

CONFINTEA VI follow-up: the challenges of moving from rhetoric to action

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Introduction

The Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) was held in December 2009 in Belém, Brazil. It was considered a landmark meeting, as it took place in the so-called South, in the country that gave birth to Paulo Freire, the most important pedagogue of the second half of the 20th century, and an emblematic figure of popular education in Latin America. Starting with the first CONFINTEA in 1949, this international meeting has been organised by UNESCO every twelve years. With so many recommendations of the previous CONFINTEAs still unfulfilled, the guiding principle of CONFINTEA VI was “From rhetoric to action”, with the conference theme being “Living and learning for a viable future: the power of adult learning”.

In the run-up to this meeting, Member States were asked to prepare national reports on the status of adult education. A total of 154 reports was submitted and used in the preparation of the regional reports as well as for the first ever *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE; UIL 2009a)*. There were five regional preparatory meetings held in Mexico, South Korea, Kenya, Hungary and Tunisia, producing their respective Regional Outcome Documents. Two of the editors of this special issue wrote some of the chapters for *GRALE*, while the third

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one played a major role in coordinating the writing process and co-authoring the report as well as coordinating the organisation of the CONFINTEA meeting.

The organised participation of civil society, be it in the preparation of the national reports, in the regional meetings, in the International Civil Society Forum (FISC) or in the actual programme of the conference, is another unique feature of CONFINTEA VI.

With 144 Member States in attendance in Belém, the governments committed themselves to 45 action points in the *Belém Framework for Action (BFA; UIL 2009b)* which covered five areas: (a) policy, (b) governance, (c) financing, (d) participation, equity and inclusion and (e) quality. Given the importance of adult literacy within the range of adult education provision, it is given special mention. The conclusion of the document places special emphasis on the monitoring of the implementation of the *BFA*, with specific responsibilities for the Member States and UNESCO. How each of the 45 action points are followed up will depend on the context and priorities of each Member State. There are, however, several common challenges which need to be addressed in all the Member States.

The challenge of developing a critical body of knowledge on adult education

Adult learning is the subject of study of a host of academic communities, but it is also a most serious preoccupation of civil society institutions. As such, the typical three areas of work in any academic field, namely the scholarship of *discovery*, the scholarship of *integration* and the scholarship of *intervention* (Report of the Universitywide Task Force on Faculty Rewards 1991) are achieved with varying degrees of satisfaction in the field of adult education. One might argue that the scholarship of discovery (what has traditionally been considered basic research) has not been prominent in the field of adult learning and that it should be reinforced, enhancing basic research in adult education. By contrast, the scholarship of integration (using multidisciplinary methods, interdisciplinary theories and data, as well as analytical and normative orientations) feature prominently in the work that is represented in this special issue. But above all, it is the scholarship of intervention which has attracted the most attention in this specialised field of research, evaluation and policy-making. This is not surprising, because what has characterised the history of a great part of adult education is the attempt to connect theory, research and praxis.

We sincerely hope that given the mandate to produce a mid-term *Global Report on Adult Learning Education (GRALE)*, more emphasis will be placed on, and more resources devoted to the scholarship of discovery. When the scholarship of discovery in adult education becomes compatible and reaches an equal footing with the other two modalities, this will create better conditions and more legitimacy for the work conducted on adult education in Departments or Schools of Education in the world.

However, questions about alternative frameworks of theory, methods and research in adult education should be placed in the context of the connections between education and politics. Some specialists but more often than not pundits and policy commentators obsessed with evidence-based policy research tend to

downplay or completely ignore the connections between education, politics and power. This is obviously a most serious pitfall, and one that urgently needs to be corrected.

One of the editors of this special issue has argued that for critical theorists

research cannot be separated from political struggle; hence scholarship and activism are inevitably part and parcel of our life journey. Paulo Freire argued that politics and education cannot be easily separated. The same applies to scholarship and political struggle, which cannot be easily dissociated, not even for purely didactic purposes. We conduct research and teaching to change the world, not simply to observe as the detached scientist what happens around us or to manipulate knowledge as social *alquimia* or as social engineering. Critical scholars do not share with technocrats the illusion that manipulating knowledge, using technocratic means and the stern application of instrumental rationality, will solve most if not all the problems of education (Torres 2009, pp. 34–35).

There is no question that we cannot pretend that the whole world of policy be transformed in the direction of critical thinking and critical theory. But at least we may hope that blind technocratic orientations or policies based on bureaucratic and authoritarian rationality in adult education might become the exception rather than the rule.

Tracey Burns and Tom Schuller argue that rather than evidence-based policy research they prefer

the term ‘evidence-informed policy research’ (EIPR), which we define as “the conscientious and explicit use of current best evidence in making decisions and choosing between policy options”.

