

**Discourses on Empowerment in Adult Learning: A View on  
Renewed Learning**

Luisa Daniele

ANPAL-National Agency for Active Labour Market Policies, Italy

### **Abstract**

The paper examines critically the dimension of empowerment in the European discourse, starting from some operational definitions used in official documents. The author analyses the shift in the European documents from 2000 to recent years, from a lifelong learning vision to an adult education approach, basically labour market – oriented, thus leaving aside the social cohesion and self-emancipatory dossiers. Against this background, a theoretical approach derived from the categories of transaction and reflexivity is suggested, setting out from the works of John Dewey. This paper investigates whether the categories of experience, problem posing and emancipation are more suitable for a long-term project on adult learning than the categories of activation, problem solving, and empowerment.

**Keywords:** empowerment; adult education; European policy; reflexivity; Dewey.

## Introduction

### Some Operational Definitions of Empowerment

The basic question addressed in this paper is: Is empowerment a key concept for Adult learning? The paper examines the dimension of empowerment in the European discourse, starting from some operational definitions used in international and European Commission documents. It investigates whether the categories of experience, problem posing and emancipation are more suitable for a long-term project on adult learning than the categories of activation, problem solving, and empowerment. The shift in international and European documents from 2000 to recent years, from a lifelong learning vision to an adult education approach, basically labour market – oriented, are analysed in the first section of the essay. Against this background, a theoretical approach derived from the categories of transaction and reflexivity is suggested, setting out from the reflections of Dewey (1916; 1925; 1933; 1949) and Mezirow (1978; 2000).

In this perspective, it is first of all necessary to analyse the context of the notion of empowerment, by analysing some selected operational definitions given in official documents from the European Commission and from international agencies:

Empowerment is the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Central to this process are actions which both build individual and collective assets, and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organizational and institutional context which govern the use of these assets. (Alsop, Bertelsen, & Holland, 2006, p. 1)

Confident, informed and empowered consumers are the motor of economic change as their choices drive innovation and efficiency (Commission of the European Commission, 2007, p. 2). Empowered and informed consumers can more easily make changes in lifestyle and consumption patterns contributing to the improvement of their health, more sustainable lifestyles and a low carbon economy (p. 11).

Strengthening girls' and women's voice, and facilitating their participation and empowerment, is at the heart of the Commission services' and the EEAS' efforts to enhancing gender equality through external relations. (European Commission, 2015, p. 10)

The concept of empowerment in these definitions seems to be related to notions such as agency, autonomy, self-direction, self-determination, liberation, participation, mobilization and self-confidence (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). The term empowerment, as an umbrella concept, has been developed in social and educational literature and policy documents since the 1960s, and it has been used to describe the empowerment of marginalized individuals or groups (e.g., minorities, disabled people, women) to mobilize self-activation against social constraints or to encourage the development of entrepreneurship. Even among scholars, many definitions of empowerment have been given since the 1980s: Rappaport (1984) defines empowerment as “a process: the mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives” (p. 2). Craig and Mayo (1995) describe empowerment as being about collective community and class conscientization, so as to challenge the powerful and ultimately to

transform the reality through conscious political struggle. For Zimmerman (2000), empowerment is a tripartite concept articulated at the individual, organisational and community levels. Albertyn (2001), from a similar position, estimates that empowerment is recognizable only if change occurs at each of three levels: micro (attitude, feeling and skills), interface (participation and action around the individual, and macro (beliefs, action and effects).

Moser (1993) like Narayan (2005) refers to expanding assets and capabilities to participate in, influence, and control institutions which affect everyday life; Grootaert and van Bastelaer (2002) introduce the notion of social capital and social institutions building as a further feature of empowerment. Alsop (2006), to the contrary, puts emphasis on the individual's capacity to make effective choices, that is, to obtain the desired actions and outcomes.

### **From Development and Emancipation to Functional Learning and Empowerment**

In relation to adult learning, the notion of empowerment appears only in the late 1990s when the market labour-oriented dossier and economic issues prevail on the first enunciation on adult learning policy. The notion of lifelong learning in the contemporary world can be traced back in the 1960s, to the definition given by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), to meet the challenges of a changing world. The second International Conference on Adult Education held in 1960 on the theme *Adult Education in a Changing World* stated that:

Recognizing the importance of Adult Education in a world of rapid change, this Conference urges all Member States of UNESCO to invest a higher proportion of their resources in the development of Adult Education (p. 2).

