The paradox of exclusion through inclusion: Interpreting inclusion from a critical pedagogical perspective

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Abstract

In our contribution we investigate firstly the general discussion on inclusion in education that had its origins in educational reform movements and in special needs education policies and practices. In line with this, we describe the growing interest in international organizations, resulting into varied attempts on national and local levels to create equal opportunities for all, with particular attention for students with special needs. We furthermore analyse how these concrete policies and practices of inclusive education often coalesced with deficit approaches, resulting into the above-mentioned paradox of exclusion through inclusion. In a next step, we explore how and why inclusive practices keep on reinforcing existing dependencies and possible ways out of the dilemma. In a final section we analyse how in adult education research literature, this paradox of exclusion through inclusion is dealt with and what answers are developed in this particular field of research.

Keywords: inclusion and exclusion, special needs, inclusion policies, adult education, critical pedagogy

Introduction

Inclusion is the new buzzword in policy initiatives related to economic, social and cultural settings in many countries in the Global North and South. In these contexts, inclusion means that maximum efforts should be done to give both children and adults, particularly the ones who live in precarious conditions, a proper place in society through initiatives of

education, social work, health services, workfare initiatives, etc. Public authorities invite practitioners of different social professions to make 'inclusion' a central target of their practice. The spread of this new buzzword and its related practices requires some critical observations. It is quite remarkable or even paradoxical that the emphasis on inclusion, particularly by policy makers, occurs in times when diverse forms of exclusion are undeniable. Is 'inclusion' more than 'a feel-good rhetoric' (Armstrong et al., 2011)? In our presentation we will argue for a nuanced, yet critical and contextualized interpretation of the concept, its policies, and its practices.

The concept of inclusion was, from the beginning, strongly associated with the support of disabled people to integrate better into mainstream society. Gradually, however, it obtained a broader meaning, particularly in policy contexts. Already in the seventies the French sociologist René Lenoir suggested that there were many other categories in need of inclusion in his seminal work 'Les Exclus' (Lenoir, 1976). From the eighties onwards the notion of inclusion encompassed initiatives in diverse fields of policy intervention such as education, social welfare, employment, poverty reduction, with a special focus on marginalized groups. In response to these developments, various authors argue that the broadening of the policy concept should be understood in connection with the increasing neo-liberal tendencies in the globalized world (Armstrong et al., 2011; Tomlinson, 2012; Slee, 2013, 2014; Peters & Besley, 2014; Nguyen, 2019). In response to this, they emphasize that concepts and practices of inclusion should also reflect aspects of democracy and justice, implying that everybody has equal rights and obligations and can fully participate in social life.

In our contribution we investigate firstly the general discussion on inclusion in education that had its origins in educational reform movements and in special needs education policies and practices. In line with this, we describe the growing interest in international organizations, resulting into varied attempts on national and local levels to create equal opportunities for all, with particular attention for students with special needs. We furthermore analyse how these concrete policies and practices of inclusive education often coalesced with deficit approaches, resulting into the above-mentioned paradox of exclusion through inclusion. In a next step, we explore how and why inclusive practices keep on reinforcing existing dependencies, including how philosophers like Jacques Rancière and Hannah Arendt interpret this phenomenon and show ways out of the dilemmas. In a final section we analyse how in adult education research literature, this paradox of exclusion through inclusion is commented and what answers are developed in this particular field of research. We realize that our investigations are limited to how inclusion is mainly understood in the western world and that the concept and practices of inclusion in the Global South could be interpreted differently. However, our literature search did not reveal important contributions in this regard, apart from the already mentioned Nguyen (2019). We assume that the 'western' understanding of inclusion is being proliferated under the influence of international organizations and globalization dynamics. It would, however, be interesting and a challenge to research in a comparative way the different interpretations of inclusion around the world.

The origins of inclusive education

Inclusive education has a long history, already going back to the reform pedagogies of the first half of the 20th century. John Dewey, the famous American philosopher, and educational reformist was, together with his wife engaged with the problem of the exclusion of disabled persons from regular schooling practices. They experienced how their own adopted and disabled son was, at different occasions, excluded from several

schools (Danforth, 2019). This experience turned the couple into early activists of inclusive education. In spite of this personal experience, inclusion of disabled persons was not an immediate matter of concern in Dewey's writings. He rather framed this problematic in a broader understanding of democratic education and equal opportunities. In his view schools should be places where all participants are considered equal, in spite of their many differences.

