European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults, Vol.14, No.1, 2023, pp. 9-15

Editorial: Radical popular education today: Prospects and possibilities

Fergal Finnegan
National University of Ireland, Ireland (fergal.finnegan@mu.ie)

António Fragoso
University of Algarve, Portugal (aalmeida@ualg.pt)

Barbara Merrill
University of Warwick, UK (barbara.merrill@warwick.ac.uk)

Introduction: Freire's pedagogy and popular education

Freire's centenary was widely celebrated in 2021 and this led to extensive reflection, debate and discussion within adult education in many countries. This Special Issue on popular education builds on the celebration and discussion of Freire's work while also extending the debate to focus on radical popular education today. This has provided the opportunity to reflect on the current state and future prospects of radical popular education in relation to theory, praxis and methodology.

Freire's work has been enormously influential within adult education and is also the most widely cited and used adult educator outside of the field. Underpinning Freire's ideas is the proposition that all education is political, most famously in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972). Freire states that education is either for 'liberation' or 'domestication' (Freire, 1972). Education for liberation entails, for Freire, the need for educators to overtly take the side of the oppressed and marginalised and that this political stance involves 'educational dialogue and social action, or *praxis,* with the oppressed in order to understand and act upon the causes of their oppression' (Crowther & Martin, 2018, p. 11).

This radical version of popular education is especially well-developed in Latin America but is also associated with a range of educational initiatives across the globe. It 'embodies a commitment to social justice, the promotion of a critical democracy and a vision of a better, fairer world in which education has a key role to play' (Coare & Johnston, 2003, p. ix). Freire advocates that popular educators seek to create knowledge dialogically and that learning should begin with the lived experiences of learners and that the educational process is a learning experience for both the educator and the learner. The aim of radical popular education is to create 'really useful knowledge' (Johnson, 1988; Thompson, 1997) which aims to link experience and theory in a critical way and facilitate

ISSN 2000-7426

http://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.4691
www.rela.ep.liu.se

learners with a deeper understanding of their lives and how they are positioned in society and become transformative agents. In Freire's words:

> The oppressed are not marginals living outside society. They have always been inside – inside the structure which made them 'beings for others'. The solution is not to 'integrate' them into the structure of oppression but to transform that structure so that they can become beings for themselves (Freire, 1972).

It has been argued that this sort of social and educational transformation requires the following (Martin et al.,1999, p. 9):

- 'its curriculum comes out of the concrete experience and material interests of people in communities of resistance and struggle;
- Its pedagogy is collective, focused primarily on group as distinct from individual learning and development;
- It attempts, wherever possible, to forge a direct link between education and social action'.

Freire within the wider radical tradition

From our perspective Freire's work is best seen as one, albeit particularly rich, contribution to a much wider collective tradition and part of the rationale of this special issue it hold this in mind. Popular education has been created and recreated through waves of social movement activity in various contexts, most notably anti-colonial, workers, feminist, anti-racist and alterglobalisation movements. This has occurred on a range of scales. For example, in Portugal after the 25th April revolution there was an attempt to build a system of adult education emerging from popular education associations (Melo & Benavente, 1978). There are several examples of large-scale effort in Brazil, such as the democratisation of schools and adult education at a state level (Apple, 2013; Freire, 1993) and also in movements such as the 'Movimento Sem Terra' (landless) movement, and those fighting for the homeless or indigenous rights (Souza, 2007).

During high points of social movement activity popular education can be usefully described as a social learning process which seeks to develop really useful knowledge at a local level but which also aims to transform public institutions and change power structures in a profound way (Wainwright, 2018). In less active periods or contexts this activity operates at a smaller scale with much more 'local' and modest goals but retains a strong sense of the importance of non-formal educational processes that combine with forms of action and struggle for social transformation (Canário, 2007). For example, the Adult Learning Project in Edinburgh, Scotland, the Highlander Centre in Tennessee, USA or CREA in Barcelona, Spain.