The following Faure Report, in 1972, *Learning to Be* (UNESCO) underlined that “we propose education as the master concept for educational policies in the years to come for both developed and developing countries” (Faure, Herrera, Kaddoura, Lopes, Petrovsky, Rahnema, & Ward, 1972). Thus a holistic interpretation of lifelong learning is usually adopted in relation to the Faure Report, which claimed that:

Every individual must be in a position to keep learning throughout his life. The idea of lifelong education is the keystone of the learning society. The lifelong concept covers all aspects of education, embracing everything in it, with the whole being more than the sum of its parts. There is no such thing as a separate “permanent” part of education which is not lifelong. In other words, lifelong education is not an educational system but the principle in which the over-all organization of a system is founded, and which accordingly underlies the development of each of its component parts (pp. 181–82).

As Schuetze (2006) stated, Faure's idea of lifelong education “formulated the philosophical-political concept of a humanistic, democratic and emancipatory system of learning opportunities for everybody, independent of class, race or financial means, and independent of the age of learner” (p. 290). However, in parallel with this humanistic interpretation of lifelong education, the OECD reframed its lifelong discourse in more economic and employability terms as suggested in its report, entitled: “Recurrent Education: A Strategy for Lifelong Learning” (1973) and underlined by Gelpi (1980) who pointed out that “in the industrialized countries at the time of the economic boom of the 1960's, the ideology of lifelong education =

general education reflected in effect the necessity for the rapid training of workers at average and higher levels in the vocational field” (pp. 1–2).

Twenty-eight years after the Faure Report, lifelong education has been transformed into lifelong learning. In 1996 UNESCO’s Delors Report it was underlined that learning was a key to the twenty-first century, and learning throughout life will be essential for adapting to the evolving requirements of the labour market and for better mastery of the changing time-frames and rhythms of individual existence. Further, it was emphasized that:

There is a need to rethink and broaden the notion of lifelong education. Not only must it adapt to changes in the nature of work, but it must also constitute a continuous process of forming whole beings—their knowledge and aptitudes, as well as the critical faculty and ability to act. It should enable people to develop awareness of themselves and their environment and encourage them to play their social role and work in the community (p. 21).

Several studies share the same conclusions: the presence of three main phases and points of view on lifelong learning (Antikainen, 2009; Matheson and Matheson, 1996; Bagnall, 1990). The first phase is represented by the humanistic concept, and the focus during the 1960’s would have been on more comprehensive and integrated goals such as developing more human individuals and communities able to face social change. The second phase, after the 1980’s, is connected with retraining and learning new skills that would enable workers to cope with the change in the labour market and new technologies. The more economic point of view taken by the both the OECD and the European Union, as Holford & Špolar (2014) pointed out, is also related to recurrent education: education after compulsory schooling to alternate with periods of work and other social activity. In the third and present phase lifelong learning has become more individual-oriented: Griffin (1999) points out that emphasis in the lifelong learning discourse on the learner could also be interpreted as assigning more agencies to individuals in contrast to the previous thrust on institutions, and structures. This means that the welfare state tries to abdicate its responsibility to provide opportunities in the labour market.

The Delors Report established the basis for the lifelong and life-wide prospect of lifelong learning, giving way to the non – formal and informal learning to be recognised in the context of the “learning society”, but some scholars observe that “by highlighting economic concerns, the dominant discourse on lifelong learning offers a narrow and fragmented appreciation of women and men’s roles in societies. In Europe, where there were record numbers of unemployed in the nineties, lifelong learning was reintroduced to mean mere retraining” (Medel-Añonuevo, Ohsako, & Mauch, 2001, p. 5).

Within a framework of global crisis, job uncertainty, decreasing demand for low-skilled labour, and increased demand for highly qualified workers, lifelong learning “has gradually come to be appropriated more and more within the narrower instrumentalist discourse of further training and professional development” (Wain, 2001, p. 187).

In 1994 the European Lifelong Learning Initiative (ELLI) and the European Commission organised the “First Global Conference on Lifelong Learning - A Survival Concept for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”, which stressed the importance of lifelong learning as initial and continuing education:

Education policy must provide for a continuous series of "second chance" trains and lifelong occasions to re-adapt, to develop one's intellectual and human potential, and to unlock the human creativity essential to coping with global change in such areas as the environment, population, employment and communications (p. 3).

