neo-liberal right at the end of 20th century had a significant impact on what inspired the U-turn with regard to adult education.

The main characteristics of adult education under the paradigm of lifelong learning

In the second half of the 20th century, it was the *lifelong education* approach that was mostly behind the educational policies of the welfare state and social thinking in social sciences, but in the 21st century the concept of *lifelong learning* quickly replaced it. This change in emphasis is a consequence of the domination of neoliberal globalisation (Barros, 2009). It concerns a change in the socio-educational panorama which in turn reflects the effects of a broader change that took place in the international political and economic context (Falk, 1999; Bauman, 1999; Bourdieu, 1998, 2001). What took place was that the *Keynesian consensus* of post-war international politics, according to which education is perceived primarily as a citizen's right and which the state should provide, was replaced by a new agreement, the *Washington consensus* of post-cold war world international politics, under which education was to be seen first and foremost as a service to the consumer that the state should liberalise (Field, 2002). To understand the impact of the new neoliberal political consensus we have to be aware of at least three other levels of consensus, intended to reverse the political-ideological assumptions of the Keynesian consensus: the first one concerns the future of the economy (World Bank, 2000); the second is about development policies (McMichael, 1996); and the third refers to the role of the state in the economy (World Bank, 1997). Out of all this arises in the first instance a new global economy associated with a growing global prevalence of a financial and investment way of thinking over the real economy (Chossudovsky, 1997), as well as the emergence of a new international division of labour (Tilly, 1995; Olesen, 2008, 2010).

The result has been a profound impact on the social structures that shape the socialization of individuals, with the result that, on the one hand, there has been a huge increase in the social divide between classes within national societies, even changing the norms of social stratification which had prevailed since the post-war period; and on the other hand, it has caused a break with the collective cultural values of the construction of the sense of belonging and social identity, by putting constraints on and personalizing their own symbolic classification criteria of social and cultural relationships. There is therefore a new economy, a new type of politics and a new social stratification emerging in our contemporary history. And it is in this broader scenario of social transition that we witness the shift from the hegemony of the perspective of *lifelong education* to that of *lifelong learning*.

The concept of *lifelong learning* was the dominant political outlook at the beginning of this century. However, this is not strictly speaking a 'new' concept, as Lima points out, 'it is important to understand the centrality assigned to lifelong learning starting with its secondary or rather peripheral emergence in the 1970, as the satellite idea of the then key concepts of lifelong education or continuing education' (Lima, 2003, p. 130). It is important to remember that many buzz words in the field of education received official recognition within the context of the main international political bodies. Thus, the promotion of the *lifelong learning* paradigm is especially linked to the OECD and the EU, as both produced several policy documents, such as the OECD report published in 1973, *Recurrent Education – a strategy for lifelong learning*, (OECD, 1973) and after that, the document entitled *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* published by the European Commission in 2000, one of the most important and disseminated policy documents in 21st century.

In the widely distributed *Memorandum* the concept of *lifelong learning* is understood as: 'any learning activity with an objective, undertaken on a continuous

basis and aimed at improving knowledge, skills and competences' (Comissão das Comunidades Europeias, 2000, p. 3). The distinction is clearly made between two of the dimensions associated with the concept: one of them is expressed in the term 'lifelong', where 'the emphasis is laid on time: learning during a lifetime, continuously or periodically' (ibid., p. 3); and a second dimension is expressed in the term 'lifewide' in all areas of life, which:

draws attention to the dissemination of learning, which can take place in all aspects of our lives (...) reminding us that a useful and pleasant acquisition of knowledge can take place, and indeed does, within the bosom of the family, during our leisure time and in our continuing social and professional life. (ibid., p. 3)

