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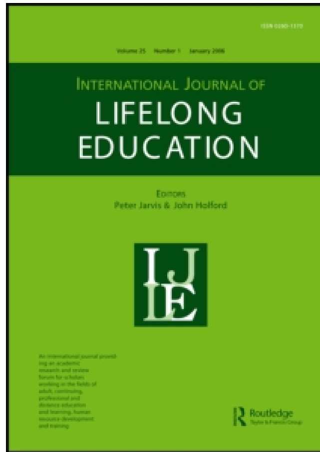

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Adult education as experienced by the learners

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Adult education as experienced by the learners

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During the last decade, the issue of lifelong learning, which was once launched as a project of emancipation, has become more integrated into the labour market and employment policies of governments and international organizations such as the EU and OECD. The most important concrete result of this has been a rapid increase in adult education programmes and incentives for adults to join them. In some cases, these incentives almost assume the character of compulsion. The Danish Adult Education Research Project (1997–2000) has been dealing with the broad adult education systems mainly serving poorly educated and unemployed adults. The project has consistently sought to investigate current adult education from the perspective of the learners. Empirical activities have comprised observation of teaching sessions and daily life, and individual and group interviews of participants. Most adult learners approach education in very ambivalent ways. The majority of participants enter the programmes because they are more or less forced to do so, and not because of an inner drive or interest. In practice, they typically develop a variety of psychological defence strategies to avoid learning that challenges their identity and personal ways of thinking, reacting and behaving. In general, it seems to be basically characteristic of adult learning that: adults have very little inclination to really learn something they do not perceive as meaningful for their own life goals; adults in their learning draw on the resources they have; and adults take as much responsibility for their learning as they want to take (if they are allowed to do so). These characteristics are significantly different from general assumptions behind most educational programmes. Thus, such programmes are not fit to fulfil the ideals of lifelong learning, and often it would be better to move resources from educational arrangements to clarifying, guiding and motivating activities. Education should only take place when the learner has understood and accepted that the arrangement is in his or her own interest.

In the modern so-called ‘knowledge society’, an almost boundless importance has been ascribed to education and lifelong learning. Tony Blair has delivered the most significant evidence for this by proclaiming ‘education, education, education’ as the three most important endeavours of the British New Labour Government, and a continuous stream of documents from international policy agencies such as the EU and OECD have massively supported this standpoint (OECD 1996, EU 2000).

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Consequently, adult education has grown explosively during the last 5–10 years and today, at least in Denmark, has developed into mass education. No one today can expect to pass through adulthood without being involved in some sort of education, usually several times, and adult education has taken over the most basic feature of children's schooling, namely that it is compulsory, if not by law then by necessity.

This situation has inevitably caused changes in the ideology and practice of adult education. Earlier, the implicit background of adult education was that it was usually a voluntary activity, in which the participants involved themselves because they experienced a need or desire to learn something in subjects and fields of their own interest (Knowles 1975). Therefore, a positive motivation and aims in the direction of emancipation, enlightenment and empowerment could be assumed (Mezirow 1991). Now, the majority of participants turn up because they have to, they are forced or persuaded to come, either directly by employers or authorities, or indirectly because the alternative would be social and economic marginalization.

In the so-called 'Adult Education Research Project', we have, through observation and interviews, investigated the three popular adult education systems in Denmark: the 'Adult Vocational Training' system (offering mainly short practical training courses); the 'Adult Education Centres' (offering secondary school level courses and exams for adults); and the 'Day High Schools' (serving mainly unemployed adults who need to start a new career).

We have deliberately chosen the perspective of the learners, focusing on their accounts, experiences and evaluations of the educational situation and setting and the process that led them to participate (Ahrenkiel and Illeris 2000, Illeris 2000). Our results, in many ways, contrast both the official administrative and the general ideological conception of adult education. At the same time, the investigation has pointed to big differences connected with the participants' employment situation and perspectives, between various age groups and to some extent also gender differences, whereas class differences seem to blur because the majority of participants irrespective of their background tend to be part of an expanding societal class or group of people who are at risk of being marginalized.

Ambivalence and identity

In general, we have found that most adults approach education in very ambivalent ways. Their motivation is closely related to the need to keep their jobs or improve their possibilities of getting one. They hope for and demand enrichment and involvement but also fear being humiliated or challenged above the level of their personal thresholds. They are sensitive and vulnerable. While they hope for help and support in a critical life situation, they doubt that it is possible. They are sometimes ambivalent in a way that almost splits them apart.