The reform movement in education again gained prominence in the sixties and the seventies of the previous century. Teachers, parents, students and school directors experimented with new forms of school practices, while paying attention to the inclusion of different categories of persons who, for various reasons, could not fully participate in mainstream education (Armstrong et al., 2011). In adult education, the 'discovery' of important groups of (functional) illiterate persons both in the North and the Global South, prompted the development of diverse practices of adult literacy education, which at a later stage became formalized in policies and practices of adult basic education. This broad reform movement was inspired by various critiques of the exclusionary character of mainstream education and by attempts to democratize educational institutions.

Around the same time, initiatives of inclusive education were increasingly associated with the domain of special needs education. From the fifties and the sixties onwards this domain of educational research and practice operated on the basis of diagnosed deficits and 'within-child' explanations (Schuelka et al., 2019). Sophisticated measuring instruments were developed, often with a medical psychological bias, to diagnose these deficits that supposedly made it hard for individuals to participate in regular schooling and society. In line with this, individuals who were diagnosed as deficient, were relegated to special education institutions that were expected to remediate the differences and deficits on a scientific basis. Hence, special education in those days increasingly isolated individuals with special needs in segregated institutions. In addition, Slee (2013) observed that:

> In an astonishingly short period of time, inclusive education has firmly planted itself in education and public discourse. Libraries and bookshops have dedicated shelves to this genre. Education jurisdictions around the world have adopted the vocabulary of inclusive education […] and invested significant resources into the production of policy texts, the development and renewal of capital and human infrastructure, and modified curriculum programmes to make schools and higher education more inclusive. (Slee, 2013, p. 896)

Today, inclusion is indeed a key term in policy documents and recommendations produced by international organizations such as UNICEF, UNESCO, OECD, ILO, the World Bank, the European Union and CEDEFOP. While the term originally referred to the inclusion of students with special needs in educational processes (UNICEF, 2014), it has gradually acquired a broader meaning and is now used to emphasize the need to include all marginalized social groups in educational structures. We see this broadening in two important texts. Firstly, in the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2020) where it is stated that the term inclusion refers to:

> [...] actions and practices that embrace diversity and build a sense of belonging, rooted in the belief that every person has value and potential and should be respected. Yet inclusion is also a state of affairs, a result, whose multifaceted nature makes it difficult to pin down (p. 11).

A similar approach to this issue can be found in the official texts of the European Union. A recent European Commission document on blended learning states that inclusive education systems are those in which '[...] all learners of any age are provided with

meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers.' (European Commission, 2023, p.7). Furthermore, the World Bank also refers to the term inclusion in a broader sense, while acknowledging the difficulty in implementing inclusion policies:

> Inclusive education is a process that requires a profound cultural shift to attain one education system for all learners with the provision of supports inclusive of all marginalized and/or vulnerable groups. The process towards more inclusive education systems cannot happen overnight. (World Bank, 2022, p.2).

In particular policy texts, there is also a strong connection between inclusion and the workplace. In this sense the International Labour Organization (ILO) argues that even though 'an enterprise may be successful in attracting and recruiting a diverse workforce, it is inclusion that influences equality of outcomes, that is, the extent to which diverse members of the workforce are retained, able to thrive and fully contribute' (ILO, 2022, p. 88). And CEDEFOP, whose work influenced the European Commission's tendency to equate adult learning with the acquisition of vocational skills, states that modern initial vocational training programs, and in particular apprenticeships, have the potential to facilitate and enhance the '[…] progress towards the green transformation by shaping skills for workers, learners, and citizens, support the inclusion of vulnerable groups in the labor market, strengthen gender balance in the employment of key "green" sectors and trigger employer innovativeness' (CEDEFOP, 2022, p. 25).

Increasing skepticism

In spite of these positive signals coming from international organizations, the reality on the ground was much more complicated. Various authors became increasingly skeptical about concrete special education practices and policies, particularly for their strong 'deficit' orientation and the lack of awareness among policy makers and practitioners of how the political context strongly influenced the way inclusive education was being developed (Tomlinson, 2012; Peters & Besley, 2014; Simons & Masschelein, 2014; Portelli & Koneeny, 2018; Schuelka et al., 2019; Thomas & Macnab, 2019; Nguyen, 2019; Done & Andrews, 2020; Spandagou, 2021). They all observed that inclusion practices often failed because they are implemented in neo-liberal times which continually create new forms of exclusion and situate the solution of the problem in the individual rather than in the community or the social policies. Tomlinson for example states:

> In the current global recession governments find it easier to focus on individual deficiencies and the removal of welfare payments rather than more costly strategies of reorganizing educational institutions to support all young people in their preparation for adulthood. (Tomlinson, 2012, p. 283)