It is widely known that the concept of *lifelong learning* has become quite dominant today in transnational policies concerning adult education, and has enjoyed a degree of recognition in particular in the context of European policies since the 1995 White Paper (Comissão Europeia, 1995) and 1996, the *European year of lifelong learning*. This event heralded the launching pad for European guidelines concerning political agendas in the field of national mandates for adult education. Since then, within this 'silent enrolment explosion' taking place in the field of adult education (Tuijnman, 1996, p. 26), it is possible to pick out the most frequent interpretations presented in public debate about the concept of *lifelong learning*, and which form the basis of its widespread adoption in the new canonical educational *ethos* present in many of the contexts of today's adult education, namely: one in which it is presented as being a key tool for adaptation to change, both by individuals as well as organizations and society in general, to the extent that the concept is perceived as being the best educational tool to increase flexibility and economic competitiveness; in another sense it is seen as a policy of social cohesion and for combating exclusion through educational programs intended for adult audiences considered problematic; another interpretation presents it as a factor of employability and professional promotion; and a final one that shows it as a strategy to develop consumer-citizen participation in the social, cultural and political spheres of their societies. It is significant that since the turn of the century, all European governments have been implementing adult education policies referring to the *lifelong learning* paradigm that are eminently vocational and technocratic in nature, as we found during the course of a recent research project on European countries' national reports to CONFINTEA VI (Barros, Guimarães & Lima, 2012).

This widespread adoption has been behind the latest turning point to take place in the history of this sector, and which Jarvis sums up as follows: 'the commodification of education for adults' (Jarvis, 1995, p. 242). In public debate in this field there was a conceptual and theoretical reconstruction in adult education, based on sources from management, especially on the theory of human capital and the theory of development of human resources, whose ideological basis is neoliberal (Milana, 2012). The main consequence of this is that the meaning and purpose of education is now reinterpreted in terms of productivity and competitiveness. This political-ideological trend is reflected in the majority of adult educational practices on offer in the capitalist centres and southern European developing countries³. This can be illustrated by the Portuguese case, where we find a predominance of educational political discourses oriented towards adaptability, employability and the production of competitive advantages in the global market (Barros, 2009, forthcoming).

In this way, the economic, political and cultural bases that underline the adoption of *lifelong learning* in a political sense have contributed to the spread of a new mission statement for adult education: as a management tool of the work force; as a means to

prevent forms of social conflict; and as a tool of adaptability. The first statement sees adult education as a central instrument for the management of the workforce (European Round Table of Industrialists [ERTI], 1995). The premise for this interpretation is based on changes in the economic situation recorded in the last decades, which are presented as inevitable, in particular with regard to the dramatic transformations that have occurred in the world of work. These changes have led to the systematic erosion of outward signs of well-being that marked the so-called ‘thirty glorious years’, which followed World War II, namely: full employment, labour rights, universal social rights, the gradual tertiarisation of business, the exponential growth of consumption, increased leisure time, the expansion of access to education (Mishra, 1995, 1998). The oil crisis of the 70’s is the milestone that marks the end of this cycle and the beginning of another more austere age, which has been labelled the period of ‘thirty disastrous years’ by the most critical sectors (Forrester, 1997; Chomsky, 2000), or as the ‘new economy’ by the more conservative sectors (Taleb, 2007; Krugman, 2008). The most representative characteristics of this second cycle are: the emergence and maintaining of mass structural unemployment; international competition with regard to work; and rapid and constant technological innovations. In this context, adult education, now restructured for a market context which also favours a *lifelong learning* approach, is there to provide a range of services, which, from the point of view of human resources management, are seen as the key to increasing efficient productivity (Comissão Europeia, 2002; Consejo Europeo, 2011). These educational offers are presented as a required investment for the entire manufacturing sector that will represent gains in competitiveness in the national economies in the global market, with the promise of future returns and benefits for the population.

