

LEARNING SOCIETIES & LIFELONG EDUCATION

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Abstract :

One of the most remarkable features of the new educational paradigm is the proliferation of potential places of learning and training. If education becomes a continuing process that is no longer confined to a particular place and time, preceding working life or alternating with it, what must be more fully acknowledged is the scope of informal learning, whose potential today is vastly increased by the opportunities opened up by the new technologies

Key Word : Learning societies & lifelong Education

Introduction :

The term *learning society*, given currency by Robert Hutchins (1968) and Torsten Husén (1974), indicates a new kind of society in which the old limits on where and when organized knowledge could be acquired (inside educational institutions or immediately after initial training) no longer apply.¹ In an increasingly complex world, where anyone may need to ply more than one trade in the course of a working career, lifelong learning becomes indispensable. Around the same time as this notion of a learning society was becoming established, Peter Drucker (1969) pointed to the emergence of a “knowledge society”, where what matters above all would be “learning how to learn”.² This new concept of education was almost simultaneously put forward (1972) in the report to UNESCO by the International Commission on the Development of Education, chaired by Edgar Faure, entitled *Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow* (hereafter referred to as the Faure Report). The report argued that education is no longer the privilege of an elite, nor a matter for one

age-group only: it tends to cover the whole community and the whole lifetime of the individual.

Lifelong learning:

The idea of recurrent education emerged in the wake of adult education and what at the time was called “popular” education. To begin with, adult education was seen as a personal option offering the prospect of catching up socially or of vocational retraining, but by the 1970s lifelong education came to be seen as part of a broader vision of a person’s educational career, with education viewed as a continuum “from the cradle to the grave”. In particular, such a vision inspired the reflections of the Faure report. Starting out from the premise that initial training was inadequate and incomplete, and should henceforth be regarded as simply the basis for learning to learn, to be constantly reactivated throughout life, lifelong education for all has become one of the cornerstones of self-construction. Originally the question of adult education appeared to reflect concerns specific to the industrialized countries and did not seem very relevant to countries where basic educational needs are far from being met. The potential for empowerment contained in education matched the aspirations of the developing countries. Lifelong education should be seen, today, as one of the preconditions for development conceived as an ability for adaptation and autonomy, as well as a means for ensuring the sharing and flow of knowledge worldwide.

Lifelong education can provide a response to the growing job volatility that most forecasters predict. Increasingly, people will be changing jobs several times in a lifetime, and education can no longer be limited to offering a single specialization, but must develop each person’s ability to change course during his or her lifetime, and to cope with economic and social change. But the labour market problems also had the effect of sometimes overemphasizing the economic and occupational implications of lifelong education and sidelining, as a non-essential bonus, the personal development aspect. In fact, lifelong education extends far beyond the time spent at work, and goes on before, during and after an individual’s working life. Lifelong learning is a process that should ideally be meaningful at three levels which, though closely linked, can be ranked differently according to the individual and the period in life. In short, there are three levels of development:

levels of development :

- **personal and cultural development** – the meaning a person gives to his or her life;
- **social development** – one’s place in a community, citizenship, political participation and living together in society; and, lastly,
- **professional development** – stable quality employment and its links with production, job satisfaction and material well-being.

Lifelong education thus entails transforming, redistributing and re-harmonizing individual and social periods of learning.

Periods of Lifelong education:

Over a lifespan, several periods of education and training can be identified.

- **The first is pre-primary education:**
Which is both an effective introduction to later schooling and a way of raising the living standards of the children who are most exposed socially.
- **The second is basic school education.**
- **Third is that of education and training after compulsory schooling.**
- **The fourth period is that of “continuing training” after the completion of initial schooling :**

Here again, opportunities for access vary greatly from one country or region to another. But generally speaking it is still anything but “lifelong”. Some public policies give short shrift to this fourth period, leaving it to the corporate sector to train its workers where necessary, or abandoning the vast continuing education sector to the market. The influence of professional or family constraints also entails an unequal distribution of opportunities.

- **The fifth period, after working life :**

Is no doubt where there are fewest constraints. Assessment, in particular, is no longer as crucial as during the earlier periods, and what distinguishes this period from the others is the freedom for people to pursue their own inclinations, interests and social activities once released from the restricting influence of their professional activities.