Strategies that neglect these contextual dynamics are often doomed to fail. In line with such observations, it matters to consider issues of exclusion also from a broader political and societal perspective. In recent decades, societies on a global scale have increasingly created distinct categories of 'winners' and 'losers', both on an individual and collective level. The winners feel comfortable in their cosmopolitan condition. This often coincides with the stigmatization of the losers (the deplorables in the words of Hillary Clinton) who in their turn then respond with hatred vis-à-vis the middle and upper classes, including renunciation or rejection of democratic values and institutions. Education often plays a

role as a selection machinery rather than creating equal opportunities. It is important that educators remain critically aware of how these dynamics operate in view of developing realistic, inclusive responses. The Harvard sociologist of recognition, Michèle Lamont reminds us of Wright Mills' (1959) observation of how private troubles are connected to public issues. Hence, it matters for social researchers to raise awareness,

> about how a society that is increasingly organized around the pursuit of socioeconomic success and the achievement of middle-class status is doomed to condemn at least the lower half of the social pyramid to be defined (and worse, to define themselves) as "losers." (Lamont, 2018, p. 433).

In accordance with such observations, Thomas and Macnab (2019) warn for romantic ideas about inclusion. Such ideas, in their view, often obfuscate power dynamics embedded in educational practices. Also Portelli and Koneeny (2018, p. 134) argue that it is important to ask some key questions such as: inclusion of what, who determines why, how and who ought to be included; whose values and norms are reflected; is inclusion the same as equity; to what extent does the practice of inclusion reproduce hegemonic norms in education and society? In their contribution they deconstruct some myths that are habitually linked to policies and practices of inclusion in education such as 'equal opportunities guarantee inclusion', and 'standardization coupled with equality ensures inclusion', or 'democracy implies embracing inclusivity without limits'. Underlying such myths is a 'deficit mentality that privileges certain norms, particularly ones that reflect white, middle-class values, negating variation and refusing to consider contrary perspectives' (p. 139). Furthermore, Sally Tomlinson, who has researched the domain of inclusive education for more than thirty years notices in 2012 how the ongoing individualization tendencies in neo-liberal societies have provoked the irresistible rise of the special education industry (SEN-industry):

> While from the early 20th century educationalists, medical personnel and psychologists all had vested interests in expanding the numbers of those in special education, now whole new professions, including the expanding therapeutic and neuro-science professions and allied technical experts, all have interests in expanding, assessing, diagnosing and treating those regarded as being problematic educationally, socially and economically. (Tomlinson, 2012, pp. 279-280)

Widening the scope

From a 'critical' pedagogical view, the tendency to consider exclusion in terms of individual deficits, to be remediated often with the help of specialized professionals, is not a solution to the problem. Inclusion is a challenge and a responsibility both for the individual and society. In line with this, Thomas and Macnab (2022) invite us to also consider how a social system may enhance exclusion. They refer to the way in which many schools in recent times have further developed into assessment-competition and discipline-driven institutions that prevent, rather than stimulate inclusion. In their words, schools often operate as 'exclusion rooms' under the guise of being 'inclusion rooms'. 'Such Orwellian double-think occurs, of course, because of the conflicting demands of political authority, but also because the models, ideas, vocabulary and instruments used to construe difficulty at school have remained essentially unchanged for over half a century' (Thomas & Macnab, 2022, p. 240).

According to many protagonists of critical pedagogy, the interpretation of exclusion/inclusion needs to be broadened. They thereby often refer to the notion of 'intersectionality', first introduced in the academic debate on racism by Kimberlé

Crenshaw in 1989. Crenshaw's seminal paper 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex' criticized the dominant tendency to reduce the complex phenomenon of deprivation of black Americans in the US to one single cause. In her view, such discourse makes us 'think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis' (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). In this way of thinking, oppression is regarded as disadvantage caused by one specific characteristic, namely race. In line with this, Crenshaw suggests that:

> […] the failure to embrace the complexities of compoundness is not simply a matter of political will, but is also due to the influence of a way of thinking about discrimination which structures politics so that struggles are categorized as single issues. Moreover, this structure imports a descriptive and normative view of society that reinforces the status quo. (Crenshaw, 1989, pp. 166-167)

As an alternative, Crenshaw suggests to consider exclusion as an intersectional phenomenon, whereby different forms of discrimination interact in creating oppression or exclusion. In line with this, critical pedagogy claims that exclusion operates at the *intersection* of different forms of marginalization: race, gender, income, class, level of education, disability, etc., and that strategies of inclusion should encompass different lines of action (Schuelka et al., 2019, p. 4). In addition, Thomas and Macnab (2022) argue that there is more at stake to understand inclusion than learning difficulties or special needs, as often emphasized by practitioners and researchers of special needs education. Following Crenshaw, they emphasize the complex intersection of diverse factors causing exclusion:

> It is only recently, as the focus has shifted to the intersections of a range of personal, social and cultural characteristics – disability, ethnicity, gender, class, income level, care status, and others – that we have begun to appreciate a broader context to the travails that might be encountered by children and young people at school and for the need for community to be cultivated (Thomas & Macnab, 2022, p.230).