The second statement sees adult education as a means to prevent forms of social conflict (OECD, 2003, 2005). This interpretation is based on the promotion of social cohesion and the fight against social exclusion, which are essential in a context where the result of social options and policies of the new economy, namely the neoliberal consensus, is the systematic churning out of the unemployed, the spread of poverty, the generalization of insecure employment and a sharp drop in real wages, as well as an unprecedented creation and concentration of wealth, while at the same time there is more social inequality and a rising rate of bankruptcy (Martin & Schumann, 1996). The result of this is an imminent threat of civil violence on the part of a growing section of the population that is marginalized by an uncaring political class. In Europe, the social consequences of the erosion of the welfare state (which reflected the political commitment that permitted the articulation of democracy and capitalism on behalf of social justice) gave rise to an unprecedented increase in the scale of long-term structural unemployment, creating social framework that is harmful from a social point of view, but not necessarily from an economic perspective (Boyer, 1999). The massive amount of existing offers of education for young people and adults, both in the public and private sector, which are presented as new opportunities for employability (European Association for the Education of Adults [EAEA], 2006), can be interpreted as a way of curbing violence, a sort of safety valve or palliative factor in the social management of unemployment, inspired by the classic social control mechanisms, and well-known among conservative social policies. It is all about maintaining social order, despite injustice, to ensure the proper functioning of the economy (George & Taylor-Gooby, 1996).

The third statement sees adult education as a tool of adaptability for the benefit of the working population. This way of seeing it is based on the key assumption that it is employees themselves who are responsible for maintaining their jobs, and this

necessarily involves self-empowerment and the constant updating of skills. Here the future is presented as inexorable with technological change and development seen as something inevitable and unstoppable (Beck, 1998, 2000). In this context, it is argued that employees must learn to learn throughout their life, in an aggressive logic, in which, along with the current systematic appeal for training and *lifelong learning* there is a renewed highlighting of individual responsibilities for the acquisition of technical knowledge (OECD, 2000) and ‘competitive skills’ (Lima, 2003, p. 129).

In short, the current understanding of the adult education mission is founded on these three central political statements. From this it follows that the adoption of the perspective of *lifelong learning* represents, essentially, a partial and instrumental appropriation of the field of adult education, whose potential for social transformation and social emancipation, which was developed in the framework of a philosophical tradition with critical and radical roots, has been strategically confined to a state of latency. In this way its use has been strictly limited to what best suits the market, that is, it is confined to the scope of a philosophical tradition with technocratic and vocational roots.

Mapping the effects of policy changes: from collective qualifications to individual competences

As we have seen, *lifelong education* and *lifelong learning* each have a different approach and a firmly based way of understanding a definition of adult education, especially in terms of how intentionality or mission is attributed. In other words, each of these models involves the adoption of specific underlying principles that imply very different practices.

This discussion (occurring on capitalist centres) could be situated within the socio-productive restructuring movement which began in the last quarter of the twentieth century. This shift of contexts has implied the transfer of the *model of qualification* to what is known as the *model of competence*, which gave the concept of competence (later competences) and empowerment such a strong central position within the framework of today’s adult education. This is so both at the level of its discursive practices, as well as formal, non-formal and informal educational practices. From this perspective particular attention is drawn to the fact that contemporary educational practices carried out with adults which appeal to the concept of competence, particularly those with a non-formal character, turn out to reveal an *ethos* whose main characteristic is to put education at the service of business interests (Boshier, 1998). Most of the current adult education discursive practices dominant in European policy documents leave us with little doubts about this. In fact, the *lifelong learning* paradigm provides an understanding of the concept of competence that appears to be deeply instrumental and applies overwhelmingly to key benchmark skills that underpin a logic of educational results (meaning productivity gains for companies, and competitive empowerment for employees). Despite theoretical work to accomplish an acceptable educational definition of competence (Gillet, 1998; Perrenoud, 1999; Le Boterf, 2000), there is not yet a consensus on this. In mapping the effects of changes in terms of this conceptual domain, we see that the shift in thinking from competence to competences was mainly the rolling out of a new European Union policy concept.