Even in the UNESCO's CONFINTEA V, held in Hamburg in 1997, lifelong learning had a central role, both connected with the economic rationale and the wider societal objectives: "a contrast is often made between Faure's (1972) maximalist, humanistic and liberating view of lifelong education, with a more pragmatic and economic perspective – adopted by international organisations such as the OECD, the EU, and the World Bank – tending to treat lifelong learning more instrumentally, as a means to achieve employability" (Holford, & Špolar, 2014, p. 38).

Education was raised to the attention of the European Commission's policies only with the *Maastricht Treaty*, (Treaty on European Union [TEU], 1992) when it was only a marginal concept, but the growing international competition showed the need for economic development through education policies: "the Commission began to show interest particularly in vocationally-oriented areas of lifelong learning such as school-to-work transitions and 'adult anti-illiteracy campaigns'" (Holford, Riddell, Weedon, Litjens, & Hannan, 2008, p. 46).

1996 was proclaimed the European Year of Lifelong Learning, which had the main purpose to "make the European public aware of the importance of lifelong learning, to foster better cooperation between education and training structures and the business community, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, to help to establish a European area of education and training through the academic and vocational recognition of qualifications within the European Union, and to stress the contribution made by education and training to the equality of opportunities" (European Parliament and Council Decision n° 95/2493/EC of 23 October 1995 establishing 1996 as the European Year of Lifelong Learning, p. 1)

The main contribution to the global debate was the life wide and lifelong approach as defined by the cradle to grave formula, putting in the centre of the discussion not only the economic aspects of learning but also issues such as "personal growth, participation in the democratic decision-making process, recreational learning and active aging", as claimed by the European Commission (ibidem, p. 1). Next in the European strategy was the large debate on new basic skills: information technology, foreign languages, entrepreneurship and social skills.

As Holford & Špolar underline, "If the key characteristic of lifelong education as conceptualised in the 1970s (and used in the UNESCO vocabulary until CONFINTEA V) was its humanistic dimension, when lifelong learning emerged in national and international policies in the 1990s, the emphasis was firmly on aiding economic performance, whether individual or societal... Human capital has been closely associated with neo-liberal ideology; this approach can be seen in the *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (CEC, 2000)." (2014, p. 41).

The *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* derived from the conclusions of the Lisbon European Council, in 2000 when the Lisbon Strategy was launched, in order to make "the European Union the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world" (Commission Staff Working Paper, *A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*, 2000, p. 3).

The conclusions of the Lisbon European Council confirmed that "the move towards lifelong learning must accompany a successful transition to a knowledge-based economy and society.

Therefore, Europe's education and training systems are at the heart of the coming changes" (Commission Staff Working Paper, *A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*, 2000, p. 3).

The six key messages contained (new basic skills for all; more investment in human resources; innovation in teaching and learning; valuing learning; rethinking guidance and counselling and bringing learning closer to home) were intended to create a framework for an open debate: the action plan which stemmed from the *Memorandum* consultation, *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality* (Commission of the European Communities [CEC], 2001) changed the priorities, "indicating a clear neoliberal agenda for economic growth through education and Adult learning" (Holford and Špolar, 2012).

In the following years, the European Council launched the *Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (ET2020)* (Council of the European Union [CEU], 2009): while in the document active citizenship and personal fulfilment is related to economic growth and employability, a deeper analysis of the document reveals that lifelong learning is only ancillary to employability rather than to social cohesion, active citizenship and personal fulfilment.

What is particularly remarkable here is that the European Union has been successful in shifting the policy discourse from collectivities (communities or social classes) to individuals. The social justice dossier still evoked in the 1960s and 1970s through the emphasis on citizenship has been turned into inclusion: there is no room for social distribution, but only for functional integration. "The recent developments of Commission proposals reveal a strong preference for a liberal social model, even in relation to learning policies." (Somek, 2013, p. 49). The individual has been put at the centre, even in the bargaining procedures for training and education at workplaces: the Individual Learning Account - ILA, theorized and applied as an approach in the nineties, especially in peripheral and smaller contexts has produced the prevalence of stronger and explicit demand for training and education (those who already have an easy access to training and education) thus leaving implicit and hidden the weaker components (those who are, in fact, most in need of training and education).

