Change orientated learning and the Greek disability movement - a mutually beneficial encounter between knowledge and action

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Abstract

This paper is a qualitative survey based on the exploration of disabled peoples' existing experience of participating in non-formal forms of education, which take place in the context of the Greek disability movement. Its aim is to record the way in which this kind of education can be a catalyst in the empowerment of disabled people. Data was obtained through semi-structured interviews held with both learners with disabilities and educators and from direct observation of the educational process. The main findings of this study explore the ways in which educators can contribute to the empowerment of disabled people. It is found that the empowerment of learners cannot simply be regarded as an aspect of education but rather as an integral part embedded in the content, in the educational methods and in the role of the educator. Finally, the paper highlights the necessity for disability organisations to cooperate with the fields of disability studies and adult education, in order for them to jointly conceive and try out new more transformative pedagogical methods.

Introduction

In this paper, the disability movement is perceived as a "support system", which was developed in order to achieve the transition from the medical approach model of disability to the social approach model. Two assumptions are responsible for the choice of the disability movement and for engaging with the issue of disability: a) the disability movement has a clear critical social action orientation b) both educational theory and practice have generally followed an avoidance strategy in the management of disability matters.

As regards the former, the disability movement participates in the reflective intake and reconstruction of the definition of disability, and this is of vital importance, as definitions semantically surround all spheres of human activity and give them a symbolic meaning. The disability movement puts up resistance to definitions of normality and 'this resistance implies confronting disablism not just in the ideologies of the able-bodied but in the institutionalised practices stemming from these ideologies' (Oliver, 1990, p. 77).

As for the latter, the educational theory and practice approach, disabled people as a special target-group with specific inherent deficits, needs and dispositions, hence they focus on special programmes for dealing with "them" (Covington, 2004; Polson & White, 2000; DuBois, 1998). This means that the matter is limited to specialised organisations or researchers and therefore raises no issues with wider implications on educational research.

The two aforementioned assumptions call for an interdisciplinary meeting of two fields: *adult education* and *disability studies*. Many critical adult education and disability studies have recognised the potential of interdisciplinarity between the two fields as far as disability is concerned (Beckett, 2015; Clark, 2006; Erevelless, 2000). Clark (2006, p. 310) argues that 'disability studies and adult education share an intersecting interest in issues of learning, asymmetrical power relationships, hegemony, race, gender, class, education, social and self-agency, identity construction, contestation and representation, sexual orientation, adult development, and social change'.

In conclusion, knowledge that is capable of allowing the disability movement to put an end to oppression cannot be generated within the prevailing culture. It can only be produced by consciously putting up resistance to this culture and by searching history and social relations for the reasons and forms of oppression.

This paper attempts to highlight the potential and the ways in which the Greek Disability Movement - GDM (namely the National Confederation of People with Disability of Greece[1]), expects to contribute, through education to the development of socially active agents, involved in the development and re-development of the disability situation. Education in the disability movement can be defined both as informal learning (through everyday experience, events, work groups, consultation procedures) and as non-formal learning (through grassroots organisations' related training) of people belonging to the disability movement. It can also be defined as learning which takes place in society at large, as a result of the existence and action of this movement (Gouin, 2009).

The empirical research was conducted in the framework of the educational programme of the GDM[2] titled: *'Education of elected members and or staff members of the disability movement in the policy planning of disability matters'*. The educational programme lasted 200 hours and was incorporated in the framework of the Operational Programme 'Education and Lifelong Learning' of the programming period 2007-2013 and was funded by Greece and the European Union (European Social Fund).

Theoretical framework

Change orientated learning and disability

Beckett (2015) based on Kumashiro's typology (2000, 2002), considers three options to the question 'What form might disability-focused anti-oppressive pedagogy take?': 1) 'Education about the Other', 2) 'Education that is Critical of Privileging and Othering' (Freire, Critical Pedagogy) and 3) 'Education that Transforms Students and Society' (Mezirow 2000). A critical composition of the second and third approach will be attempted in this text.

The purpose of education is for people to 'achieve a deepening awareness both of the sociocultural reality that shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality' (Freire, 1970, p. 27). Freire's idea of 'conscientization' was also used by Mezirow. However, while Freire refers to the 'conscientization' of social, cultural and political circumstances that define their lives, Mezirow (2000) refers to the 'conscientization' of a person's frame reference (meaning perspectives, meaning schemes).