The understanding of the evolution of the *lifelong education* approach towards that of *lifelong learning* requires an understanding of some continuities (these include the critique component of the school system in the Faure Report, which allowed a more inclusive view of formats and innovative contexts for adult education and learning), as

well as an understanding of some tensions and ambivalences stemming from an accelerated process of socio-productive restructuring. There has been a change in models, from the Taylor-Ford production paradigm to a new flexible or post-Ford production model. In the present context of hybrid structural transitions, we can observe that the concept of competences is winning the central ground.

The current hegemony of the concept of competences (particularly the prevailing understanding which reduces it to the concept of professional competence) is firmly bound to the interpretation that has traditionally been given to the concept of qualification. The spread of the concept of qualification, which came to the fore in the late 1940s, was based on two main axes of socio-political structuring, which together would help to sustain a model of social organization that would dominate throughout the Western world. These two axes were: the system of collective agreements, aimed at classifying and ranking jobs; and the systems of education and vocational training, with the task of classifying and organizing knowledge around diplomas and certificates. It is because of this that there is now a triple meaning attached to the current understanding of the concept of qualification. First, in terms of employees, referring to the knowledge and skills which stem from their vocational training; next in terms of the job, indicating the standard requirements required by the job; thirdly in terms of classifying the employees in the hierarchy of professional categories, each with their own salary and legitimate status, and which then serve as a basis for the idea of promotion and social emancipation (Kovacs, 1994; Schwartz, 1995; Bellier, 2001).

This qualification-based model, because it was so highly structured, allowed for a society in which individuals *a priori* believed that a certain level of qualification would correspond to a certain level of social status. This *status quo* acquired by qualifications can imply two things. First, it allows a collective feeling of belonging, which is important for the construction of professional and social identity among workers (Olesen, 2008), since different qualifications had a certain secure market value, that is, they would be the holders of a particular value that is unchanged by the context. Second, it allows for the creation of concrete social promotion channels resulting from a legitimate and permanent collective bargaining, based on collective agreement pay scales, out of which came, for example, the statutes of civil service careers.

However, this sort of social structuring came to a crisis at the end of the twentieth century, giving way to a time of uncertainty in which new modes of organization and social stratification emerged, whose rules are not always easily understood. This is a paradoxical situation in society, since, within the framework of changes in the relationship between the economy, the workplace and between education and training systems, some rather ambiguous situations have arisen (Bron, Kurantowicz, Olesen & West, 2005). For example, alongside a trend towards the devaluation of certificates and diplomas, and an ending to meritocratic opportunities for social advancement and access to jobs, there co-exist different ways of social, symbolic and professional classification, not unlike the transition in hegemony from the qualifications model to the new model of competences. In this way a new set of discursive practices emerge that point to a growing inadequacy of the qualification model. These appear to be based on changes in the employment system, which now requires technical skills to deal with the innovations introduced into these organizations by new information and communication technologies (OECD, 2006). Therefore the model of competences is now presented as a response to the inadequacies diagnosed in the model of qualifications. And, as is to be expected, this response springs promptly from the theories of human resources management, and in particular from the schools of thought of the so-called forward-

thinking and predictive school of management (considered as key elements of the new economy).

The model of competences, on which the recent models and provisions for non-formal education for adults are founded, presupposes two things: first, that there is a connection between competence and action, in which experience is the central concept; and second, that competences refers exclusively to the person, by which competence implies a new assumption of responsibility at the individual level, although previously it was at the collective level, as well as the social recognition and encouragement of this assumption of responsibility through the concept of empowerment.

The influence of this shift in responsibilities is quite profound for adult education, both in the political discourse about the field and in the underlying logic of educational practices regarded as innovative, especially in formal and non-formal methods with singular emphasis on the recognition of prior learning (Barros, 2011a). These new practices based on competences are, of course, the ones which are given the most support today by the supranational financing policies based on the *lifelong learning* approach, which, in the context of the European Union in turn mark the agenda both of educational policies carried out by the Ministries of Education, as well as the social policies carried out by the Ministries of Labour of the various Member States.