As a response to this challenge Portelli and Koneeny (2018) plea to situate efforts for inclusion in a broader perspective of democracy and democratic education. They thereby refer to the work of Gert Biesta (2009). In his reflection on the relationship between democracy and inclusion, he argues that attempts to make democracy more inclusive are undeniably laudable. However, they do not suffice, since such attempts 'are ultimately based upon a colonial conception of democratization, one in which inclusion is seen as a process where those who are already inside include others who are outside' (Biesta, 2009, p. 101). This is a status-quo conception that considers democracy as a state of being that sustains existing hierarchies of power. For Biesta, for an order to be democratic and inclusive, it implies that it has to be continuously reinvented, refined, aligned with new contexts and new publics. We should understand democratic inclusion not in terms of adding more people to the existing order, but rather as a process that necessarily involves the 'transformation of that order in the name of equality' (Biesta, 2009, p. 110). In this regard, it is important to acknowledge the role of social movements that often trigger democratic initiatives from below.

Assuming equality of intelligence

The transformation of the order can, according to Biesta, find inspiration in the work of Jacques Rancière. This French philosopher has indirectly dealt with inclusion in his writings about emancipation. He has repeatedly stressed that emancipation – in a similar

way to inclusion - is an ambivalent, paradoxical term, particularly in educational contexts where empowering the student is an important objective (Rancière, 1991, 2009). He argues that attempts to emancipate students often have counterproductive effects. Rather than liberating them, well-intentioned teachers make students dependent on the knowledge of the 'master'. What is being taught, in Rancière's view, is in the first place the inability of the student to correctly understand what is at stake. In such approach, the pre-condition for emancipation is the acknowledgement of the ignorance or the student. The teacher sets the aim to reduce the gulf separating him/her from the student. However, in doing so, the distance is often recreated. In view of replacing ignorance by knowledge, the teacher must always be one step ahead of the student, thereby installing a new form of ignorance between the student and him/herself (Rancière, 2009). The consequence is that the inequality between the master and the student is continually confirmed and reconfirmed. Rancière calls this the practice of stultification.

In response to his critical appraisal of this paradox of emancipation, Rancière (2009) develops a radical alternative to which he refers in a provocative way as 'the competence of the incompetent', or 'the capacity of anybody at all to judge the relations between individuals and the collective, present and future' (p. 83). He thereby departs from the presupposition of 'equality of intelligence' and sees the same kind of intelligence at work among a wide variety of people, 'from the ignoramus, spelling out signs, to the scientist who constructs hypotheses' (Rancière, 2009, p. 10). The intelligence he refers to is not quantitative, in terms of how much one knows, but qualitative, in the sense of what he calls the 'poetic labour of translation'. In his approach the point of departure is that all human beings dispose of 'an intelligence that translates signs into other signs and proceeds by comparisons and illustrations in order to communicate its intellectual adventures and understand what another intelligence is endeavouring to communicate it' (Rancière, 2009, p. 10). And, coming back to the position of students in schools or spectators in art practices, he claims that they are not the presupposed passive participants but both distant spectators and active interpreters. 'Spectators see, feel and understand something in as much as they compose their own poem, as, in their way, do actors or playwrights, directors, dancers or performers' (Rancière, 2009, p. 13).

In this view, it is important to assume that in education, as well as in arts and in politics all actors are initially capable of engaging intelligibly in one or other way with what is presented in the class, on the scene, or in the domain of politics. They are all potential translators of signs into other signs, of creating linkages between what they see, hear and what is being done. By consequence, equality is not the outcome of the process, but an assumption with which the process begins:

> Equality exists insofar as someone asserts that equality exists. More accurately equality exists to the extent that some subject acts and speaks on the assumption that equality exists. In either case, equality can neither be planned nor accomplished. It can only be practiced and through this practice verified. It is in a way 'incalculable'. (Biesta, 2009, p. 112)

This is the main intuition underpinning Rancière's philosophy: 'there is not, on the one hand 'theory' which explains things and, on the other hand, practice educated by the lessons of theory. There are configurations of sense, knots tying together possible perceptions, interpretations, orientations and movements' (Rancière, 2009 p. 120).