Freire (1970) emphasizes oppression stemming from class and economic background, and makes no mention of the category of disability. This approach leaves room for the expansion of the debate and allows for the inclusion of analysis of other forms of power and knowledge, through which people constitute themselves as subjects.

Mezirow (2000) on the other hand, with his transformative learning theory, focuses mainly on aspects of personal change, with personal experience almost completely cut off from its social context. Mezirow limits his analysis in mentioning the significance of social conditions, since he steps no further, to describing or explaining the means and terms of their influence on the individual. This indicates the need to extend Mezirow's transformative learning theory and to explore the power of the social dimension of transformational learning as well as the interaction of learning with its wider social context.

One could indicatively mention bibliography references that make use of the transformative learning approach in relation to disability, such as Baumgartner (2002), Courtenay, Merriam, Reeves and Baumgartner (2000), Courtenay, Merriam and Reeves (1998), Rager (2003). In these references, representation of disability within the adult educational context is seen from a transformative or a self-directed learning paradigm and reflects disability as a biomedical event, presenting the adult learner with a disorienting dilemma and subsequently triggering a new experience of learning, a redefining of the meaning of life and identity, and/or an action for self-determination on a personal basis (Clark, 2006, p. 312).

These findings call for an alternative reading of the works of the two theorists; that is of Freire and Mezirow. It is along this line of thought that we shall attempt to formulate a social discourse on transformative learning, which stresses the importance of social movements, notably of the disability movement, in relation to transformative learning experiences, personal transformation and empowerment.

The Greek Disability Movement as an example of coordination of meanings and transformative learning

With the appearance and rise of 'new' (or not so new) social movements (such as the femininist movement, the environmental movement, the LGBT movement, the disability movement etc.) bibliography on critical adult education has expanded to include the action of individual movements (Crowther & Shaw, 1997; Foley, 2001; Holst, 2007). It is generally accepted by the radical social and educational theory, that social movements can be distinguished from other forms of collective behaviour in that they create "cognitive praxis"; that is, social movements have a dynamic role to play in challenging dominant understandings and generating new ones; they provide the framework from which new knowledge can emerge and they give impetus to social action (Crowther & Shaw, 1997; English & Mayo, 2012; Freire & Shor, 1987).

'New' social movements have a potentially transformative role, which facilitates new participatory democratic forms. Transformation is often perceived as a solitary and rather unexpected event, however catalyst events, frequently accelerating transformation, derive from a support system (Courtenay, Merriam, & Reeves, 1998). Therefore, transformation has both a personal - evolutionary and a socio - historical context.

The GDM finds itself in a particular social context, that is to say the environment of transition from the medical approach model to the social approach model of disability. The medical approach model of disability regards the aspect of disability as an individualised situation, which is caused by illness, injury or other health conditions and is defined as a physical, mental, sensory or psychological divergence from 'normal'. The social approach model regards disability not as a feature of the individual but as a 'social construction' or 'social product'. By introducing the social factor into the meaning of disability, one automatically also introduces the human rights dimension.

Disabled people have experienced the medical approach model in their everyday life (disability certification, family, education, work, etc.), and as a result they find the two models (the medical approach and the social approach) at conflict even within themselves. The re-framing of the meaning of disability, in the light of active participation in forming the socio-political field, constitutes an integral part of a transformational process that combines both thought and action (praxis). On this basis, the disability movement can be seen as an example of coordination of meanings and transformative learning. While the identity of persons with disabilities in the traditional and dated contextual framework is marked by the dualism "normal - deviant", the disability movement is concerned in terms of reflective reconstruction of meanings and codes, as well as of semantic reframing of the definition of the term 'disability'.

Frame analysis of interpretative frames[3] ['the notion of the schema of interpretation, or frame', which 'has proved very influential among scholars interested in symbolic aspects of collective action' (della Porta & Diani, 1999, p. 74)], allows us to capture the process of the attribution of meaning which lies behind the explosion of any conflict among disabled people. According to Snow and Benford (1988), there are three stages to this process, defined as the 'diagnostic', 'prognostic', and 'motivational' dimension of framing.

