CHAPTER 2

Resisting Mainstream Lifelong Learning

The Contributions of Popular Education and Participatory Research

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Abstract

Popular education as a way to organise the process of learning and teaching has a long tradition around the world. Usually, it is taken for granted that popular education was born in Latin America in the 1960s, with the primary representative of it being Paulo Reglus Neves Freire. In this chapter, I will explore the intellectual context that shapes the building of a different education. On the one hand, the theories, and practices of deschooling society. On the other, the building of a 'popular' knowledge through participatory research. I will also refer, very briefly, to methodologies, considering the dialogue as their central element. Finally, the chapter looks at two experiences that can be considered as exemplary of popular education.

Keywords

deschooling society – lifelong learning – non-formal adult education – Paulo Freire – popular education – participatory research

1 Introduction

Popular education as a way of organising the process of learning and teaching has a long international tradition. Sometimes it has been reduced to the field of adult education, but it is better considered as an educational approach for all rather than as an approach addressed to a specific group of people. Usually, it is taken for granted that popular education was born in Latin America in the 1960s, with the primary representative of it being Paulo Reglus Neves Freire.

In some ways, this is true. There is a consensus that considers Latin-America the geographic space and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (first published in 1970 in the USA) as the foundational work of popular education. As Kane (1999) stated:

Throughout Latin America, popular education was inspired by the Brazilian experience of the early 1960s when, in the course of struggling to bring about social change, popular organisations themselves identified the need for an alternative education; one which was related to their experience and under their control. (p. 55)

But it could also be important to consider two major elements related to the concept of popular education. On the one hand, the geographical context that cannot only be reduced to Brazil or Latin America, but must also include other countries, regions and historical times. In this direction I will refer to the 'Misiones Pedagógicas' in Spain as an experience that can be presented as a practice of popular education.

There is also an important second element, which is how to define experiences of popular education? What experiences can be considered models for confronting the mainstream policies and practices of Lifelong Learning? To that end, I will later present a singular experience related to recovering the memory of people. Finally, how do we define popular education?

Martin (1999) stated that "the idea of popular education, [refers to] an education that is rooted in the interest, aspirations, and struggles of ordinary people" (p. 4).

In the same line, Turay argues that

Popular education refers to a non-formal adult education approach that develops the capacity of learners to critically analyse the root causes of their socioeconomic, political, cultural, spiritual and religious struggles, with the ultimate goal of organising and taking collective action that will enhance social transformation. (2005, pp. 480–481)

In short, there are two major ideas regarding the understanding of popular education. First, the understanding that education is a process in which people reflect on their life, their experience, and about their community. Secondly, education is a powerful tool for helping people to imagine and build a different community and another world.

Popular education has an important methodological element too. It is an attempt to develop education in a t way which is more concerned with a collective than an individual approach. To Martin (1999), the methodological approach is based on three aspects: (1) the curriculum comes from the experience and interest of the people, (2) it is focused on group activities, and (3) "it attempts, wherever possible, to forge a direct link between education and social action" (p. 5). Finally, another methodological element is to focus more

on people's lives and experiences that on transmitting the content of textbooks. In short, connections between the ideas of education and the way this education is developed are clearly related and the borders between theory and practice seem very diffuse.

In this chapter I shall develop all these aspects, starting from a brief look at the Latin American intellectual context.

2 The Intellectual Context

According to Osorio (2020), the birth of popular education in Latin America is related, among others, to three major intellectual influences: Paulo Freire's work and, overall, his notion of dialogue as the main methodology to organise educational processes, (2) the theories of unschooling as a revolt against the colonised school, and (3) participatory research as a way of creating knowledge from people's experiences. In this paper I am going to focus on the second and third aspects already mentioned and only refer to Freire's work when talking about dialogue as a methodology.

If I focus on these two and not others it is because both are strongly implicated in the resistance to, and confrontation of colonialism in the domains of school, education and the creation of knowledge. In some ways, these two influences on popular education can inspire us to challenge Lifelong Learning policies and practices.

Before this, however, I wish to refer briefly to another important intellectual influence: the Theology of Liberation. Kyrilo and Boyd (2017) have explored the relationships between Freire's thought and his Christian beliefs. They affirm that it is very important "to explore the connections between Freire's faith [...] and its impact on his thought, practice and his overall work of fostering the humanisation of humanity" (p. XIX). On the other hand, in interview Kirkwood suggests that the major influence on Freire's ideas are the personalist thinkers — mainly Emanuel Mounier — and other Christian philosophers (Kirkwood & Lucio-Villegas, 2012).