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The *Agenda for New Skills and Jobs: European Contribution Towards Full Employment* (CEU, 2010) and the *Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning* (CEU 2011) recognize the role of lifelong learning to cope with the economic and employment crisis. "The crisis has highlighted the major role which adults can play in achieving the *Europe 2020* goals, by enabling adults – in particular the low-skilled and older workers – to improve their ability to adapt to changes in the labour market and society. Adult learning provides a means of up-skilling or reskilling those affected by unemployment, restructuring and career transitions, as well as makes an important contribution to social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development" (CEU 2011, 372/01, p. 1).

Adult learning is tightly tied to the broad empowerment concept and its characteristics: activation of the individuals, adaptation to changes (flexibility, *in primis*) in the society and labour market. As Holford and Mohorčič (2014) claim, "Though still given an important

position in policy, its focus has shifted towards areas which were seen as bringing employability, employment and income. The Adult learning agenda has narrowed, concentrating on more specific areas such as basic skills, increasing the proportion of 30–34 year-olds who have completed tertiary education (to 40% by 2020), and monitoring the Adult learning sector (including through the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competences PIAAC)” (p. 45).

The contemporary European discourse on Adult learning has given rise to an “emerging right to individuality” (Franck, 1999, p. 1), which is parallel to the decline of the community. “Individual freedom and empowerment are evaluated from a functional perspective if their realization is viewed as desirable with regard to what they contribute.... It becomes possible, then, to imagine a functional form of emancipation, that is, emancipation from being dysfunctional, or, put differently, emancipation in the state of liberalization and privatization” (Somek, 2013, p. 61). Empowerment when concerning individuals or groups is always involving activation on the basis of an empowering intervention such as a psychological counselling or a sociological project or developing management. In the empowerment approach, social change starts from individuals, basically considered, or grouped together by some common features. The activation of mere individuals or grouped individuals are functional to the economic issues of the European Union: empowerment is relevant to obtain more efficient production, better and cheaper products, or “to help individuals adjust to globalisation and technological change” (CEC, 2008 – 412, p. 5). In a few words, to come back to our adult education and training issues, in the Renewed Social Agenda it is clearly stated that, “Education and investing in human capital formation in general is critical to ensure labour participation and social inclusion and to enhance the competitiveness of the EU” (CEC, 2008 – 412, p. 6) Two decades after the Faure’s Report and the raising of lifelong learning to the attention of the EU policy agenda, the social and cultural issues related to adult learning seems to be considered as irrelevant and redundant in comparison with the skills maintenance and competitiveness dossier.

### **For a Different Notion of Adulthood**

In this section a notion of adulthood different from the neo-liberal paradigm so far illustrated, is suggested. This conception of an adult as being characterized in relation to his or her functions – workers, citizen, father and mother – as we have examined in the previous section, seems to be the premise of another definition, in which the adulthood is conceived as the arrival point of a cycle, that through subsequent “stages” leads the individual to his psychic and physiological maturity (Alberici, 2002, p. 78). Both the functional and the stadial approach, placing emphasis on an adult conceived as the product of evolutionary phases or social roles, they pay little attention to the process that leads the individual to become an adult, which is basically a process of learning and reflexivity.

Many factors (precarious living conditions, economic globalization, technological changes, crisis of traditional gender roles, etc.) undermine the adult model as a result, the final product of a unique stadial development. “Facing these changes, it seems relevant to identify possible and different adult identities as plots, paths of growth involving individuals, but also as indispensable fulcrums and pivots to orientate the development of the society” (Alberici, 2002, p. 78).

Overcoming a dichotomous conception of adult identity, either as a response to functional tasks, or as fulfilment of social roles in the community, there appears to be a third line of

research in the field of adult education, the one linked to the interaction of these components with a dimension of self-care, that is expressed in the need and the ability to reflect on him- or herself, on his or her path and also in the projection of a possible future.