Since the 1980s we have witnessed a 'reduction of democracy as a political process to the market as an economic process' (Crowther & Martin, 2018, p. 9). The workers and anticolonial movements and mass left parties that have been important to popular education in the past century have waned in power. Adult education as a field has also changed and in many contexts; 'politics is thus diminished to the making of market choices facilitated by lifelong learning' (Crowther & Martin, 2018, p. 9) with a focus on learning rather than education. The landscape of adult education work has been further reconfigured in recent years through economic crisis, widening inequalities and more recently by the pandemic crisis. But as Lima (2018) argues 'particularly at times of crisis, it becomes evident that what is needed most is democratic adult education, capable of

resisting adaptation, despite the fact that an education of this nature is difficult to achieve, since it is considered subversive' (2018, p. 230).

Thus, radical popular education has a rich history of experiment and major social and political transformations and the papers in this Special Issue reflect this as well as highlighting different cultural approaches and traditions. One of the aims of the Special Issue also provides a space for critical reflection on the state of radical popular education in the present conjuncture and its significance to the broader field of adult education.

The Contributions to this Special Issue Radical Popular Education

We were delighted by the keen interest that the Call for Papers for this Special Issue generated. We have eleven papers that cover diverse themes and issues in relation to radical popular adult education in movements and organisations, in community and higher education settingz and in literacy projects. It offers a fascinating insight into the varied ways radical popular education has been approached. The articles deal with the past and present of radical popular education and in Brazil, Tanzania, Poland, Portugal, Ireland, Spain, England and Scotland.

The first paper by Astrid von Kotze and Shirley Walters from South Africa reminds us that popular education today needs to think and act globally in responding to what refer to as a 'climatic catastrophe'. In doing so they are arguing that radical popular education is still relevant to today's issues such as climate change albeit in a changing way. In their paper they are calling for 'humanity to change the way we live' if we are to change the current climatic crisis as well as asking 'how do radical popular educators respond to this call?' To address this question they draw on their activist work in Africa from the perspective of ecofeminism thus challenging patriarchal male perspectives. Using examples from Africa they link questions of equality to ecology and argue for the need to learn from each other in supporting communities to sustain and conserve their land against the climate damage to the land by the wealthy.

Mariateresa Muraca explores in the second paper a Freirean analysis of the Peasant Women's Movement (Movimento de Mulheres Camponesas MMC), a movement that today exists in eighteen Brazilian states. Muraca offers a detailed account of the MMC based on collaborative ethnography. The paper discusses the inspiration provided by Paulo Freire's pedagogies in this movement and how this movement has developed and adapted Freire's ideas and that he is 'a crucial reference point for the MMC'. This influence is rooted in the history of liberation theology and popular political and cultural struggle in Brazil. Specifically, Muraca discerns Freire's influence in the dialogical and participatory approaches to education and research, the way that militant subjectivities are built, the critical positioning and permanent problematising, and the strong connections between the concrete experience of social actors and their attempts to change social reality. Muraca's paper does an excellent job in presenting popular education as an integral, living component of the MMC's work. As such Freire is remade and rearticulated through new experiences and concerns and in the case of MMC agroecology and reflecting on the value of feminism to the movement.

An interesting case study is presented in the third paper from Spain illustrating the importance of transforming popular adult education ideas and theory into practice in different settings. The paper by Laura Ruiz Eugenio, Itxaso Tellado, Rosa Valls-Carol and Regina Gairal-Casadó use the term dialogic popular education to illustrate how popular education has been developed in the post-Franco era. They describe the establishment of an adult education centre La Verneda Saint Marti School in a popular quarter of Barcelona in the 1970s which still exists today. Freire was a major inspiration