Jeria (quoted in Kirylo & Boyd, 2017) sums up this aspect of Freire's thinking very well:

These early experiences in Catholic Action led Freire to pursue his literacy work among the rural poor, and eventually led to his exile from Brazil [...] Moreover, these experiences caused his spiritual sensitivities to become intricately and intimately related to a commitment to social change and a fight against oppression. (p. 5)

3 Deschooling Society

Even though the theories of deschooling have traditionally been focused on Ivan Illich and his book *Deschooling Society* (Illich, 1971), there are other important thinkers (for example, Reimer, 1976) that have reflected on this trend to build an educational system outside of the school. As Tort (2001) states, "Deschooling appears in a context of cultural and educational opposition. It is related to the crisis of the myth of endless progress and unlimited growth" (p. 271). But it is related also to increasing doubts concerning the utility of the knowledge provided by the school that represents the colonial and hegemonic views that maintain the system of social classes in a society. To Illich (1971), who lived and worked in Mexico, this system is derived, in the case of Latin America, from the colonial domination.

The idea of a school that reproduces unequal social relations is not only developed by deschooling authors. Sociologists such as Bourdieu and Passeron, in their classic work (1977), exposed how the school is an apparatus for reproducing the hegemonic view of society in each specific period. Apple (1986) explained how this transmission is not only explicit but is also done by means of the school organisation, norms and hierarchy, defined as the 'hidden curriculum'. Deriving from this, deschooling theorists consider that the school is an instrument of oppression – in colonial and social class terms – and must be replaced by the community. Illich saw the school as an apparatus whose major aim is to reproduce the unequal social relations in capitalist colonial society. This aim is achieved by acting in a double sense: (1) in an ideological direction reproducing hegemonic thought, and (2) not enabling people to aspire to social mobility. According to Illich (1971), the school guarantees neither the value of merit and effort, nor the development of individuals and communities. He stated:

Neither learning nor justice is promoted by schooling because educators insist on packaging instructions with certification. Learning and the assignment of social roles are melted into schooling. Yet to learn means to acquire a new skill or insight, while promotion depends on an opinion which others have formed. [...] Instruction is the choice of circumstances which facilitate learning. Roles are assigned by setting a curriculum of conditions which the candidate must meet if he [sic] is to make the grade. School links instruction but no learning to these roles. (1971, p. 11)

Illich also argues that the organisation of the school gives the teacher unlimited power over the learners. And this is not only a power related to knowledge, but control over their entire lives, including moral judgement, or simply denigration, of the learners. This denigration is also present in the effort to exclude

people's daily life from school, where they learn things that dismiss their experiential knowledge. Always very critical of the school, Dickens, notably, already in 1854 ridiculed this lifeless knowledge – taking the definition of a horse as his example – in the second chapter of *Hard Times* ([1854] 2008).

To confront this situation of inequality, Illich's proposal is to replace the school with the community. This also means to transfer the educational power and knowledge from the colonial and classist school to the community. Illich named this system 'learning webs', by affirming that people can learn in different places and with different methods.

The program of this proposal can be summarised as follows: (1) to guarantee full access to educational resources during the entire lifetime of the individuals, (2) the conviction that every person can share their knowledge with other people who are interested in it, and (3) that every person can present their own knowledge in public talks to the community.

This program takes shape in four different webs: (1) services related to educational objects that should facilitate the processes of learning. These objects can be stored in libraries, exhibition rooms, etc.; (2) skilled workshops that enable people to offer and share their skills with other people; (3) the search for learning partners as part of the entire process of teaching and learning; (4) finally, building a catalogue of people with any type of qualification.

I think that Illich's major contribution to popular education is to consider the community as a privileged space for teaching and learning, replacing the school by the community. And this is one of the features of popular education: the listening phase (Freire, 1970) is essential in order to look for generative themes derived from people living in communities. These generative themes organise the process of teaching and learning. In the learning webs, community is the foundation of the knowledge that is in the educational process.

4 Popular Knowledge and Participatory Research

A second significant element that helps to explore the contributions that give shape to popular education is related to participatory research. I want to approach it not only as a methodology for working with adult learners but as an instrument to decolonise knowledge and create new knowledge.