EIPR can be distinguished from conventional scientific research (however that is defined) in that the former is oriented to informing action while the latter is oriented to developing theory and testing hypotheses. These are not mutually exclusive categories, but the distinction is important, as burdens and standards of proof of causality are very different and in many cases evidence-informed policy is obliged to use the best available evidence at a given moment in time (Burns and Schuller 2009, pp. 58–59).

Unfortunately, their perception is misplaced, because they assume an obsolete perspective of what educational research is all about (e.g. oriented towards hypothesis-testing and theory development) and because the authors do not seem to understand the complexities of the academic work and the three modalities of academic research (the scholarship of discovery, integration and intervention) that actually inform the field of adult education.

Moreover, the obsession with “evidence-based policy research” or, in the modified version of Burns and Schuller, of EIPR, covers up another important trait of our days: the fetishisation of method in contemporary research and its ability to inform decision-making. Likewise it hides the absurdity of treating people as numbers, and treating learning, knowledge, individual traits and behaviours as represented in test scores, internationally-defined “best practices” or prescriptive

indicators of educational quality such as the ones emerging from the World Bank and OECD papers.

What emerged in the civil society debates that preceded CONFINTEA VI is that we cannot aspire to construct solid scientific knowledge divorced from the experience, aspirations and dreams of the communities and social movements which are the movers and shakers in the field of adult learning education. We cannot, in short, completely dissociate the empirical-analytical process of research from the normative.

Historically, it has been UNESCO that has been asked to perform an almost impossible task: to preserve, enhance, take stock and take advantage of the politics of culture and education of the main stakeholders (e.g. nation-states) while at the same time providing leadership advancing new forms of thinking and action in the field of adult education. Anyone who has worked in academia and interacted with government officials knows that these two tasks are impossible to achieve simultaneously. This is so because there are different rationalities at play in the diverse national scenarios. Policy officials and politicians are reluctant to implement policy research that does not match their policy preferences. Another reason is the lack of critical analysis that is now beginning to undermine even the quality of academic research in most fields (Boron 2008).

Thus the challenges of implementing the mandate of CONFINTEA VI are magnified. This is particularly so when we know that the true answer to the dilemmas of adult education are not the method as a fetish, or off-the-shelf indicators as indelible markers, or 'evidence-based policy research', which define per se, without any cultural or historical condition, what quality of adult education is all about. But what is even more damaging is the negation of the strong interactions between knowledge, power and politics; it is this rationale that has led to overlooking the extraordinary contribution of civil society institutions and social movements in shaping the new rounds of policy and practice in adult education.

The challenge of effective governance in adult learning and education

The CONFINTEA process is essentially a global policy process which has as one of its major aims to ameliorate the conditions surrounding adult learning and education (ALE); ultimately to foster social and cultural life that is consistent with sustainable development, peace and security in the world. UNESCO has taken up the daunting challenge to steer, at an international level, the multiple stakeholders involved throughout this process. The challenges of doing this effectively are real and cannot be overstated. The onus of this undertaking however does not rest solely with UNESCO. All stakeholders have a role to play and bear unique responsibilities in forming and maintaining effective governance mechanisms toward these ends, at all levels ranging from the global to the local (global-to-regional-to-sub-regional-to-national-to-sub-national-to-local), and the local to the global.

Indeed, perhaps one of the most important challenges facing adult learning and education today is to develop and manage effective structures which foster democratic or bottom-up governance while at the same time providing leadership and nurturing the creation of shared meanings which can enable effective

communication and mobilisation toward shared goals and aspirations. The mechanics around how stakeholders interact at all levels for the purposes of reaching these ends thus need to be tended to carefully in order to make a real difference in the area of adult learning and education and ultimately in peoples' lives.

The large-scale divergence in the meaning that underpins key terms such as *functional literacy*, *non-formal education* and *lifelong learning*, which was apparent in the reports prepared by national governments in preparation for CONFINTEA VI, is a tell-tale sign that more needs to be done in order to enable effective communication among the stakeholders relevant to adult learning and education. The same term can come to mean different things to different stakeholders, making it impossible to pin down shared meanings to any particular term. This is especially the case in the absence of an authoritative account of what those terms actually mean to different stakeholders, and even worse in the absence of a dynamic mechanism that creates, revises, consolidates and disseminates shared meanings over an extended period of time.

It is clear that there is a need for more advanced mechanisms that help to produce socially shared meanings in the field of adult learning and education. Ones that go beyond any given domain such as research, policy or practice, or any individual such as researcher, policy-maker or practitioner. This is needed for effective advocacy, collective action and progress on many social ills but this problem is particularly acute in the area of adult learning and education because the stakeholders are dealing with multi-dimensional concepts that are relevant for social action and premised on the notion of democratic participation.¹ It is not difficult to see that without a common vocabulary, one that does justice to the diverse realities and needs of the world but at the same time allows for effective communication, it becomes very difficult to coordinate or mobilise social action and, accordingly, resources. A lack of common understandings thus deeply limits the scope for coordination, cooperation and development, not only at the global level, but between stakeholders such as governments, civil society and private interests at all levels.