The idea of equality of intelligence is also present in the way Hannah Arendt conceives of education. Morten Timmermann Korsgaard (2016) informs us how Arendt, following Kant, argues that all humans dispose of the faculty of disinterested aesthetic judgement, detached from subjective positions of self-interest. He calls this kind of

judgement a form of enlarged reflectivity to which school-education can contribute in important ways:

> By creating a school where the events and objects of the world are represented to students in a safe, protected and suspended environment, we can create settings where they can practice the arts of enlarged thought and judgement in close connection to the world, but critically in a suspended and non-productive way, in which they can test and develop their abilities without having to face the responsibility that comes with political existence in the adult world. (Timmermann Korsgaard, 2016, p. 942)

However, the current instrumental pressures on schools, coming from the outside world often have neither space nor time for such kind of enlarged, critical thinking. Nowadays school education is expected to solve various difficult problems society copes with. As an alternative, schools could be places that disconnect themselves to a certain extent from the urgent pressures of the outside world. Studying the world means, in Arendt's view, to learn about 'that what is strange to us' or to learn about the plurality of life. In a paradoxical way, in order to learn about that world, the education should take place 'in a state and a place that is, in a sense, separate from the world, that is, in a state of suspension' (Timmermann Korsgaard, 2016, p. 937).

Timmermann Korsgaard thereby refers to the ideas of Masschelein and Simons (2013), who suggest to free schools from 'productive time' or to take them out of the mode of production. In their words, the school should be the time and the space where students can let go of all kinds of sociological, economic, familial and culture-related rules and expectations. In their view, making school is about suspending the weight of these rules:

> A suspension, for instance, of the rules that dictate or explain why someone – and his or her whole family or group – falls on a certain rung of the social ladder. Or of the rule that says that children from housing projects or from other environments have no interest in mathematics or that students in vocational education are put off by painting, or that sons of industrialists would rather not study cooking. (Masschelein & Simons, 2013, p. 35)

Freeing schools from productive time in this sense means to interrupt educational practices from the instrumental pressures of society, while creating opportunities to study the world, its culture, its traditions, its scientific and technical achievements and so much more in depth and with all senses, so that students are enabled to judge in their own way why and how they want to build their future on the basis of this knowledge, these skills and these values. From the perspective of inclusion and democracy, it also matters to create schools as spaces where plurality and difference can be met, where students learn in very concrete and positive ways how to engage with others that are not like themselves, that may have different cultural, ethnic, linguistic or religious backgrounds, and different abilities to engage with the world.

So far, we have mainly explored what inclusive education for children and youth could mean. The question that remains now is how the matter of inclusion in adult education could be conceived of and what positions researchers in that field have developed in this regard over time. What similarities and differences can be found when adult education policies and practices are compared to policies and practices of school education? Is the paradox of exclusion through inclusion also at play in adult education, and if so, how does it manifest itself? This question will be investigated in the following sections.

What can we learn from adult education?

The term inclusion in adult education research and practice is not a new phenomenon. Its history runs somehow parallel to the history of inclusive education in school-settings. However, it addresses a different public, different settings and different contents. A systematic search of the papers that have been published in the most important journals in the field of adult education and lifelong learning yields texts that discuss the specific term and were published almost four decades ago. An interesting example is the early work of Ilsley (1985) who discusses the inclusion of learners in the process of designing adult literacy programs in order to overcome problems that seem to exclude people from participating in learning activities. Ilsley argues that the participation of deprived adults in the decision-making process and the utilization of their subjective experience in the learning process may enhance the contribution of adult literacy programs to the social inclusion of their participants, since in this way the individual needs of those who participate may be served more precisely. However, Ilsley also acknowledges that a simple focus on individual needs that is not accompanied by a broader recognition and discussion of social values, while it appears to serve inclusion, in fact removes people from their social contexts by promoting an apolitical and value-free learning process that leads to a peculiar form of exclusion. Ilsley's paper is an example of the way inclusion is discussed in this field and one of the first papers we identified, discussing the danger of exclusion through inclusion-oriented initiatives. Nevertheless, as we stated, Ilsley's paper is one of the many that discuss inclusion in adult learning and education. Thus, in order to create a more accurate (though not exhaustive) picture of how inclusion is discussed in adult education we conducted a literature review searching for papers that debate inclusion as a concept, policy, or educational and research practice in some of the most important adult education research journals[1]. In these papers, we observed the following themes regarding inclusion: (a) skills and competence building for vulnerable groups, (b) Questioning the policy rhetoric, (c) pathways of transformation.

