

Editorial: Inclusion, adult education and social justice

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Policies and practices of inclusion in diverse fields in society have received increasing attention in recent years. Initially, the notion of inclusion was almost exclusively related to the (enhancement) of participation of disabled persons through educational initiatives. In recent decades however, the focus of inclusion policies and practices has systematically broadened, encompassing individuals and groups that are deemed to be in high risk of vulnerability or marginalization, such as persons living under the conditions of migration, unemployment, disability, insufficient literacy skills, disadvantaged communities or poverty, etc. The term social inclusion

‘has become a broad spectrum policy organizing and action concept that encompasses all forms of social exclusion and marginalization with a strong poverty-reduction and youth-unemployment focus’ (Peters & Besley, 2014, p. 108).

This widening of scope has been enhanced by the growing interest of international organizations such as UNESCO, OECD, the World Bank and the European Union, but also national governments, that have increasingly become worried about the persistent exclusion of large numbers of individuals and groups from diverse societal domains both in the Global North and South. Policies initially had mainly a welfare character. Later these policies were also enlarging their scope and have fostered a broader understanding of inclusion. In line with this, inclusion has now become part of the discourse of policies and practices such as education, social work, employment, sports and recreation, politics and even in the world of banking fostering ‘digital inclusion’. It is connected to discourses on lifelong learning, social cohesion and integration, activation, widening participation, equality/equity, democracy and social justice. Initiatives of inclusion are often a response to processes of social exclusion that can be described as a rupturing of social bonds, which is

‘a process of declining participation, access, and solidarity. At the societal level, it reflects inadequate social cohesion or integration. At the individual level, it refers to the incapacity to participate in normatively expected social activities and to build meaningful social relations’ (Silver, 2007, p. 4419).

The increased concern for social inclusion also relates to the rise in Europe and beyond of extremist political parties taking advantage of the discontent of large groups of people who feel excluded from mainstream society.

Adult education has over the last decades been very active in this domain, since one of its major goals is to combat social exclusion and to support the participation of vulnerable individuals and groups in society. It has often done so from a strong social justice perspective, while understanding exclusion/inclusion in accordance with societal transformations causing deprivation and marginalization. Such approach to inclusion is not neutral, since it is based on a normative, predominantly humanistic, view on desired societal conditions (Schreiber-Barsch, 2018). In line with this, diverse strategies have been developed to combat social exclusion through literacy education, language learning, workplace learning, integration courses for migrants, second chance learning, open universities, community education, employability initiatives, social work practices, teacher training, online learning and blended learning. These practices have been framed with the help of theoretical concepts and research methodologies such as validation of prior learning, biographical learning, inclusive learning spaces, participatory (action) research, transformative learning and critical pedagogy (Morrow & Torres, 1995).

There is a very rich literature on (social) inclusion in various disciplines of social research such as sociology, political sciences, psychology, law, pedagogy, and anthropology. With this thematic issue, the European Journal for Research on the Learning and Education of Adults (RELA) contributes to the furthering of insights regarding the connection between adult education and social inclusion with a special focus on equality, equity and social justice. Social justice thinking in adult education has predominantly been inspired by humanistic discourses. More critical positions in adult education research have referred to the intersectionality of exclusionary mechanisms such as race, gender, class, age and disability and how this has impacted on the experiences of adult learners (Merrill & Fejes, 2019). In recent times this basic inspiration is also being complemented by post-humanist, new materialist and indigenous discourses, claiming the inclusion of non-human actors in reflections and practices of education (Goodwin & Proctor, 2019, Lange, 2023).

In this thematic issue we now present an interesting selection of contributions that cover a varied range of both theoretical and empirical reflections on the connection between inclusion/exclusion and practices of adult education.

The first paper on *‘The Paradox of Exclusion through Inclusion’* by Danny Wildemeersch and George Koulaouzides analyzes the general discussion on inclusion in education that had its origins in educational reform movements and in special needs education policies and practices. They further go into 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. These concrete policies and practices of inclusive education often coalesced with deficit approaches, resulting into the paradoxical situation that attempts to include often had opposite effects. Inclusive practices may indeed reinforce existing dependencies rather than reducing them. In a final section the authors analyze, through a literature study, how adult education practices and research deal with this paradox of exclusion through inclusion.