In the case of the disability movement, these stages correspond to the *recognition of disability as a social problem*, to the *recognition of possible strategies which could resolve it*, and finally to the *recognition of disabled people's motivations for action*. The following table illustrates an attempt to juxtapose the stages of attribution of a meaning behind the struggle of the disabled with the stages of transformative learning.

Table 1: Comparison of the stages of the Transformative Learning theory and of the Interpretative Frame theory

STAGES OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING		STAGES OF FRAMING	
1	A disorienting dilemma	1	**Diagnostic** (recognition of disability as a social problem)
2	Self - examination (along with a feeling of fear, anger, guilt or shame)		
3	A critical assessment of assumptions.		
4	Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared		
5	Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions.	2	**Prognostic**

6	Planning a course of action.		(recognition of possible strategies to resolve the issue)
7	Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan.	3	**Motivational** (recognition of motivation for action of people with disabilities)
8	Provisional trying of new roles.		
9	Building competence and self‑confidence in new roles and relationships		
10	A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspectives.		

The creation of a sense of self is closely linked to a frame reference, which *'is the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions'* (Mezirow, 2000, p. 16). Frame references represent cultural examples as well as personal opinions emanating from the process of recognition by 'important others' (family, school, society). In the case of people with disability, exemplary assumptions (Brookfield, 1995) which group people into fundamental categories, in this case the 'normal – disabled' segregation, constitutes the hierarchical divide by which, both the disabled and the non-disabled, learn to perceive reality and so construct it in a way that causes problems to the democratic coexistence of subjects and social groups.

Later on as adults, having the possibility of free choice, we are concerned over the assumptions of frame references, both ours' and others', and proceed to evaluate them and decide on their adequacy or the need to change them (Mezirow, 2000). Of course, in the case of the disabled, the issue of adulthood becomes more complex, as the question arises, whether or not, and to what extent is the right of disabled people to self-determination[4] recognised (Houghton, 2003).

In light of these problems, the status of a movement member may work as a catalyst; both the support frame and the forms of recognition created within the disability movement, stimulate disabled peoples' critical thinking, so that they become aware of the social restrictions on their personal development, their autonomy and their self-determination, imposed by traditional assumptions, and therefore proceed to review/ reform them.

Consequently, the stigma of disability and the anguish caused by non- recognition and social exclusion, emerge as an important research topic, because they are in fact psychological and emotional processes, which organise inter alia everyday political action. It is through these processes which are, ultimately, culturally constituted and mainly carried out through educational interactive processes, such as participating in the social movement, by which new political subjectivities may well occur.

Participation in the disability movement, as a form of informal learning, provides space and time for disabled people to talk to each other, to work together (regardless of the category of disability), to exchange experience, thus promoting a genuinely democratic form of learning. Personal experience is utilised, analysed and/or transformed and acquires a collective nature that is transformed into knowledge on disability, which starts from below.

This emerging field of knowledge and action is characterised by a transformative perspective, an ability to transform the way by which personal experience gives meaning within the movement, where the goal of change does not restrict itself to the relation of a person with him-or herself but is about their claim of recognition as right holders, which starts from above or from the outside.

In this context, the process of transformative learning becomes both personal and social; on the one hand the subject is visible – although it has little to do with the subject as it is usually presented by postmodernists, but more so as a subject that is 'collective, rather than individual, and unifying and coherent, rather than multiple and decentralized' (McLaren & Lankshear 1994, p. 3) – on the other hand objective conditions of oppression and lack of respect are in effect.

Participation in the movement provides triggers for reflection, which allow disabled people to re-negotiate the frames by which they perceive not just themselves but the world in general. It is in essence, a transformative process that marks the development of socially active agents, who can become involved in the (re-)shaping of the disability situation (not only at a level of self and self-determination), but also at a level of taking action in order to change the social, economic and political reality they experience.