for this work but it is also other emancipatory educational currents such as the vibrant, if discontinuous history of socialist and anarchist education in Spain and contemporary feminism. The aim of La Verneda Saint Marti School is tackling oppression and fostering progressive social change in this area of Barcelona. The article details some of the activity and successes of this project in supporting learning and solidarity. It outlines how this is tightly linked to the work of CREA at the University of Barcelona and offers a fascinating example of how popular education can be supported by university researchers and how the lessons learnt through popular education can then be brought to the university (in the example offered in the article this relates to tackling gender inequalities). Large- scale and ambitions academic projects led by CREA utilising these emancipatory approaches, and synthesising a wider body of critical social science, were then applied in formal educational reform. The article offers a fascinating example of how ideas and practices travel between settings and institutions in a generative way.

The fourth paper is by Carmen Cavaco, Catarina Paulos, Rita Domingos and Emília Alves takes us to the Cova da Moura neighbourhood in Portugal, self-built by African migrants on abandoned land and with a long story of popular struggles. The paper analyses the dynamics of popular education inspired by participatory research in the association Moinho da Juventude, where the role of the 'expert by experience' and the 'work in tandem' is central. The paper shows a wide range of popular education initiatives jointly built and managed by the association and the people that seek to change and improve the social, cultural and educational life of the neighbourhood. The findings emphasise that participatory research centred in the political action does have a strong potential to foster a collective-critical interpretation of the social reality, and the capacity to transform it via counter-hegemonic emancipatory processes

The fifth paper by Silke Schreiber-Barsch, Joseph Badokufa and Lukas Elbe offers a conceptual and transnational/continent approach to radical popular adult education by looking at the work of Paulo Freire as a Brazilian and that of Julius K Nyerere of Tanzania. The authors explore the relevance of their work on education for liberation to radical popular adult education today. The paper draws on qualitative comparative methodology to explore and enter a dialogue into the commonalities and differences between the approaches of Freire and Nyerere and their contribution to radical popular adult education. Within this framework issues of solidarity and sustainability are central.

In the sixth paper Marjorie Mayo and Fiona Ranford discuss popular education in the UK. They argue that in an era of populism and growing inequalities popular education is needed more than ever. The article notes with concern 'increasing exploitation and oppression, along with persistent xenophobia and violence against women and minority communities'. Recent political history in the UK means that this article foregrounds the challenges we face but argues, pace Freire, for the need for hope. With that in mind the authors discuss empirical reseach The World Transformed (TWT) project 'a festival of political discussions and cultural events' launched in 2016. This initiative was held alongside the Labour Party's annual conference but was not directed by the party. The aim was to reach to activists in community and movements and trade unionists. Between 2017-2019 18,000 people attended these festivals which 'included political discussions, debates, workshops, training sessions, exhibitions, performance, guided historic walks, music and sports' including a session dedicated to creating a popular education network. TWT has also branched out to do local events. The authors indicates that this work has had a positive impact but is faced with scarce resources and issues of inclusivity, funding and reach. They authors conclude that the findings point to the 'need for the development of mutual support systems and networks' and suggest that universities could play a role in such work.

The seventh paper takes us to northern Europe presenting another case study. Juha Suoranta looks at the changing Finnish higher education system and the move to establishing managerial neoliberal universities and crucially asks how can radical popular education find a space in such a climate? Of course, this is not a situation which is confined to Finland as it has relevance to what is happening to universities globally. Adult education has a long history in Finnish universities but like in other countries it has been marginalised academically. The paper presents the findings of a project undertaken at Tampere University which highlighted that even in a managerial led university popular adult education still has a role to play in offering 'meaningful knowledge' and a sustainable future.