This emphasis on the complexity and versatility of being adult does not justify adulthood as an unstructured, disengaged, weak condition, on the contrary, it leads to an evolutionary continuity, in which individuals continuously redefine new objectives in terms of personal, professional, social fulfilment. Adulthood is no longer the quiet harbour of the ‘Prudent Man’, but rather a continual work of weaving which is characterized by a transition from one apical phase in the process of defining adult identity, to another. As a result, the multidisciplinary approach is the only one able to investigate and interpret the multiple assets and paths in adulthood. And, again, the permanent state of change and transformation justifies the paradigm of lifelong learning, putting a specific accent on reflective and experiential learning. In this field of investigation, learning is basically a process of meaning construction, where the apical and everyday experiences become the substratum of knowledge through continuous reorganization of heuristic, explorative and investigative functions. Knowledge and learning are so configured as part of an eminently constructivist approach.

From these premises, even learning and cognitive processes are part of a process of development and transformation: knowledge for the adult not only has an individual value, but is also something that is produced and reproduced, it is exchanged and negotiated during activities and social practices.

### **From Activity to Experience, from Problem Solving to Problem Posing**

In this paragraph, the notions of experience and reflexivity are explored as possible alternatives to the already discussed notion of activity and empowerment. This different approach to learning and education in adulthood gives way to the definition of learning given by Dewey (1916) as “a continual reorganization, reconstruction and transformation of experience” (p. 50). Dewey distinguishes carefully between activity and experience: only the attribution of a sense and significance makes mere activity an experience, “Mere activity does not constitute experience. It is dispersive, centrifugal, dissipating. Experience as trying involves change, but change is meaningless transition unless it is consciously connected with the return wave of consequences which flow from it. When an activity is continued into the undergoing of consequences, when the change made by action is reflected back into a change made in us, the mere flux is loaded with significance” (Dewey, 1916, p. 163).

An educative experience is one in which we find a connection between how we act on things and what happens to things or to us in consequence; the value of an experience consists in the awareness of a continuity, which consists in a relationship among events. But what is the direction of this continuity? Any experience is, after all, a social experience, is accomplished in contact and communication, and requires a transmission from humans who have preceded us, it is therefore not merely individual experience, but on the contrary, “There are sources outside an individual that give rise to experience and external conditions always affect educational experiences” (Dewey, 1916, p. 24). The experience in Dewey is therefore perceived as the totality of natural phenomena, in their relations and transactions with the individual.

The second essential principle for discriminating the experiences leading to learning from those which do not is in fact, that of interaction. Interaction assigns “equal rights to both factors in

experience-object and internal conditions” (Dewey, 1938, pp. 38–39). Moreover, “any normal experience is an interplay of these two sets of conditions. Taken together, or in their interaction, they form what we call a situation” (Dewey, 1938, p. 39). As a result, the individuals always live in “the series of situation” (Dewey, 1938, p. 41), and the conceptions of situation and of interaction are inseparable from each other. The two principles of continuity and interaction are connected to one another. They are the longitudinal and lateral dimension of the experience.

The other capital aspect in Dewey is reflective learning: according to Dewey reflective thinking is somewhat uncomfortable and it causes perplexity when an individual encounters a situation whose “whole full character is not yet determined” (Dewey, 1933, p. 157). The internal experience for the learner is one of disequilibrium, until the search for a balance drives the learner to do something to resolve it, thus starting the process of enquiry and reflection.

To have a genuine process of reflective thinking it is necessary to be able to linger in the doubt and the perplexity of having no precise judgment on a fact or experience. This means that reflective thinking, and the process of enquiry, should be actively taught: in other words, adult learning should be concerned also by this question – how to teach adults to think – “One man’s thought is profound while another’s is superficial; one goes to the roots of the matter, and another touches lightly its most external aspects. This phase of thinking is perhaps the most untaught of all, and the least amenable to external influence whether for improvement or harm. The common assumptions that, if one only thinks, one thought is just as good for his mental discipline as another, and that the end of study is the amassing of information, both tend to foster superficial, at the expense of significant, thought” (Dewey, MW 6, p. 210). “The result of the process of enquiry is “enriched meaning and value in things” (Dewey, 1929 (LW 1; EN, p. 20), which means that present things are charged with significance because they are signs of absent things and this suggestion is confirmed by the present experience. We are still in the continuity of experience, “inferring signs in the present things and giving them a significance makes the individuals more able to impress direction to themselves and to their environment, as it gives increased power of control” (Dewey, 1929, LW1; EN p. 83).