Methodology

The *qualitative approach* was chosen for the conduct of primary research, given that it is the type and intensity of experiences that matters and not the generalisation of results. Both a) *semi-structured interviews* held with learners and educators and b) *direct observation* of the educational activity were used for data collection. The two methods (*triangulation*) were used in order to 'explain more fully the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint' (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 254)

Learners with disabilities and educators of Greek Disability Movement educational programme titled: 'Education of elected members and or staff members of the disability movement in the policy planning of disability matters', constitute the survey 'population'. Learners were elected members or just plain members of GDM; educators were social scientists with teaching experience in formal education and/or adult education. There were ten interviews held in total; five with disabled learners and five with educators. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Direct observation was applied in five classes. The author of this article did not take part in the educational activity during direct observation; however the participants were aware of her position as researcher (*observer as participant*) (Robson, 1993). Coding and analysis of data content were applied for *data interpretation.* In the present paper, by which the results of the survey are made public, the use of pseudonyms ensures participants' anonymity.

The aim of the research was to investigate a) the empowerment potential of people with disabilities through education in the disability movement and b) the educational factors which reinforce empowerment of people with disabilities. In order to attain the aims mentioned above it must first be attempted to answer the following research questions:

- Were the disabled learners empowered as a result of their educational experience from the disability movement educational programme?

- If so
  - in what way?
  - how did the educators contribute to empowerment?
- In cases in which the educators contributed to empowerment:
  - to what extent did the prevailing approach of general adult education influence the type of empowerment (as defined below) developed through the educational process?
  - to what extent did the prevailing approach of general adult education influence the ways in which this was achieved?

Empowerment as a result of educational experience

The content of the meaning of "empowerment" varies widely and for many theorists empowerment is still a concept which requires closer scrutiny (Archibald & Wilson, 2011; Freire & Shor, 1987; Foley, 2001; Inglis, 1997). According to Jarvis (1999, p. 205), the use of the term "empowerment' differs according to the approach of adult education.

1. Radical adult educators use the term in relation to providing a social class, e.g. the working classes, with the awareness and knowledge to act in and upon the social structures so that people can restructure society in a more egalitarian manner.
2. More conservative and progressive adult educators use the term to refer to equipping and raising the confidence of individuals so that they can be more successful in the world.

This paper adopts the first version of the meaning of "empowerment"- the radical one. By combining elements of the critical adult education approach (Freire, 1994· Freire & Shor, 1987), of Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 2000) and of Interpretative Frames (see Table 1), it appears that empowerment, in the case of the disability movement, consists of three levels: the *first level* which is the production of topics from disability as a feature which the disabled people themselves regard as being of major importance in their lives and therefore qualify as important in the formation of disability identity which they support and in the form of collective action appropriate for this purpose. The *second level* is the connection of the subject of disability with broader socio-economic and political matters, perceiving it as a subject with social, economic and political dimensions. Finally, the *third level* is investing knowledge into action and discovering new modes of action for the disability movement.

Primary research (as illustrated by the following quotes) showed that the classroom environment is a place of vital importance for the empowerment of people with disabilities, thereby strengthening the argument that the social dimension of educational programmes of people with disabilities is important. The building of social capital bonds (Putnam, 1995, as cited in Merrifield, 1997) is a positive step towards highlighting disability issues within political dialogue. Learners are then in position to break their social isolation, to form allies and encourage collective identity which could potentially evolve into actual community.

> when we're together we achieve more, because the State won't listen just to the deaf, or just to the blind, but it will listen to people with disabilities (in general). This makes sense, we all need to united, Kostas- learner

In groups where learners belonged to different disability categories, it was easier for the educators to work towards bridging social capital, by using the analytical category of disability as a common denominator. The learners of these groups developed empathy for the needs of other disability categories and overcame latent intra-disability conflicts, unlike groups in which the majority of learners belonged to the same disability category, and in which the creation of social capital was restricted to each individual disability category.

> I know which category [of disability] I belong to. [I need] to learn about the rest […] As we have different disabilities each one of us spoke about his own problems and we all shared our problems, Kostas – learner

> The experience of learning about the other parts of disability is very interesting, Vivian - learner

In terms of knowledge, learners acquired a deeper awareness of the social dimension of disability through the exploration of the socio-political curriculum of the educational programme, and this constitutes a step towards the development of social acting subjects.

> Lets say, when there's the medical model [of approach of disability] and for its own reasons it focuses on disability as an illness, isn't this a financial question? […] If there was another government it would be different] […]. If you have a different attitude you change, you see things from a different point of view. Vivian – learner

> I think that most of us approached [the matter of disability] from the medical model [point of view], Thodoris – learner

In terms of ability, learners acquired a voice, meaning that they were both more willing to speak but also had something to say, in a fashion which others could hear and comprehend.