Even though the origins of participatory research can be first found in the work done by Kurt Lewin (1946), there is a certain agreement (see Hall, 2001) to consider the seminal work by Matja-Liisa Swantz (see Swantz et al., 2001) with women and unemployed people in Tanzania in the 1970s as a foundational experience, far removed from the more technical approach developed by Lewin (Fals Borda, 1998). This last author, Fals Borda, is important not only

because of his contributions to participatory research and his work with peasants in Colombia, but because his work is in Latin America, the geographical context where I have situated one of the 'origins' of popular education.

Participatory research is thus closely related to the creation of knowledge in a different way and with different actors compared to the 'traditional' knowledge elaborated through academic research. In some ways it is also closely related to another Mexican thinker: Rodolfo Stavenhagen. In the early 1970s, Stavenhagen wrote an article on "Decolonizing social sciences" (1971) as an attempt to reflect on the limits of the traditional paths of creating knowledge.

Stavenhagen's first idea is that the most fruitful theory must be confirmed only if it enables people to resolve the problems that arise in their daily life. In this direction, social sciences must serve people by providing answers to their problems and by exploring new paths for creating and disseminating knowledge.

Summarising Stavenhagen's proposal, it can be said that he looked for a social science that focuses on researching people's daily lives so that individuals can understand and transform them. In doing that, social sciences become more scientific (Demo, 1988). On the other hand, this approach broke with the traditional differentiation between researchers and common people as objects of research. People become subjects and participants in the research process.

When talking about participatory research, Fals Borda tried to define what he called 'popular science':

It is the practical, empirical and common-sense knowledge, the ancestral possession of common people, that enabled them to create, work and understand mainly with the resources that nature gave to people. (1980, p. 70, author's translation)

One of the pillars of popular education is this idea of a popular or quotidian knowledge. In fact, when Illich criticised the school, one of his major considerations is that the school is not an institution which creates knowledge but is only transmitting a specific type of it – the knowledge already created by the hegemonic powers in society.

To achieve what Hall (2011) has called 'knowledge democracy', it is very important to organise the 'socialisation' of knowledge in a way that Fals Borda (1986) named 'systematic return'. He differentiated four steps for this devolution. The first is related to the fact that speeches, resources, etc. must be organised and presented in a comprehensive language and in a format that enables individuals to read, to understand, to ask for and discuss the information. The second step is to organise the return of the knowledge created in an accessible language that allows and encourages people to participate in and share new

knowledge. The third step is related to the origin of the research. The research themes arise from the curiosity, problems, desires, and interest of the people and are nearest to the environment of the community. In doing so, research and community establish a close collaboration whose main aim is to provide responses to the situation people are living in.

The last step of this process, according to Fals Borda (1986), is focused on the use of a certain methodological approach. Usually, participatory research uses a biographical approach that facilitates people's participation not only at the level of informants, but as researchers, and in the process of returning the new knowledge.

Finally, I would like to refer to the concept of *Vivencia*. According to Fals Borda (2001),

Participatory Research was defined as a vivencia necessary for the achievement of progress and democracy, a complex of attitudes and values that would give a necessary meaning to our praxis in the field. From this time on, PR [participatory research] had to be seen not only as a research methodology but also as a philosophy of life that would convert its practitioners into 'thinking-feeling persons'. (p. 31, original emphasis)

This *vivencia* is clearly connected with the Gramscian idea that the researcher – the organic intellectual in his terminology – not only has to know how people think, but he or she has to feel with people. In fact, Fals Borda (2001) states:

Another support for *vivencia*, different from praxis, is also necessary because it is not enough to be an activist [...] As stated above, participatory action research has not been a question of knowledge. It is also a transformation of individual attitudes and values, personality and culture, an altruistic process. (pp. 31–32, original emphasis)

To summarise, the contribution of participatory research to popular education is focused on the process of creating knowledge as a path to create awareness and to connect education, research and community in such a way as to provide answers to people's hopes and dreams.

5 Popular Education Methodologies

Until now, I have taken an approach to popular education, stressing two different elements: deschooling theories and participatory research. This means that I have focused on popular education as a theory of education more so

than a practice. In the following, I would like to say something about methodology and practices of popular education. I will do this in two ways. I will briefly reflect on some methodological approaches, and then I will present two different experiences.

I think that methodologies can have two different approaches. On the one hand, the consideration that every educational act is one of producing knowledge. On the other hand, that education is a relational process, and the methodology must reinforce this relational element.

