

Ellen Boeren and Nalita James (Eds.). *Being an adult learner in austere times: Exploring the Contexts of Higher, further and community education*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. 2019. ISBN 978-3-319-97207-7 (hbk). ISBN 978-3-319-97208-4 (ebk). 218+xi pp.

Over the past decade, the attention to adult education generally, and adult learners particularly, has faced a gradual decline. The recent discourse on adult education identifies some major socioeconomic factors and policies, for instance, neoliberalism and austerity which might be the major key elements in this decline. Accordingly, the current book aims to provide an overview of the current status of adult and community education in the times of austerity. This book comprises 8 chapters and a concluding chapter as well, most of these chapters have been developed from the standing conference on teaching and research in the education of adults which was held on 5-7 July 2016, at the University of Leicester in the UK.

This book includes two sections, the first section comprises the first three chapters. It focuses mainly on being an adult learner in higher education, highlighting the British and European contexts. Hence, in their introductory chapter, the editors offer their framework and provide some critical arguments on the current situation of adult education and the discourse on austerity. Chapter 2, authored by Ellen Boeren, explores the current state-of-art of adult lifelong learning participation. She highlights how UNESCO and the OECD influenced the European Commission to conceptualize the measurement of participation in adult education. She argues that it is problematic to determine the availability of educational opportunities for adult learners. Moreover, Boeren discusses educational attainment, age, and employment as individual determinants of seeking participation in adult education and lifelong learning. She clarifies that “adults tend to make fewer investments in their work-related learning once they are closer to retirement age and both upskilling and retraining are thus more recognized by younger adults who want to make progress within their occupation” (p. 31).

In chapter 3, Sharon Clancy provides the historical context of adult education and offers some examples of adult education practices. She highlights the important role

that adult education can play in communities, focusing on the role of non-formal community-based learning, and therefore she calls for a stronger restoration of adult education as a means to strengthen community besides promoting the society.

The second section of this book comprises five chapters. It focuses on discussing adult learning settings and the role of adult education in the age of austerity, highlighting higher, further and community education contexts, and offering the voices of adult learners and educators.

In Chapter 4, Lindsey Fraser and Kerry Harman explore the fluctuations of the participation of adult learners in higher education, as there is a certain decline in part-time undergraduate adult learners, while there is a decrease in the number of full-time adult learners in the English higher education context. Thus, Fraser and Harman discuss policy agenda which is related to the part-time adult students in times of austerity. This chapter draws on statistics from higher education official bodies, such as the higher education funding council in England, and higher education statistics agency, focusing on widening participation programmes. Surprisingly, the authors here reflect on their own teaching practice, as they have experienced working as teachers within these programmes.

In Chapter 5, Charlie E. Sutton aims to formulate policy recommendations on supporting adult learners in higher education. Sutton explores social isolation amongst adult learners who pursue their undergraduate degrees, highlighting the difficulties that they have experienced. The findings in this chapter indicate that adult learners tend to feel more isolated than younger learners. For adult learners, being mixed with younger peers or paying attention to focus on study-related aspects in order to combine studying with other life domains might generate these feelings of isolation. Sutton sheds light on the variety of adult learners and the importance of supporting and empowering them, “acknowledging that mature students are not a homogenous group is essential in designing appropriate support to help mature students effectively complete their degree” (p. 117).

In chapter 6, Sherene Meir presents a study, based on a grounded theory approach. It explores the impact of returning to education on learner’s subjectivities and narratives, through in-depth engagement with narratives from three working-class women. Drawing on feminist and adult education theories, Meir argue that working-class women who failed in completing their education are unaware of the learning they have acquired through non-formal and informal learning outside academic settings, and hence, Meir recommends that providing access to higher education courses for disadvantaged adults cultivates learner’s confidence, and sense of agency, along with other personal and social benefits.

Vicky Duckworth and Rob Smith, in their chapter, discuss the impact of further education on transforming adults' lives, through providing narratives of adult learners in further education, and some reflections on their research project, *FE in England: Transforming Lives and Communities*, which focuses on narratives about transformative teaching and learning in further education. Duckworth and Smith discuss the role of the knowledge economy and the impact of neoliberal policies. They argue that "further education courses for adults now requiring them to apply for a loan to cover tuition fees, financial considerations, particularly for those adults with families, are likely to impact strongly on the choices they make and it seems likely that the number of adults on courses will decline" (p. 156).

In chapter 8, Katy Jones, drawing on her doctoral thesis, critically engages with a unique aspect of austerity politics, focusing on the organizations which support homeless adults. Jones zooms in on the influences of austerity politics on homeless adults and community education highlighting that homeless adults are often excluded from mainstream education. Furthermore, she clarifies that "data limitations are a well-known problem in research concerning homeless people" (p. 181). Recently, a number of policy initiatives addressing homeless adults in education have been introduced. Jones concludes her chapter with some recommendations for stakeholders in government, the adult education sector and the homelessness sector.

Boeren and James end their book with some conclusions and recommendations, addressing the impact of neoliberalism, the issues of widening participation in adult education, and the idea of ageism. They argue "the idea that education should be for all, regardless of their background characteristics including age, has not been translated into practice [...] The economic and social impact of engaging in adult education play an important part on the individual and the wider economy, leading to better health, well-being and sociability" (p. 204).

Overall, this book constitutes a good contribution to the literature on adult learning in times of austerity. Both editors and contributors succeeded in presenting the theme of this book with a comprehensive view of the field. *Being an adult learner in austere times* should be of interest to policy makers, adult educators, practitioners and students in the field of adult and further education.

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