> I know whom I must address to support an issue I have or something I want to do. You don't know the way from the start. The local action plans on disability [one of the curriculum sub-units of the educational programme] are a way to learn how to handle a matter and to learn whom you must address, talk with… Aris – learner

To sum up, the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed by disabled and non disabled students, in order to act effectively, can be divided into three levels: they need to be informed, to have a voice, and to work together (Merrifield, 1997, p. 6).

Practices / Methods that reinforce empowerment of people with disabilities

Given that in the context of this educational programme, educators work for the benefit of empowerment of disabled people, it was investigated to what extent the teaching practices followed were consistent with this political choice (Freire & Shor, 1987), that is the use of dialogical deliberative processes and democratic teaching styles, aiming at reinforcing the self-reliance of disabled learners through the critical awareness of the problems they face. The results in relation with this question can be divided into three categories: empowerment *through the curriculum, through teaching techniques and through the educator's role.*

Empowerment through the curriculum

The curriculum on the whole involved matters aimed at learners with disabilities claiming their rights and their equal treatment in all areas of life (education, work, healthcare, accessibility, etc.) in a uniform and systematic manner. So, since the inclusion of socio-political topics was predetermined, and not the educator's choice, it comes as no surprise from primary research that educators do not account for the inclusion of these issues in their lessons.

However, the way in which the educators made use of the topics varied. To begin with, the various motives of the educators can be reflected in the way they make use of the curriculum. So, educators with a socio-political interest in their work also had a broader understanding of the curriculum and were mainly concerned with the critical exploration of ideas. In this case, the curriculum was treated in a manner which involved the direct relation of disability (as a social construction) with economy and the analysis of the wider phenomenon of oppression, focusing on oppression due to disability, therefore essentially attempting an expanded application of the Marxist analysis.

> Socio - political participation is a sine qua non for assertion and also a component of union action. Theoretical training and a thorough knowledge of the causes of the problems are prerequisites for justified claims and effective participation. Otherwise union action (action in inverted commas) is limited to recycling superficial and ineffective claims and practices. Angelos – educator

The majority of educators however, addressed the curriculum in a rather restrictive manner, focusing mainly on the presentation of the function of public administration and these were limited to union practice without going further into the critical investigation of the root causes of social exclusion of people with disabilities and the system's operating mechanisms.

> People with disabilities must acquire the methodology (they need), in order to learn how to find a law which concerns them, and how they can claim their rights, Agatha - educator

The subject matter that additionally emerged in the classroom covers issues related to the lives of learners with disabilities. Educators interviewed give prominence to the use of the learners' experience as an important element of the educational process:

> I realised that as an educational team there was a strong experiential element and therefore, anything said, cannot only be presented as theory. Theory alone is not enough […] Participation became much more intense when there was lived experience on the syllabus subjects, Elisa - educator

It was found that the educators' motives were also reflected in the way in which they made use of personal experience. So, for educators with a socio-political interest in their work, the personal experience of disability became the starting point for generalisation, discussion and political action (Choules, 2007, p. 169-171). In other cases, the disabled students' experience was approached solely at a personal level as an individual psychological, therapeutic process and, even though it might bring people closer together, it has limited possibilities for building solidarity amongst a group. Also, this option generates a pedagogical comfort zone that makes the oppressed feel good about their victimisation (Lovett, 1988).

The educators attempted to invest the knowledge acquired into practice and suggested improved modes of action for the disability movement. By living such an experience

learners, as well as educators, 'begin to perceive more than before that education has something to do with politics' (Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 45-46).

> For example, being a grass-roots organisation they seemed interested in working with University students of their city in creating a map with accessible routes in the city. What brought this on was the reference to good practices in Europe. Giannis - educator.

> It gives me knowledge as to what to do. Kostas - learner

In conclusion and despite the exceptions, the influence of the social model of disability approach is evident in the subject matter of the educational programme, especially as regards assertive speech, formulating arguments and developing a sense of being a social acting subject.

Empowerment through teaching techniques

Educators who perceive learners' empowerment as part of their role, recognise the value of using participatory techniques, as a means of building social capital bonds in learners. However, they seem to mention the use of participatory techniques to a larger extent in their interviews than was actually observed in practice.