The first approach – education as an act of producing knowledge – is summarised by Martin (1999):

Moreover, the utility and efficacy of the 'knowledge from below', that is the hallmark of popular education, is defined primarily in collective rather than individual terms. In this sense, popular education is informed by an egalitarian rather than a meritocratic ethic. (p. 6)

There are two significant ideas here. To begin with, popular education is a "real struggle for democracy" (Martin, 1999, p. 7), and democracy includes knowledge democracy. As well, popular education is an attempt to build a different educational process where people can explore new paths of knowledge by confronting the 'official' one.

In this direction, the Freirean concept of dialogue is essential. Dialogue guarantees communication and establishes education as a cooperative process characterised by social interactions between people. Regarding dialogue — one of Freire's most important contributions to methodology — Kirylo and Boyd (2017) state that it is

An encounter between human beings, and in order for it to be authentic and transformative, the presence of love, humility, hope, faith in humanity, and critical thinking are all necessary aspects to a dialogical relationship. (p. 62)

Dialogue also means multiple voices and multiple directions. As Park (2001) states:

Dialogue occupies a central position as an inquiry in pursuing the three objectives of participatory research, and the knowledge associated with them, by making it possible for participants to create a social space in which they can share experiences and information, create common meanings and forge concerted actions together. (p. 81)

Finally, dialogue enables people to create "open and trusting relationships between two or more people ... One important aspect of dialogue is its ability to build social and emotionally caring relationships between people" (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2012, p. 4).

In the end, every process of research is arguably a communicative space where people are sharing knowledge, experiences and relationships. For that, the second approach to methodology – to reinforce social relationships – is important. And this is because "more than a technical means to an end, it is an expression of the human condition that impels people to come together" (Park, 2001, p. 81).

Clover, Follen and Hall (2010) consider that popular education starts from people's intellectual, emotional and physical environment. From this point of departure, the authors organise a program addressed to environmental adult education with a strong emphasis on group relationships. They differentiate five steps: (1) the creation of a plan to define the aim of the program by using tools to motivate, and bring to light fear, or lack of self-esteem, etc. (2) the knowledge of the context where the program will take place. This listening phase (Freire, 1970) includes the selection of venues and the timetable of activities. (3) the knowledge of people holding the group together. This means to know why people attend the course, what are the moments of resistance and the fears that people experience about participating in learning processes, amongst others. (4) the subjects and the processes of learning. Subjects must arise from the desires, interests and curiosity of the people. They must listen to the experience and stories of people involved in them. (5) an evaluation of how people learn, how this learning is useful to them, how the program can be improved.

In short, I wish to stress that the methodology of popular education has, as one of its main features, the group as a place for learning, while people remain the primordial resource for learning. In the following, I shall present two experiences. First an historic experience: the 'Misiones Pedagógicas'. After that, a current experience of researching people's lives: the 'Social and Historical Memory Workshop'.

5.1 The 'Misiones Pedagógicas' Tiana (2021) defined this experience with the following words:

In Spain, between the years of 1931 to 1936 an original and interesting popular educational experience was developed. Some people, mainly younger people, most of them connected with teaching activities, together with writers and artists, went across Spain bringing books, music, copies of paintings, projectors, films, plays, and puppets to places and villages,

some of them still very isolated. In these places, they organised exhibitions, theatres, teaching keynotes, public sessions of reading, they worked and played with children and their teachers, and lived together with villagers. After some days, they returned to their homes after planting the seeds of education and culture, as well as leaving books and records in the schools. This lasted for a five-year period and in different seasons of the year. (p. 15, author's translation)

There is no better explanation of this process. The same author refers to the methodology of the experience that he names 'recreational school' to stress that it was open to a diversity of cultural events and activities to break the isolation of Spain's hinterland.

This diversity of activities can be summarised as follows: (1) the study of the natural environment through keynotes, exhibitions, etc.; (2) the 'socialisation' of fine arts with exhibitions of copies of great paintings; (3) the organisation of public readings and listening to music – popular and classic – live or on records, (4) the use of the cinema; (5) citizenship education focused on people's rights and the principles of the Republic; (6) activities to encourage people to read, mainly by the organisation of public libraries in small villages; and (7) actions devoted to teacher training (Tiana, 2021).

Participation in the 'Misiones Pedagógicas' involved not only those connected to education. We can mention individuals such as the poet Luis Cernuda, the philosopher Maria Zambrano or the playwright Alejandro Casona, among others. Most of them went into exile when the fascists won the Civil War in 1939 and the Franco dictatorship began.