Thus there appears a new ideological-political rhetoric that articulates the field of adult education with the world of training and employment by means of various educational neoliberal governance mechanisms (Dale, 2005; Barros, 2009). This new way of thinking comes on the back of the idea of an inevitable technological shock (Fukuyama, 1992), requiring people as well as organizations and institutions to constantly adapt to evolving technologies, at the risk of countries losing their global economic competitiveness.

Considering the close relationship today between the new economy, flexible work practices and educational practices aimed at competences and skills, it is not surprising that the terms, approaches and concepts used in the context of management theories often appear in discursive practices on education in general and about adult education in particular. Moreover, in turn, and in a similar way, some terms, approaches and concepts in the field of education are appropriated and re-conceptualized under the auspices of management and organizational flexibility (Tuijnman, 1996; Lima, 2003; Barros, 2011b).

These much used flexibility strategies are the most visible aspect of an ongoing neoliberal globalization (Soros, 1987; Greenspan, 2007), and are based on four axes of action: in numerical flexibility, by which businesses quickly reduce or increase their workforce, basing this on the concept of additional human resources, which is used in the form of temporary work, short term contracts, part-time, and occasional work. The result is that this kind of flexibility, which is very popular at the moment, leads increasingly to the casual nature of employment; a second axis, which supports the first, is flexibility in salaries which, in essence, breaks wage agreements standardized by the model of qualifications, reducing expenditure on employees and increasing profits; a third strategic axis is called distancing which functions by subcontracting both goods and services; and finally a fourth axis is functional flexibility, which appears closely associated, on the one hand, with the general idea of multi-competences, and on the other hand, with the idea of transferability of these same competences, by applying these in such a way the desired results for the organization will be achieved. The result is the change from a model of salaried fixed employment to a job model which is becoming increasingly autonomous in that it transfers the responsibility for job management to the one who carries it out. This model of competences, which has come

to take precedence in the discursive practices of adult education, is widely advocated by management theorists. For example Senge (1990) defends, under the new information and management systems, the appliance of five key aspects, designed with the explicit purpose, it should be noted, to create new models of thought among the workforce that may contribute towards the liberation of their collective aspirations.

All these transitions are a reflection of the latest evolution in capitalism, which has been transformed into a wild capitalism, which leaves its marks on the whole of today's social life, making it de-standardized and individualistic and creating a constant climate of uncertainty and risk. We live in times of growing insecurity arising from the instability of our professional situation, which is also reflected in the physical and psychological health of workers, who are becoming increasingly isolated and socially unprotected. This is exacerbated by increasing social inequality, exclusion and violence. Seen as a whole, this situation gives society a general sense of disenchantment and alienation, allied to a paradoxical situation in which the adult is incited to action while at the same time is discouraged from acting, that is, people are encouraged to be compulsively active while receiving education. Furthermore it is to be noted that they are engaged in *lifelong learning* in all aspects of their lives. These individuals are told not only that their employability is in their own hands but also that the possibility of them becoming competent workers is also their own responsibility. But a competent worker at the beginning of the 21st century is a well-adapted one, whose personal action is reduced to the sphere of their positive professional commitment, and their positive performance as a consumer. Therefore, a citizen that is competent to work and consume cannot be too active in asking questions and in querying unfair social realities. In a way, the competences model of lifelong learning seems today to be actively advocating the consolidation of a 'collective free aspirations world'. We believe that this neoliberal utopia can be upset by another kind of commitment in educational work.

Final thoughts on interpreting shifts in adult education policies

The impact of these transformations in adult education is having a profound effect, and is generating a paradoxical situation. In fact this has traditionally always been a field of knowledge in which critical perspectives have played a part, and this has given rise to most of its inheritance and heritage in terms of theoretical and pedagogical conceptualisations developed by a broad set of humanist educators, many of whom agree with the general assumptions of the paradigm of *lifelong education*. Despite this, the phenomenon of education and training for competences invaded the field by means of its polyvalent rhetoric, which comes from the normative, political-philosophical discourses which are in essence administrative and managerial (Fragoso & Guimarães, 2010).