Following the suggestions from Dewey’s works, we can observe that the accent on problem solving adopted in measuring the performance of adults (International Adult Literacy Survey – IALS (1994–1998); Second International Adult Literacy Survey – SIALS (1999–2000); Adult Literacy and Lifeskill – ALL (2001–2004); Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies – PIAAC (2010–2012) should not leave aside the question of how adults learn to solve problems and if it is possible to teach how to improve this cognitive process.

In this context, the work of Mezirow (1978) is relevant, as this author elaborated an approach to reflective thinking where, starting out from the works of Dewey, he subsequently develops a critique of the premises, the conditions preceding the inquiry and the problem solving. In this regard Mezirow states that Dewey meant critical thinking as the process by which assumptions are examined and validated, but he never explicitly differentiated between reflection on the content of an issue or on problem solving process and the function, here called “reflection on premises” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 7), which implies a review of the assumptions.

Therefore, according to Mezirow, while Dewey explains reflective thinking as a tool for problem solving, transformative theory emphasizes the process of reflection as a process of critical revision of the premises, such as the patterns and perspectives of meaning, with reference to the problem setting or problem posing process.

In Mezirow's thought, through reflection, we can analyse objectively the logic used to give interpretation of everyday life, so as to become critically aware of our own presuppositions and to challenge our established and habitual patterns of expectation and meaning perspectives.

The central function of reflection in Mezirow is identified as that of validating what is known. Reflection, in the context of problem solving, commonly focuses on procedures or methods. It may also focus on premises. Reflection on premises involves a critical view of distorted presuppositions that may be *epistemic*, *sociocultural* or *psychic*, meaning schemes and perspectives that are not viable are transformed through reflection. Uncritically assimilated meaning perspectives, which determine what, how, and why we learn, may be transformed through critical reflection, "Reflection on one's own premises can lead to transformative learning" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 57).

The transformative theory embraces not only the methods of analysis of experiences, but also the structures that the adult uses in the process of interpretation of the experience and the process of modification of the same structures. So, for Mezirow transformative thinking in adult education is first of all emancipatory as it explores new and different hypothesis from those commonly accepted from previous relationships with oneself and with the society. Transformative learning involves a particular function of reflection: reassessing the presuppositions on which our beliefs are based and acting on insights derived from the transformed meaning perspective that results from such reassessments. "Emancipatory education is an organized effort to help the learner challenge presuppositions, explore alternative perspectives, transform old ways of understanding, and act on new perspectives". (Mezirow, 2003, p. 212)

Against this background, the collective action, so often evoked in the paradigm of empowerment, is only consecutive to the acquired awareness of the social inequalities and asymmetrical power relationships that perpetuate this inequalities, "Learners need to become critically reflective of how these factors have shaped the ways they think and their beliefs so they may take collective action to ameliorate them" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 28). In this context central to the goal of Adult learning in democratic societies is the aim of helping learners become more aware of the context of their understandings and beliefs, more critically reflective on their tenets, and more effective in taking action. In this context, curriculum, instructional methods, material assessment, and faculty and staff development should address both learner objectives and this goal of education.

### **Adult Learning, Competent Oligarchy and Functional Illiteracy**

This passage deals with the contemporary state of the art in the field of adult education and learning in the industrialized countries. At the end of the section some experiences relevant at the beginnings of adult education in Italy are evoked as suggestions in order to get out of the described *impasse*.

In all the industrialized countries we are witnessing a trend towards a basic division of the population into layers, represented by advantaged groups with higher level of alphabetic culture and larger disadvantaged groups with a consumerist push, though excluded from a valid cultural fruition and with few instruments to allow a deep analysis of symbols and meanings of the current culture. This majority is not only represented by a marginalized component, but

also by people who actively participate in the benefits of economic development at least with a high consumption capacity.

As an example, what we observe in Italy, in recent years, is that even though the prolongation of school years (compulsory school lasts 10 years, from 6 to 16 years old) has guaranteed primary literacy for all, the current trend of diffusion of illiteracy maintains a connotation opposite to the democratic development of the society. In fact, the spread of illiteracy in every advanced country seems to go along with a lack of awareness on the part of the illiterate themselves about the limits resulting from the regression of their literacy skills: on the contrary, the process of development of contemporary society in the last century was driven by the claim for a more central role on behalf of those who were held in the margins of communication and knowledge processes. In short, it is alarming that the spread of media and internet has suggested a perception of adequacy related to the possibility of easy access to information and fast communication, nevertheless omitting the ability to approach a wealth of knowledge of greater consistency, stability and depth, but with a greater effort in the access. "The illiteracy seems to be accompanied by a failure in the capacity of reflection, which corresponds to a reduced ability to interpret phenomena in rapid transformation as are those of the modern world... the illiterate component of the society is opposed to the elite with advanced literacy skills, which enable a high level of understanding: the latter represents the new oligarchy" (Vertecchi, 2001, p. 47).