The second contribution by P. Gouthro and S. Holloway, titled *Critical social theory, inclusion, and a pedagogy of hope: Considering the future of adult education and lifelong learning*, discusses how critical social theory informs adult education teaching and learning to develop lifelong learning policies with concerns for inclusion, social justice and equity. Based on the analysis of work developed by several scholars, such as Freire, Mezirow and Jarvis, among others, this article debates the role of pedagogy in the promotion of inclusion and equitable circumstances for adult learners. It also stresses the relevance of discussing power relations in the shaping of learning contexts. It argues too how research has emphasized the role of neoliberalism in co-opting different institutional discourses to its benefit. The article finishes with a plea for research focussing on hope and social purpose in adult education teaching and learning.

In the third paper *Citizenship, learning and social inclusion* Viktor Vesterberg interrogates a EU-funded welfare project in Sweden targeting poor EU migrants. He focuses on the ways those engaged in these projects construe the concept of social inclusion. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, analyzing interviews with key staff involved in the project, he identifies the ways the target groups for the project are constructed, problematized and governed as learners that are not yet socially included in society and the labour market. The analysis shows further how EU policies on social inclusion, with a strong emphasis on employability, clash with dominant political discourses in Sweden and the regulations of the Swedish ESF council. The latter aspects rather hinder the work enhancing the employability of vulnerable groups. The author argues for further research that takes the perspective of those who are the target of these kinds of interventions.

In the fourth article titled *Social exclusion in public policies and the micropolitics of an association funded by migrants*, by Carmen Cavaco, Catarina Paulos, Rita Domingos and Emilia Alves, the reader is presented a critical discussion on the complexity of social exclusion. The article is based on two main topics: public policy discourse on social exclusion in programs under development; and adult education activities implemented by a non-governmental organisation founded by migrants, based on valuing of experience, knowledge and the work in tandem of adult educators. Interpretation of data collected through participatory research stresses paradoxes to be found between public policies discourses on the one hand and on the other hand the way people, participating in experiential adult education courses in a specific area of a Portuguese town located in the periphery of Lisbon, understand their neighbourhood, as a space of struggle and social exclusion.

In the fifth paper '*Towards a Post-Humanist Design for Educational Inclusion*' by Viktor Swillens, Mathias Decuyper, Joke Vandenaabeele and Joris Vlieghe, the authors discuss how an inclusive pedagogy can foster a more just way of inhabiting litter polluted living environments, in which the interests of both human and non-human dwellers are taken into consideration. They theorize how arts can function as study material and enable a collective sensitivity for the ways in which (non-)human entities (e.g., fishermen, seals, birds, litter pickers, tourists, plastic producers) constitute a 'sick' habitat. Based upon a theory-driven participatory action research with adult inhabitants of the litter polluted Belgian coast, they conclude that a study pedagogy has the power to constitute collective events of emancipation in which inhabitants of damaged living environments can start to inhabit these places.

In the sixth contribution *Teachers' approaches to teaching for social inclusion in second language education for adult migrants* Helena Colliander and Sofia Nordmark focus on how teachers in these practices conceptualize and enact teaching for social inclusion. They draw on interviews and observations conducted with eight teachers. The

findings demonstrate the teachers' concepts and practices of fostering social inclusion are based on their perceptions of the students and their requirements for inclusion. Teachers emphasize the importance of the development of language skills for both formal qualifications and everyday life, in addition to imparting knowledge about civics and societal norms necessary for integration into Swedish society. They conclude by arguing that qualification and socialization are the main aims of teaching rather than subjectification. Social inclusion thus implies students' responsibility to change.

In the seventh paper by Jakob Bickeböller titled *Special offers for target groups that otherwise would not have been reached*, the author focuses on regional networks in literacy and basic adult education in Germany. Drawing on the perspective of neo-institutionalism and institutional logics, Bickeböller has set up case-studies in two regions in Germany aimed at identifying the impact of different community logics on the participation in basic education practices. Data in the two regions are gathered through interviews with experts. A key finding is how the affiliation-based community legitimizes itself through a shared belief in a unifying value. The members support each other and foster a sense of belonging.

In the final paper '*Adult Education and belonging*' Alexis Oviedo and Karem Roitman argue that access to education is a matter of individual and communal justice and development. However, simple inclusion often fails to capture the structures of power and inequality that limit the potential of education. It is not enough to *be* in education, we must aim for an education that adult students can *belong* to. This requires a re-conceptualization of belonging as complex, non-binary, and multifaceted, acknowledging the struggles of adult students to participate in education. For this, the authors call upon theories of liminal belonging, in particular Anzaldúa's idea of mestiza consciousness. In connection with a case-study in Ecuador with adult students, they reflect on the gender and identity struggles to belong and conclude with some recommendations on how pedagogy and institutions can be adapted to foment belonging for adult learners.

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