If we are to abide strictly by the principle of lifelong education for all, then all five periods should receive equal attention from decision-makers and social actors. But, in fact, this is far from being the case. Public policies concentrate on the second period. As a result, access by adults to lifelong education for all is very uneven; few countries actively encourage opportunities for going back to school or university. Structural resistance also comes from labor market constraints. The individual and social costs of lifelong training increase as individuals proceed with their working careers. Furthermore, as the expected returns from lifelong education decrease with age, simple economic arithmetic points to maximum investment in the younger generations. But this works to the detriment of continuing education and training, particularly as all the indicators show that there is a close correlation between access to continuing education and the level of initial education: the higher it is, the greater the will to embark on further training and the higher are the chances of success. And so we are caught up in both a “virtuous circle” (it is less expensive to invest early in education and training, and more profitable for both the individual and the community) and a “vicious circle” – for this rationale makes it even harder to break out of the mould forged by initial education; makes subsequent retraining more difficult; excludes the large number of people who have derived no benefit from the growth of initial schooling; and minimizes the importance of sustaining knowledge on an ongoing basis. But at a time when the tendency in more and more societies, especially in the industrialized countries, is towards raising the retirement age, how, in the long term, will it be possible for lifelong education and training to continue to be the preserve of the most highly educated and youngest individuals?

The issues of lifelong learning :

One of the most remarkable features of the new educational paradigm is the proliferation of potential places of learning and training. If education becomes a continuing process that is no longer confined to a particular place and time, preceding working life or alternating with it, what must be more fully acknowledged is the scope of informal learning, whose potential today is vastly increased by the opportunities opened up by the new technologies. If we look not just at the activities of conventional educational institutions (teaching-centred paradigm) but also, increasingly, at the forms of learning open to

individuals and communities (learning-centred paradigm), we see that there is a wide range and variety of places and institutions that can legitimately claim to be imparting knowledge. This is why one of the important aspects of lifelong education is the need for continuing learning to be socially recognized as such. Lifelong education policies must incorporate these many different places and forms of learning, including self-education. This can be seen in embryo in the systems known as “validation of experience”. What is at stake here, then, is also a demystification of formal certificates or diplomas as attesting to completion of a course of study and as a passport to working life, and the predictable emergence of new forms of recognition of educational careers and skills. This transition is not always easy, especially in countries where diplomas or successful performance in examinations is still very highly regarded as the qualifying factor. In the developing countries, this point is just as crucial, as the inadequacies of education systems and infrastructures for storing and disseminating knowledge make the non-formal education sector vitally important. With the marked tendency in many countries to cut back on public spending on education, alternative financing and co-financing arrangements will need to be developed. True, we are already witnessing the growth of new and far more varied private educational provision. But the “for all” imperative demands that access to such provision should not depend solely on people’s financial resources, and one of the aims of public policies will therefore be to make sure that individuals and groups are not de facto excluded from lifelong education for all.

This general trend in learning is open to some criticism. Some experts have pointed out that, with the growing calls for lifelong education, coupled with an expanding vocational training industry, there is a danger of people becoming permanently cast in a mould to suit the demands of the economy and employers’ expectations. The permanent sustaining of a stock of profitable knowledge capital can therefore generate perverse effects and a progressive blurring of the boundaries between workplace and place of learning, between leisure and productive activity.

To avoid these pitfalls, it is important to recall that citizens must be able to express their own educational aspirations and choices. As strongly underlined by Amartya Sen, in his analyses on development as well as on education systems, the complexity of development cannot be subsumed to a mere management of economic parameters. Human development must go hand in hand with freedom of expression, and it is the role of education to help the

individual reach this freedom of expression. It is not lifelong education as such, but insufficient and poor-quality education, that may lead to the individuals' subservience.

Against this background, sweeping statements of intention are not enough. What is needed is a policy targeting specific groups that may find themselves outdistanced or even *pushed out* of the mainstream of the learning societies – people with low incomes, ethnic minorities, migrants, young people who underachieve at school, the unemployed, poorly qualified, low-skilled workers, the disabled and isolated elderly people. Generally speaking, individuals with the skills needed to manage and organize their own long-term learning paths are not the majority. It also means taking due account of the conflicting perceptions of lifelong education. Some see it invariably as a means of increasing their social capital, whereas others view it as a potential source of insecurity. Some salaried workers, for instance, fear that their jobs may be at risk if they spend too much time on training activities, while others, particularly older people, may also feel a sense of vulnerability at being back in a learning situation, ill-at-ease with what they perceive as a negation of everything they have learned and having to submit to forms of assessment and work to which they are not accustomed. There are ways of dealing with these difficulties. The proposal put forward by the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century to introduce a “study-time entitlement” or education voucher or credit system is most interesting and would obviously require an important financial effort. In an environment where technological renewal is becoming the norm, and where instability represents a factor of insecurity for the individuals, educational careers can offer both flexibility and security through a concerted action of the state and the private sector leading to the production of new skills, away from mere charity.

What is more, placing individuals in an educational continuum in which their knowledge, skills and outlook on the world is continually renewed and consolidated, might provide them with the benefits of advances in new technologies and, above all, the implementation of efficient and diversified systems of distance education.

Reference :

1. **UNESCO WORLD REPORT**, (2005), *Towards Knowledge Societies*, UNESCO Publishing.