Another concerning phenomenon can be observed in the characteristics of the Italian population as measured in IALS-SIALS surveys on literacy skills and more recently in PIAAC: level 3 of competence (intermediate) are growing only very slowly in the younger age groups who already participate in the labor market (26–35 years old). The slow increase of skills in younger ages does not seem to go hand in hand with the expansion of access to secondary education in Italy from the 1980s to today: this could therefore bring us to conclude that without a policy for the maintenance of acquired skills the fall of skills and competences cannot be effectively tackled, including the key competences related to numeracy and literacy.

Against this contemporary scenario, it is interesting to recall the first experiences that characterize the beginnings of adult education in Italy, primarily those referring to *It's Never Too Late* TV programmes in the 1960s – aiming at fighting illiteracy, and the right to 150 paid hours for study leave – a policy for the education of workers during the 1970s. On November 15, 1960, a series of television broadcasts started in Italy, entitled *It's Never Too Late*, that would bring, in the next eight years, more than one million illiterate people to achieve a primary school certificate. The program was conducted by an elementary school teacher, Alberto Manzi, had a thrice-weekly structure, included lessons in Italian and mathematics and could be followed over two thousand receiving points scattered throughout Italy: in bars, cafes, clubs of the peninsula. The program *It's Never Too Late* was later awarded by UNESCO (Teheran 1965, World Conference on Literacy) as one of the best television programs for the fight against illiteracy. The evolution of adult education, in the following years, is parallel to the claim for the right to study for workers, consisting of 150 hours of study leaves a year, which has been gradually recognized in national contracts, starting from the textile sector in 1957, and finally fully established in the Workers' Statute in 1970.

In both experiences, the *It's Never Too Late* courses for literacy on the television during the 1960s, and the claim for the right to 150 paid study hours during the 1970s, some common traits explain their success, which can be useful to recall at present: first of all an associative or collective context that, more than to focus on the individual, offers meanings and values in order to motivate to learning; then, an adult education strategy which focuses on training needs,

and not only on the activation of a passive subject; a meaningful and transformative learning particularly relevant for the weaker side of the demand for education, which brings to increase lasting and fruitful skills, not only adaptive but also reflective competence so as to give tools to the individuals to renew skills and knowledge.

### Conclusions

The article moved from an initial question: Is empowerment a key concept for adult learning? Through the analysis of the international and European documents on adult education and learning the shift from a lifelong learning to a labour-market oriented paradigm has been argued, as well as the swap between the emancipation dossier – with its inclusive, collective and democratic issues – and the empowering dossier, where the functional aspects of learning are emphasised; communities are reduced to targets (of disadvantaged categories; of census; of entrepreneurs) and citizens are reduced to consumers; workers are required to be active and functional and not good learners and a short-term evaluation of learning and teaching is prevailing.

The author's suggestion, moving from Dewey's and Mezirow's works, is to restore the notion of experience and emancipation in the paradigm of adult learning, so as to overtake the neo-liberal paradigm of empowerment.

Even at the local level, in national policies, experiences that have been successful in tackling functional illiteracy should be rediscovered and launched. The author quoted two experiences in Italy during the 1960s and the 1970s (*It's Never Too Late* television programmes to fight illiteracy and the claim for 150 paid hours for study in national agreements) which were characterised by some common traits, that should be now be brought to light again, such as a collective context; meanings and values in order to motivate especially the weaker side of the demand for learning; a transformative learning which brings to increase not only adaptive skills, but also lasting and reflective competences in order to renew learning throughout life.

Global neo-liberalism insists on considering us as individuals who compete – winning or losing – in the labour market. Still, the neo liberal paradigm recognizes the right to study and to training: we should consider to use this right to acquire the capacities of a freely thinking human being and citizen, acting with creative and social needs, not only as human capital.

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**Corresponding author:** Luisa Daniele

**Email:** [luisa.daniele69@gmail.com](mailto:luisa.daniele69@gmail.com)