Since the 1970s, UNESCO has played a key role in shaping and disseminating the policy concept of lifelong learning. The concept essentially denotes an overall scheme aimed at restructuring the existing education system and at developing the entire educational potential outside the education system so as to embrace social and individual development of all kinds. It is best spelled out in what can be labelled as two authoritative and inspiring reports, namely: The Edgar Faure Report from the 1970s (Faure et al. 1972) and the Jacques Delors Report from the 1990s (Delors et al. 1996).

Together, the two reports are authoritative for their adherence to common and shared values such as helping to build a sustainable world with just societies that value knowledge, promote peace, celebrate diversity and defend human rights. They have

¹ For example, in the medical field, relatively few people feel the need to develop their own version of a particular medical concept or to challenge physicians. Expert scientific authority in this area is generally taken for granted. And by and large the medical field is not democratised – at least not yet.

been crucial for extending a lifeline to adult learning and education, which has been a traditionally and chronically neglected and under-prioritised policy area. And while there has been at least limited success in setting out the vision at the level of core values, less success is apparent in enabling stakeholders (i.e. civil society, adult educators) in many parts of the world to have the ability and authority to pin down shared meanings around the policy concept of lifelong learning and thus to mobilise action and resources.

Despite the fact that the two above-mentioned reports have long been published, many of the CONFINTEA VI national reports contain admissions that the concept of lifelong learning has had little impact thus far other than to add confusion to an already wide array of concepts promoted by UNESCO which stakeholders continue to grapple with (e.g. functional literacy, non-formal education). Many note the lack of understanding of the concept of lifelong learning because it is so far removed from the local realities or prior understandings. This points to a need to foster complementary processes and mechanisms where shared meanings around this and other policy concepts can be generated through further dialogue and exchange on an ongoing basis and beyond a handful of reports.

Generating shared meanings and understandings for the purposes of effective governance in a complex world and in a way that is consistent with democratic ideals is however no easy feat. This necessitates dynamic processes not only at all levels, but also those that enable the interaction between different levels, from top to bottom and bottom to top, and across a wide range of stakeholders. Our contention is that managing diversity requires effective mechanisms to be in place for identifying and understanding the emerging discourses and realities at all levels and from the bottom, but that this needs to be supplemented by processes which synthesise and reconcile these into an overall code which can serve to converge resources towards shared goals. At a minimum, this would include extensive:

- data collection capabilities (both qualitative and quantitative);
- networks and interfaces that facilitate consultations between key stakeholders on the front end of joint deliberations; and
- peer review consultations of synthesised products on the back end of deliberations.

In our view, a key challenge to effective governance in adult learning and education is the development, maintenance and development of these tools and mechanisms at all levels, and on a continually recurring basis. We sincerely hope that interested stakeholders from all over the world will devote more resources and attention to fostering effective governance in adult learning and education.

This special issue of the *International Review of Education* brings together selected key issues that lie at the heart of the follow-up of CONFINTEA VI. Coming from diverse contexts, each of the articles raises explicit and implicit challenges on how to meet the different action points of the *Belém Framework for Action*. Moacir Gadotti's contribution focuses on the importance of ensuring adult education as a right and is followed by Shirley Walters and Linda Cooper's article which explores the work-related notions of adult education in the context of globalisation. Carlos Alberto Torres juxtaposes the nature of the nation-state and the

character of new social movements and how the dynamics of this could give way to more democratic measures. Next, Carolyn Medel-Añonuevo and Anna Bernhardt raise the issue of sustaining gender issues through CONFINTEA processes. The two articles on indigenous people by Sandra Morrison and Timote Vaioleti and Sylvia Schmelkes from the perspectives of Aotearoa and Latin America respectively highlight the common and the diverse challenges in addressing this specific section of the population which happens to be one of the most marginalised groups. The role of higher education in adult education in the European context is described by Balázs Németh while Kjell Rubenson and Tom Nesbit examine the process of the production of the National Report submitted by Canada as well as its content. Mahamadou Cheick Diarra outlines the key challenges in the training of trainers in Africa as they affect the quality of adult education. This is followed by Mohamed Abdellatif Kissami's presentation of the literacy situation in the Maghreb region and the role of CONFINTEA VI follow-up. Finally, the last two articles by Manzoor Ahmed and Cesar Guadalupe and Manuel Cardoso draw on two perspectives on measuring literacy.

Those of us who care about people, their learning needs and adult education, believe the *Belém Framework for Action* provides a splendid opportunity to reinvigorate, renew, perhaps even reinvent adult learning and education. This special issue shows that to continue with “business as usual” is not an option. It is imperative that adult learning and education is considered neither a low priority of governments, nor simply a responsibility of civil society actors and UNESCO in its traditional role of advocate in the field. We need a new political, technical and ethical perspective that offers us a bias for hope. This special issue was conceived with this perspective.

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