Our eighth paper by Piotr Kowzan explores the role of protest songs and how they were used as a popular education pedagogical tool by a trade union during a strike by teachers in 2019 in Poland. The teachers were striking about increasing managerialism and worsening working conditions. The wider political context in Poland is riven by debates over history, curriculum and nationalism and sharp concerns about the undermining of democracy. In the article Kowzan discuss the importance of songs in protest including of course in efforts linked to popular education such as Highlander centre in the United States and in Poland's recent history (most notably in the struggles of Solidarnosc). Drawing on the critical sociology of Eyerman and Jamison's (1991) work on the nature of learning in social movements, a somewhat neglected source in adult education, and directs the reader's attention to the role of popular culture in popular education. Kowzan looks at 78 of the protest songs of the teachers which were shared on lineas an educational tool to highlight their situation. However, Kowzan argues that the protest songs rather than furthering their cause the attempt misfired. The article concludes with reflections on what can be learnt from this

Bernie Grummell is the author of the ninth paper. This paper moves the focus to adult literacy and in particular the contribution of adult popular education in the development of and current practice of adult literacy in the Republic of Ireland. Like other European countries the work of Paulo Freire has been significant in 'Irish adult education and community development. However, the article describes the specific way Freire was interpreted (with a strong emphasis on dialogue and learner-centredness and less on political praxis). Based on extensive empirical research it also documents how policy change in recent years have constrained radical adult education in the Further Education and Training sector (post-compulsory education) with its ethos of performativity and professionalism. By analysing the findings of research reports Grummell argues that adult literacy educators can still find spaces to counteract performativity but not in a way which leads to transformation.

The tenth article by Lyn Tett examines if health inequalities can be combatted using popular education methods whereby people identify and challenge inequalities in their communities. The concept of health used in this paper departs from student's writings from the Health Issues in the Community (HIIC) project and show the impact of unemployment, lack of facilities, or food poverty on people's physical and mental health. The practices of popular education analysed in the text allowed people to link their experience with wider political structures, helping individuals, collectives and social movements to identify and understand problems, fostering a critical consciousness that counteracts oppressive structures and lead a struggle for dignity and liberation. Tett argues that popular education can challenge the ways in which discrimination is reinforced through the very processes and outcomes of education, but the educator must resist the power they have to steer students in particular directions.

The final paper by Mai Atta and John Holst focuses on the concept and understanding of social movement learning, not through direct empirical research, but through an analysis and review of existing literature that discuss research studies. From their review of empirical studies, Atta and Holst have identified five elements that could serve as the foundation of a theory of learning in social movements – interrelated elements but each can be unique within a movement. But in their own words, it 'potentially leads the field to consider the need not for a theory of learning in social movements, but rather a theory of learning and education within social movements'. There are only a handful of such theoretical syntheses of this scope in our field. Given the increased interest in the topic of social movement learning it is a significant resource for those interested in developing theories of popular education which integrates the insights of social movement studies.

Read as a whole the special issue illustrates just how difficult it can be to develop and sustain meaningful radical popular education in many contexts. As Suoranta and Mayo argue the neoliberalisation has had profound effects on what can be done or even envisaged as popular educators. As Kowzan notes radical intention and great efforts do not necessarily result in vibrant popular education and the process and modes of communication need to be genuinely dialogical to be effective. Nevertheless, the articles in the special issue also demonstrate that radical popular education can be sustained over long periods of time through conviction, vision and genuine community collaboration. The accounts of popular education in Portugal, Brazil and Spain contained in this issue attest to this and the generative impact this can have. In theorising popular education the article indicate Freire remains a central figure but it is worth noting that in when popular education is sustained over time Freire's ideas and practices always need to be adapted, rethought or refined. Feminist and ecological currents in contemporary popular education appear to have been particularly fruitful in this regard.

Undoubtedly the power of some of the popular education initiatives described in the issue comes from their rootedness in local context. Nevertheless, it is striking how much of this activity, some in projects over forty years, remain largely 'under the radar' in the European adult education research landscape. It is worth reflecting on why some of the projects documented here or why large-scale political-educational struggles in South America are not more visible despite a substantive body of research on them (Kane, 2001; Maison, 2023; Souza, 2007; Tarlau, 2013; Zibechi, 2012). We are inclined to see this as, amongst other factor, as evidence of fragmentation between progressive movements (Fraser, 2022). At the very least, as Mayo points out in her article in this special issue, this indicates there may be a need to develop or revive popular education networks and to think much more systematically about how to support transversal and transnational popular education (Arribas, 2022).