This evidence is supported by the difficulty that certain educators said they faced with group work, attributing it to the specificity of the group of learners, the diversity of learners as regards the type of disability and the attitude of the learners themselves, thus justifying their practice.

> One way to encourage collaborative learning would be to work in small groups. Unfortunately I could not work that way, mainly due to the heterogeneity of the wider group of learners. Markella – educator

Although the learning patterns of people with disabilities and their expectations for the learning process are associated with educational experiences that may be limited or come from special educational backgrounds, however, the learners interviewed were positive to participatory educational techniques and it seems they had no difficulty in dealing with them and responding to them.

> Maybe it would be best to do some other things in practice only and leave the theoretical part aside a bit. Thodoris – learner

> I like to talk of my own experience. When others tell their own experience, I tell mine too. Because they speak in their own words, not scientifically […]. When I participate, I feel that I've understood better and I want them to tell me more, to explain to me. Maria – learner

Primary research showed that educators use lectures to a great extent. However, in cases in which a lecture is accompanied by dialogue (Choules, 2007, p. 171) or in which parallel pedagogical approaches are used, one achieves the formulation of problems which put dominant knowledge of disability into question.

> Participation was mostly spontaneous, with dialogue between learners, questions posed, opinions and suggestions, Angelos - educator

> Of course we talked, it was not clearly a lesson, it wasn't a class, it was chat. Eventually the conversation became lighter, we were no longer teacher and student, look at the blackboard, learn, write, that wouldn't do. Thodoris - learner

Empowerment through the educator's role

Educators who view the empowerment of learners with disability as part of their role, recognise the value of shifting their focus from the subject matter to the learner.

> The curriculum should be the learners' actuating means and not an end in itself in the learning process. We must place the centre of gravity in the learner and not in the curriculum, which we often have to readjust depending on the target group. Agatha- learner

> I need to take into account the specific features, the educational needs and the diversity of learners as regards the category and degree of disability, and their educational level. The different educational levels require a degree of simplification, explanation of meanings, analysis of the 'obvious' and enrichment through examples, etc. Angelos - educator

In cases in which a student-centred approach was applied, adults with a disability had the opportunity to share the educational histories they bring, possibly from special education environments, coloured by gender and economic status, the category and severity of disability as well as by the sociocultural meanings attached to their visible or invisible disabilities (Ross-Gordon, 2002, p. 54). However, educators seemed to mention the student-centred approach to a larger extent in their interviews than was actually observed in practice.

The majority of educators treat learners as social agents, asking them to express their opinion, they pose questions openly and dialogue takes place. When the relationship between educators and learners was such that it allowed learners to contribute to decision-making in curriculum related matters, then learners gained the confidence to express their ideas and take initiatives.

Furthermore, primary research showed that in the case of people with disabilities, educators within their liberating role, also have to deal with some communication and participation particularities. These particularities of learners with disabilities, should there be no provision that they are properly dealt with, are likely to become reasons for discrimination against certain learners with disabilities.

The unequal participation of the deaf when there are several people talking together, is a typical example. In this case, sign language interpretation is not possible nor can the deaf person intervene in the discussion. Such discrimination, although not covered under the category of racism, however, constitutes a serious obstacle to the equal participation of persons of certain disability categories in the educational process. Where the student-centred approach was applied, it was found that the opportunity was given to the disabled adults themselves to identify the reasonable adjustments they consider suitable for them, highlighting their potential for learning (ibid).

Research also revealed that after their teaching experience with this educational group, educators feel that the way in which they perceive their role has changed and refer to the dimension of encouraging learners and facilitating the process of learning through empathy.

> I began to also understand in practice the educator's role as that of a person who encourages and makes the interactive process easier. Markela - educator

> It made me reconsider and understand the meaning of empathy better as the function of the specific target group also triggered many psychological techniques. Eliza - educator

> I find that my role is more of a coordinative one. I find that I'm increasingly trying to integrate activities into the flow of the educational process that actively involve the learners in the learning process. Giannis -educator

In conclusion, given the positive impact that learning experience has on empowering learners with disabilities, the educator's concern about the educational options (techniques, subject-matter etc.), proves important. Empowerment cannot simply be regarded as an aspect of the lesson, but as an integral part of the curriculum, of the educational techniques and of the educator's role.