We can safely conclude that one of the main differences between *lifelong education* and *lifelong learning* comes down to the role and mission that is assigned to adult education itself. Thus, as far as lifelong education is concerned adult education political mandate was essentially a social transformation plan, based on a humanist ideology, seen as a vision of building a learning society, made up of interdependent institutions and committed to the safeguarding of social justice and the *res publica*. But with respect to *lifelong learning*, the political mandate applied to adult education is seen as a social adaptation policy, following a neoliberal and individualistic ideology, represented in the vision of building a learning society, made up of autonomous organisations that provide qualifications and which are committed to safeguarding private interests. They are two

opposite poles of a *continuum* with contextual characteristics to which researchers should apply even greater tools of analysis.

It is clear to us that any debate about adult education will have to be conducted in the domain of political principles and values (Barros, 2012). We disagree here with discursive practices of mainstream European Union and OECD policy documents. We take the line of some critical educators and researchers who see the evolutionary path of *lifelong education* towards *lifelong learning* mainly as a division rather than a continuity. Indeed, the concept of *lifelong learning* may seem on the surface to follow in the footsteps of the underlying principles of the concept of *lifelong education*. However, as we have highlighted in this article, the way many of these concepts was understood underwent drastic change, and some of them re-appeared dressed up in technical and de-politicised language. In other words, we believe that the current interest in *lifelong learning*, far from implying a renewed interest in the political social ideals of the seventies, as at first glance the discourse appears to suggest, is in fact based on exactly the opposite: its deliberate and continuous erosion. Boshier goes even further and is quite candid in his criticism when he says that ‘if lifelong education was an instrument for democracy, lifelong learning is almost entirely preoccupied with the cash register’ (Boshier, 1998, p. 5). Basing our arguments on the principles of critical social thought, we can interpret these changes and observe that the original socio-political vision of *lifelong education* that advocates social justice and a ‘co-naissance’ (Wildemeersch, 2010), has been subverted; it has been replaced with *lifelong learning* that advocates social peace, which turns it into a new form of oppression (lifelong and lifewide).

Faced with this, many critical educators and researchers have sought to revive or at least give visibility to educational practices in the field of critical and engaged adult education within their spheres of influence, albeit on a somewhat small-scale. They carry this out on a more informal level, potentially still adhering to a tradition inherited from the principles of a socio-educational and socio-cultural emancipatory perspective (Ackland, 2011), or based on popular education (Martin & Shaw, 2006), and community interventions for local development (Wildemeersch & Kurantowicz, 2011). These are in some way strongholds, normally seen as radical or critical (and usually not subject to EU financial programmes), and represent small pockets of political resistance to the dominant management-based *ethos* currently associated with adult education and learning in both public and private institutions (which appears to have succumbed to a market-based rhetoric). It is urgent that counter arguments of a critical and irreverent nature should be applied to these overwhelmingly dominant discourses, so that at least one clear lesson concerning the historical heritage of adult education should be drawn: it is a field with a long conceptual tradition linked to the safeguarding of the democratisation of society, the promotion of human rights and social transformation. It will, thus, help to create more enlightened communities and consequently societies where there is a greater sense of justice and solidarity. This is what the participants in the WSF (World Social Forum) discussions have been comprehensively demanding for the benefits of all.

Notes

¹ See, Ivan Illich (1970) as the most radical thinker against formal school, and Philip Coombs (1968) as the most representative of the concept of crisis in education.

² As Paul Lengrand (1970), Julius Nyerere (1974), Ettore Gelpi (1983), for example, put it.

³ We use Wallerstein (1984) ideas on power and the modern economy to identify countries as Germany as a capitalist centre and countries as Portugal as a southern European developing country.

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