Finally, it can be stated that the 'Misiones Pedagógicas' presented a triple dimension. First, by defining a specific model of education and practice; second, it was a great effort in terms of cultural action and communication; and third, it carried a strong political implication to reinforce democracy and the Republic.

5.2 The Social and Historical Memory Workshop

This workshop started functioning in 2004 to collect people's life histories as a source of knowledge about repression, incomplete education, precarious jobs, poverty, or migration. López (2011) considers that the defining moment was an interview with María, a woman who had lost her father at the very beginning of the Civil War when she was 5 years old. She expressed her nervousness and difficulties in conveying her memories and feelings related to those years.

The workshop has developed three different research activities. The first was focused on collecting histories from people living in the time of the Spanish Civil War, and the early years of the dictatorship. Interviews were collected,

analysed and then organised around three main generative themes: repression either in the Civil War or during the dictatorship, education, and work in the post-war period. Dissemination was done in public presentations – in some cases it was the first time that some of the people involved in the workshop talked in public.

The second research activity was related to the last years of the dictatorship and the period known as *La transición*, the process of recuperating democracy between 1975 – the year of the death of the dictator – and 1978, when the democratic constitution was enacted. The generative themes that arose during a dedicated analysis of the interviews were: (a) the processes of migration – a consequence of the previous research, (b) the first massive workers' strikes, (c) the birth of democratic trade unions (even under the dictatorship), (d) the social and political militancy either in clandestine political parties, or in the first neighbourhood associations, and (e) the condition of women.

Dissemination of this research started with a public presentation in a community theatre in the district where the participants lived. Then, it was presented in diverse places: adult education schools, secondary schools, community centres and the university. Audio-visual material was organised to support these public presentations.

At present, the workshop is involved in a third research project related to one of the most important textile factories in the city of Seville. This factory is also significant for the history of the district and the history of the workers' movement in the city. According to López (2011), a variety of achievements have emerged from the research process. One suggests that participants in the workshop were enabled to learn how to carry out research. Another is related to the acquisition of tools for expressing their voice and for being listened to. For instance, their public presentations showed them how to express their own thinking and ideas.

6 Conclusions

Paulo Freire can be considered the key thinker and the most well-known author in popular education. His work is a cardinal point of reference in looking for a notion of education that helps people to understand their reality – physical and symbolic – to organise a better community and a richer personal life. Without his ideas, it is difficult to understand education – and in particular adult education – focused on the collective, starting from people's problems and their desire to learn. Freire's thought provides philosophical and methodological tools to resist the mainstream of an education only addressed to the labour market and concerned with training people to achieve employability – not a

real and decent job. To organise practices of resistance to this dehumanising system, it is important to recall that education is a collective and relational event that must be useful for individuals and communities on the road to achieving wellbeing.

What are the contributions of popular education to resisting the main-stream of Lifelong Learning? Firstly, I think that it is related to the introduction of the real world in the school. In recent years, certain critiques have presented the school as an indoctrinated institution. In Spain, for instance, right wing and fascist parties try to prevent the school from introducing "themes such as sexual diversity, gender, ethnic diversity [...] it must be a school which does not present different views of the world and different views of the way to be in it" (Kohan, 2020, p. 189, author's translation). If the school teaches these notions, it is an 'indoctrinated' school. The aim is clearly for the real world to stay out of schools. A transmissive and bookish school that forgets, for instance, the suffering of people during the Spanish Civil War (Rangel, 2021).

The same reasoning applies when the school is defined as a place where people learn useless things. The school must be focused on transmitting knowledge, competences, and skills so that people are made ready to access the labour market. In doing that, however, the desires, the curiosities, the lives of the individuals are subordinated to the competences that they must acquire. These competences then decide what is useful for people and what is not.

There are, though, other models better adapted to organise educational processes. The 'Misiones Pedagógicas' is an example. The major goal of the experience was to 'socialise' knowledge (Gramsci, 1974) to confront people with other realities, building taste and criticism (Williams, 1983). The recreational school wanted to help people to discover other ways of life, beyond the narrow world that they found in isolated villages.

If the 'Misiones Pedagógicas' can be considered a 'top-down' process, the workshop is a popular education experience that starts from the curiosity of people to know more about their lives, and to unveil a part of their own history never yet told. In the end, both experiences, the attempt to imagine a different education far removed from a school that does not serve people, or the efforts to build knowledge in a different way, become an inspiration that facilitates imagining an education beyond the restrictions of Lifelong Learning policies and practices.

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