We want to conclude by directly connecting this discussion of possibility of popular education and fragmentation of progressive social movements to the arguments made about the severity of the climate crisis in this issue. As Wainwright and Mann have argued

> Though we contend with climate change now, its most significant ecological and political consequences are still to come. The challenge of analyzing and anticipating those consequences is enormous. This is partly because both the planet's ecologies and its politics are extraordinarily complex and subject to an almost infinite variety of influences, and partly because climate change is changing what it means to be human on Earth. (Wainwright & Mann, 2018, p.18)

As Von Kotze and Walters outline in the first article featured in this special issue to respond in a reflexive and agentic way to these circumstances is a daunting task. In these

circumstances building on what we know about the potential and limits of radical popular education acquires a new urgency and relevance.

References

Apple, M. (2013) *Can education change society?* Routledge.

Arribas, A. (2022) *Report on movement learning needs* [Unpublished].

Canário, R. (2007). A educação e o movimento popular do 25 de Abril. In R. Canário (Ed.), *Educação Popular & Movimentos Sociais* (pp. 11-35). Educa / Unidade de I&D de Ciências da Educação.

Coare, P. & Johnston, R. (2003). Introduction. In P. Coare & R. Johnston (Eds.), *Adult Learning, Citizenship and Community Voices.* NIACE.

Crowther, J. & Martin, I. (2018). Why Freire Still Matters, *Concept*, *9*(3), 8-14.

Crowther, J., Galloway, V. & Martin I. (2005) (Eds.) Introduction: Radicalising intellectual work in *Popular Education: Engaging the* Academy. NIACE.

Eyerman, R., & Jamison, A. (1991). *Social movements: A cognitive approach*. Pennsylvania State University Press.

Fraser, N. (2022). C*annibal Capitalism: How our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet and What We Can Do About*. Verso.

Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin.

Freire, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the city.* Continuum Books.

Johnson, R. (1988). 'Really Useful Knowledge' 1790 – 1850: Memories in the 1980s. In T. Lovett (Ed.), *Radical Approaches to Adult Education.* Routledge.

Kane, L. (2001). *Popular education and social change in Latin America*. Latin American Bureau.

Lima, L. C. (2018). Adult and permanent education in times of crisis: A critical perspective based on Freire and Gelpi. *Studies in the Education of Adults, 50*(2), 219 -238. https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2018.1523087

Maison, L. M. (2023). Beyond Western and Indigenous Perspectives on Sustainability: Politicizing Sustainability With the Zapatista Rebellious Education. *Journal of Transformative Education, 21*(1), *41–58.* https://doi.org/10.1177/15413446221079595

Martin, I., Crowther, J., Galloway, V., Johnston, R. & Merrill, B. (1999). A Meeting of Minds, *Adults Learning*, *10*(9), 9-12.

Melo, A. & Benavente, A., (1978). *Educação Popular em Portugal (1974-1976)*. Livros Horizonte.

Souza, J. F. (2007). Educação popular e movimentos sociais no Brasil. In R. Canário (Ed.), *Educação Popular & Movimentos Sociais* (pp. 37-80). Educa / Unidade de I&D de Ciências da Educação.

Tarlau, R. (2013). The Social(*ist*) Pedagogies of the MST: Towards new Relations of Production in the Brazilian Countryside. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 21*(41), 1-24. https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v21n41.2013

Thompson, J. (1997). *Words in Edgeways.* NIACE.

Wainwright, J & Mann, G. (2018). *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future*. Verso.

Zibechi, R. (2012). *Territories in Resistance: A cartography of Latin American social movements*. AK Press.