Skills and competence building for vulnerable groups

Adult education has in recent decades increasingly moved away from its initial broad social and cultural orientation as expressed in the concept of 'liberal' adult education. From the seventies and eighties of the 20th century onwards policy makers ushered adult education in an instrumental direction, predominantly focusing on the inclusion of vulnerable groups. This went hand in hand with the upcoming discourse of lifelong learning and an orientation on the enhancement of functional skills and competencies. This trend is reflected in a set of papers that are particularly concerned with the inclusion of immigrants and refugees (Andersson & Osman, 2008; Lodigiani & Sarli, 2017; Slade & Dickson, 2021). Moreover, some papers are concerned with other socially vulnerable groups such as unemployed, people with low skills, or older adults (De Greef, Segers & Verté, 2012; De Greef, Verté & Segers, 2012, 2015; Bjursell, 2019). Here inclusion is mainly connected with access to the labour market by the non-privileged adults, either by acquiring new skills or by participating in a learning process that recognizes skills already acquired by participants either empirically or in other (foreign) contexts. De Greef, Verté & Segers (2012, 2015) have produced a series of papers where they examine the contribution of adult education programs to the social inclusion of their participants. The authors claim that the positive perception of the contribution of adult education to the social inclusion of vulnerable groups varies according to the factors that make each group vulnerable (e.g., class, educational level, etc.). When measuring the outcomes of adult

education interventions for these groups, they found that a significant share of the researched population did not experience an increase, but rather a stabilization or even a decrease in social inclusion after participating in an adult learning course. This made the authors argue that participation alone is unlikely to enhance individual inclusiveness. It rather is the ongoing support of participants by adult educators and the wider social environment that will make a positive contribution towards inclusion.

As technology-mediated learning is increasing its share in the adult education field it is of no surprise that inclusion is also discussed as a learning outcome in online settings. Cocquyt et al., (2017) examine inclusion as social participation and social connectedness and evaluate and compare the outcome of online and blended learning courses. In their research it seems that adult learners who participate in blended education environments (i.e., courses that include face-to-face sessions) show more positive perceptions of social inclusion than those who participated in courses that were delivered only with online technologies. This interesting finding challenges the dominant rhetoric which promotes digital education and learning as an inclusion panacea. On the other hand, Lodigiani and Sarli (2017) advocate for the creation of adequate recognition systems that would foster the capitalization of knowledge and competence in order to secure the stable inclusion of vulnerable adults in the labour market. Here the concept of inclusion is mainly developed in the context of human capital theory, and the role of adult education is perceived as a process that ensures the necessary certification that will transform participants into an attractive skilled workforce. However, even in this narrow economistic view of inclusion, the authors acknowledge that the processes of recognition and certification have a risk to become 'invisible instruments of discrimination among different groups of citizens' (Lodigiani & Sarli, 2017, p. 141) since not everyone has the opportunity to participate in these processes.

A similar view is expressed by Andersson and Osman (2008) who in their paper examine how the inclusive practice of recognition of prior learning (RPL) involves elements of control, observation, and scrutiny (technologies of power) that may in the end result in the social exclusion of migrants from the labour market in Sweden, noting that the issue of inclusion and the related processes associated with adult education should not be left to the mercy of the market. Analogous ideas are also expressed in the work of Cooper et al., (2017) who acknowledge that RPL practices although of inclusive intentions, reflect the exclusionary dominant ideologies that create the frame of reference of educational qualifications in every society. Once again, an adult educational practice that intends to promote inclusion may actually lead to the exclusion of those who participate in it. In the same set of papers, we also noted the work of Bjursell (2019) who examines the benefits of participation in adult learning activities for persons that have entered the later stages of their life. Here inclusion is discussed in terms of active participation in the community and the ability to socialize. Finally, in this group of papers the work of Slade and Dickson (2021) discusses the importance of immigrants' acquisition of language skills so as to enable their inclusion in the social context. The interesting notion here is that the authors recognize that social inclusion through language learning is possible mainly if the learning process includes elements of critical pedagogy and transformative learning based on the lived experiences of the participants.

Questioning the policy rhetoric

Various authors reiterate the skepticism about the instrumental orientation of policy makers in view of realizing the inclusion of vulnerable groups (Rockhill, 1996; Edwards et al., 2001; Williams, 2011). Although these papers have a significant time gap, their

point of view is more or less the same when it comes to the ideology and the rhetoric of lifelong learning. Rockhill (1996) points out that the ideology of lifelong learning is masking how adult education provision inescapably privileges the learning of some at the expense of others. Furthermore, she argues that when general notions such as lifelong learning or the learning society do not discuss or consider in-depth the tough and interconnected realities of exclusion (gender, class, sexual orientation), while focusing on the competence building of the individual lifelong learner, then the result is an even deeper inscription of existing inequities. In response to this, Rockhill (1996, p.186) suggests that inclusiveness in adult education is possible only when there is 'an explicit commitment to tackling the dynamics of racism, heterosexism, and ableism' in professional practice and in program design.