Effects of the prevailing approach of general adult education

Most of the educators, who worked in this particular educational programme, come from the field of formal education, - so their work was not exclusively with adults – however they feature elements of the basic principles of adult education in their practice, and mainly in their speech. These elements mainly result from the general adult education approach, when it comes to the teaching-pedagogical and animating function of the educator (active learning methods, adaptation of teaching modules in order to meet learners' needs, observation of the learners' personal development). In contrast, there seems to be a limited influence of the critical approach regarding the socio-political function of the educator (emancipation of learners through the learning process, encouragement of critical thought).

As regards the widespread influence of the general education approach, it can be attributed to the fact that during recent years in Greece education providers have increased and to educators working to the end of scientifically establishing and upgrading adult education activities (Kokkos, 2008). The widespread influence of the general adult education approach also seems to have affected the type of empowerment developed during the educational process. Specifically, empowerment, for which educators with a general education approach aspire, despite their claim that it is aimed at the social level, is actually focused on the personal level, just as it is in the case of educators with a person-centered approach.

On the other hand, the limited influence of the critical approach, despite the fact that it   is consistent with the objectives of the disability movement which, as provider, promotes a more emancipatory approach, may be attributed to the fact that adult education in Greece has not developed as a social movement (ibid). The majority of educators did not make the most of their freedom of action given to them in the framework of a social movement, compared to that of formal education, regarding the implementation of critical education methods, probably because their official professional training does not include taking part in opposition politics (Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 77). There needs to be a sense of solidarity among educators regarding the goals of the movement they serve, in order for them to take radical social action (Mezirow, 2000).

Especially in the case of disability, the limited influence of the critical approach is reinforced by the fact that education of people with disabilities is regarded mainly as a process of skill acquisition aiming at their social integration, focusing on specialised programmes and reasonable accommodation in the educational process. The fact that Disability Studies theory has recently been associated with the education sector also works along the same lines (Disability Studies in Education officially developed as field of study in the U.S.A in 1999, as an extension of Disability Studies; in Greece they have yet to be associated with Education).

In conclusion, adult education in this educational programme, which was inspired by a political discourse on disability, did not reach the ideal level of empowerment as determined by the critical education approach. However, one should not ignore the other findings regarding many individual positive aspects of the programme.

This leads us to the conclusion that, apart from attributing primary importance to achieving a complete radical educational intervention, one must acknowledge the value of individual radical elements of an educational process. Besides, 'social transformation is made by lots of small and great and big and humble tasks!' (Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 46).

Conclusion

In the context of the theoretical debate on changes to the limits regarding the extent and variety of adult education, disability as an analytical category may become the starting point for creating new directions of adult education, both in theory and practice. The meeting of adult education, disability studies and the disability movement can be seen as a strong link in the process of recognising the relationship between education, research and activism (Slee, 2010), which is needed by those serving the vision of social justice. The knowledge resulting from the relationship between adult education, disability studies and the disability movement can help theories on adult education and help adult educators to develop their thinking on disability related issues and to understand the value of united adult education, thereby promoting social change in this field. We expect this text to provide the context for an intersectional discussion on the development of new, more transformative approaches, both on a personal basis and at level of changing social structure.

Notes

[1] The National Confederation of People with Disability of Greece was founded in 1989. It is an umbrella organisation representing all categories of disabled people (mobility, sensory, mental, chronic diseases, etc.) and their parents or legal guardians of disabled people who cannot represent themselves (e.g. the mentally disabled)

[2] The National Confederation of Disabled People of Greece has been designated provider of lifelong learning according to the Greek law 3369/2005, in order to implement programmes in the framework of the Operational Programme 'Education and Lifelong Learning' and is co-funded by the European Union (European Social Fund)

[3] A frame thus 'is a general, standardized, predefined structure (in the sense than it already belongs to the receiver's knowledge of the world) which allows recognition of the world, and guides perception… allowing him/her to build defined expectations about what is to happen, that is to make sense of his/her reality' (Donati 1992: 141-2)

[4] Wehmeyer (1998) distinguishes the two dimensions of the meaning of self-determination: the personal dimension (which has to do with a person's control over his life) and the political dimension (a person's right to self-management).

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