In a similar way, Edwards et al., (2001) raise critical questions about policies and the role of lifelong learning in reducing social exclusion. They argue that the promotion of lifelong learning policy as a social inclusion strategy is based on a viewpoint of social order that depends on social assimilation and neglects diversity and difference. In their view, the notions of inclusion and exclusion are binary and as such the overemphasis on lifelong learning for inclusion actually reinforces difference and social exclusion. In a similar way Williams (2011) is critical on policies that consider social exclusion as a result of low aspirations and promote lifelong learning as a 'remedy' for inclusion. She argues that the assumption which considers the socially excluded as persons that suffer from a lack of confidence or low self-esteem distances the discussion from the real material reasons (e.g., financial poverty) that create conditions of exclusion. In her view lifelong learning that incorporates a therapeutic approach may lead to the 'infantilization' of the socially excluded groups 'as their ability to exercise adult freedom and make independent choices about their future is called into question' (Williams, 2011, p. 465).

Pathways of transformation

As an alternative to these policy orientations, several authors suggest pathways of transformation, individual and collective, enhancing the acceptance of cultural identities, the recognition of diverse social frames of reference, the overcoming of race and gender inequalities, while making use of the individual experiences of the participants in inclusionary adult education processes (e.g., Clegg & McNulty, 2002; Clarke & Lewis, 2016; Alston & Hansman, 2020; Fernandes-Osterhold, 2022). Also the issue of gender and inclusion is of diachronic concern in adult education, whereby authors call for a feminist lens in lifelong education (e.g. Rowan, 1997; Gouthro, 2007).

A unique position in these debates for an inclusive pedagogy in adult education we found in the writings of Sheared (1994, 1999) who introduced the concept of polyrhythmic realities. In her writings, that are also concerned with exclusion due to gender and race, she highlights the value of lived experiences. The articulation of lived experiences by participants in the educational process is, in her view, essential for any attempt to recognize, understand, and assess how exclusion works in daily life and in educational activities, but more importantly to enhance equal involvement in the learning processes. According to Sheared (1999), learning activities structured at the intersection of learners' dissimilar, multicultural, non-linear and thus polyrhythmic lived experiences not only have a greater chance of attracting adults learners, but even more they have a greater potential to prevent dropout cases since the interaction of elements such as race, class, gender and historical, sociocultural and political realities in the design of learning activities is offering, to those who are usually excluded from learning processes, the necessary voice that allows them to share power and control in the educational setting.

Hence, for Sheared, the intersectionality of learners' polyrhythmic realities has to play an important part in the education and learning processes of adults.

In several papers attention is also paid to methodologies suitable to research practices of inclusion. Some papers employ qualitative methodologies and more specifically biographical research methods focusing on the individual experience (e.g., Evans, 2014; Salva-Mut et al., 2015). In these papers inclusion/exclusion is related to cultural, linguistic and self-identity terms and adult education is perceived as a pathway to social inclusion while it is again recognized that any inclusive path should accept and celebrate diversity. On the other hand, we also noted a quantitative effort to explore the collective understanding of social inclusion in Europe in relation to the notion of social justice (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova 2017). In this paper, through the development of inclusion indexes and a cross-national comparison of statistical data, it is recognized that adult education has limited power to influence educational inequalities. However, the authors argue that in some cases participation in lifelong learning activities may provide for individuals in marginalized positions (e.g., unemployed) an opportunity for inclusion (in the labour market) and thus assist in the development of a more just society.

Our review of adult education research journals, although not exhaustive, highlighted a number of issues that are central in the debates for inclusion in the field of adult education. Firstly, it seems that adult education and lifelong learning (however vague this latter term may be) are considered to have the potential to contribute to mitigating social inequalities caused by exclusionary factors such as gender, race, social class, educational attainment, unemployment, etc. However, it is also clear that participation in adult learning processes is not in itself capable of preventing social exclusion, and that in many cases the learning processes designed to be inclusive actually create new situations for exclusion. Secondly, it seems that the concept of inclusion for the field of adult education is not fully clarified or at least has several interpretations depending on the social group and the causes of its exclusion. In many cases, particularly in the context of lifelong learning rhetoric, inclusion is linked to individual responsibility and employability. In other cases, inclusion is about critically examining social reality and recognizing diversity. It also seems that for a long period of time there are voices that call for an inclusive adult education which recognizes diversity and celebrates different cultural frames of reference and the intersectionality of the factors that lead to exclusion. Social inclusion is an important end for adult education and at the same time it is a vital foundation for the rhetoric of its development. Paraphrasing John Field (2005) we may claim that 'Adult education is important for social inclusion and social inclusion is important for adult education'.

Conclusion

In this contribution we have observed how the concept and practice of 'inclusion' has in recent decades been become omnipresent in different domains such as education, social work, sports, employment and politics. Generally speaking, inclusion is meant to create opportunities for vulnerable or marginalized individuals and groups to participate in society. In our paper we have focused on the discourse of inclusion in different fields of education. Particularly in the field of special needs education inclusion has become an important motive for empowering disabled students. Furthermore, in the domain of adult education increasing attention has been paid to the inclusion of migrants, of unemployed or illiterate people. We have looked at these developments from a critical pedagogical perspective. Such perspective implies that particular practices and policies in the educational domain are viewed in connection with changes in society at large. In line with

this, we have noticed how several researchers, both in the domain of special needs education and adult education, have articulated critical comments on the discourse and practices of inclusion. On the one hand they salute many, particularly bottom-up, initiatives that support vulnerable individuals and groups to acquire a respected position in society. On the other hand, they warn for practices of inclusion with a strong deficit orientation, often having counterproductive effects. Individuals who are considered to be 'in need of special attention' and being treated as a particular category with specialized medical, psychological and educational methods, may feel to be 'set apart'. Difficulties to participate, which individuals experience, in connection with schooling, with employment or with broader social life, are often not due to the failures or disabilities of individuals, but rather the consequence of broader exclusionary mechanisms in society. Many researchers have observed how such exclusionary dynamics have coalesced with the rise of the neo-liberal society: a society that has increasingly become competitive, pushing individuals and groups, who cannot meet the standards of perfection, further into the margins. They even have also noticed that this tendency to focus on the special needs of individuals, rather than considering the exclusionary effects of society at large, has even produced the emergence of an important special needs industry, whereby market mechanisms privilege the ones who can afford specialized support.

In response to this, various authors suggest linking inclusion practices and policies to principles of democracy, whereby existing hierarchies of power are questioned and redistributed. Philosophers such as Jacques Rancière and Hannah Arendt have shown how educational practices can be reinvented and refined in the name of equality. In addition to that, it is suggested that both schooling and adult education be set free from the pressures of productivity, while creating opportunities for students to study the world, its culture, its traditions, its scientific and technical achievements much more in depth and with all senses. From the perspective of inclusion and democracy, it also matters to create places of formal and non-formal education as spaces where students learn in very concrete and positive ways how to engage with others that are not like themselves, that may have different cultural, ethnic, linguistic or religious backgrounds, and different abilities to engage with the world.

Adult education has historically often defended such principles of inclusion, democracy and plurality. In recent times, however, it has been geared by policy makers to obtain a more productive mode, reinterpreting inclusion from a human capital perspective. In accordance, adult education and lifelong learning have increasingly been instrumentalized to support the achievement of economic goals, while giving up its original position of sustaining free, critical, and convivial spaces of learning. Research has shown that, also in adult education, the paradox of exclusion through inclusion is a real challenge. Also in this field, it is not easy to include individuals and groups from the margins of society in its practices. However, focusing exclusively on remediating individual deficits of adults in order to include them in society will not be of much help either. In this paper various scholars have, as an alternative, suggested to concentrate on the intersection of different forms of discrimination such as race, class, gender, ageism, etc. Such approach will require spaces of education and learning that not only enhance the development of instrumental skills and knowledge, but predominantly understand inclusion as the creation of space and time to explore lived experiences of exclusion and to jointly develop capacities to overcome different forms of discrimination. Such democratic practice requires educational settings where new and unexpected forms of emancipation can be experimented in conditions of equality, openness and respect. In order to achieve this, adult education practice and research will need to continue its resistance against increased instrumental and productivist policy orientations. It should

avoid being entangled in a 'single story' (Addey, 2018), reducing participants to individuals in need of help to secure their pathway to 'normality' as citizens or workers. Our analysis in this paper has shown that such approaches are often contra-productive and undemocratic. The analysis has also shown that the strength of emancipatory adult education is often related to its capacity to create places and practices where participants can experience their own capabilities and where they can exchange these experiences in view of making informed choices on how to (re)direct their lives.

Notes

1   For reasons related to access and time constraints we searched for inclusion-related papers in the following journals: European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults, International Journal of Lifelong Education, Adult Education Quarterly, New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, Studies in Continuing Education, Journal of Adult and Continuing Education and Journal of Transformative Education.

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