These circumstances lead to participants telling of their reasons for being involved in adult education in most contradictory ways. On the one hand, they usually emphasize that they have chosen to start an educational programme because they want to learn something; on the other hand, most of them are only attending the courses because they have to. In some stories, the social motives are dominant, but they are always mingled with other motives for qualification or personal development and with elements of passive resistance and perplexity.

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Sanne is a married woman in her mid-40s and is the daughter of a skilled worker. She did quite well at school, but left after nine years, worked for 20 years as a dentist's assistant until a disagreement forced her into an unskilled job in the electronics industry. After some years there, she was pressed to take part in a series of courses in order to improve her professional skills and knowledge, and thereby become a more all-round and flexible employee. She says:

> I cannot stand courses. I always have butterflies in my stomach when something new is going on. I hate it. I need security. I was incredibly negative, I was annoyed, I was mad, thought it was just a lot of bullshit. Also because it is really not something I can use at all. I thought it was a waste of time and money. I thought it was simply ridiculous. I was madly frustrated about it. [. . .] I am quite sure that the company takes note of whether one is willing to go to courses or not. For instance, our shop steward up there says that if we don't go to courses we are not suited for the company. That's it. We must be fit for all of it, all of us. I won't be able to just count on them letting me sit here and play around with the tasks I know. [. . .] But . . . I did it, and I am glad that I did it. I think I have learnt something. [. . .] think it as been fun and exciting. But I certainly don't approach a course with a positive attitude, I admit that, and no matter what course. (Ahrenkiel *et al.* 1998: 64–65)

Motivations are rarely straightforwardly positive or negative but seem to be a mixture of social, personal and/or technical elements with a focus on the concrete skills that the adults expect to gain. At the same time, there is a great deal of desperation or resignation in most statements. And when adults tell of their everyday lives, their life histories and the values that they have been orienting their lives towards so far, it becomes evident that the actual approach to adult education is very ambivalent and even confused. The mixed attitudes are not just produced by the outward elements of economic power and control. It is evident that the broader social and economic conditions these participants are currently facing have consequences for their very identities.

Maria—an unemployed woman of 39 with an academic background—has deliberately chosen a day high-school course to prepare for a new and less ambitious career. She describes her situation in the following way:

> When I started it took me unawares that the common denominator for people coming here was that they had been 'activated' [by the municipal administration], and all the frustrations that that situation involves. And it takes up a lot of time, incredibly much, and it has done so from the first day. There are incredibly many discussions in classes about the labour market and about how frustrated people are, and a heap of examples of how unjustly they feel they have been treated. It is a storage facility for people that they don't really know what to do with. (Ahrenkiel *et al.* 1999: 62)

Identities at risk

Viewed from the perspective of learning, it is an integral part of life for children and young people that they are developing and, therefore, have to learn new things

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all the time. In my recent book on *The Three Dimensions of Learning* (Illeris 2002a), I discuss, among other things, fundamental differences of learning in relation to life ages. Whereas children's learning is necessarily uncensored and confident, adults want to take responsibility and personally decide, consciously or unconsciously, what to learn and not to learn—and youth, in this connection, is the stormy and troublesome stage at which one gradually learns and wins the ability and right to manage one's own learning.

However, most of the adults that enter the educational institutions have not freely chosen to do so. They have had stable jobs and family lives, but some or all of this is challenged or has already changed. This means that the identities they have developed are also challenged. What they conceived of as stable factors in their lives have become uncertain or simply no longer exist. They have to find new life orientations, but in contrast to younger people they have to develop these new orientations on top of some they have already established. Thus, for them the development of a new identity simultaneously means discarding parts of the old identity, and the latter is often a process that is far more difficult and causes much more pain than the former.

In recent years, there has been an on-going discussion about the concept of identity. The traditional understanding that a person's identity is developed and formed during adolescence as a relatively stable perception of who he/she is and how he/she is perceived by others (cf. Erikson 1968) has been fundamentally challenged. The main arguments are, on the one hand, that identity is basically not a personal but a social formation, depending on social relations and constructs (Schotter 1993, Gergen 1994) and, on the other hand, that in late modernity a stable identity is both inconvenient and impossible as the outer world is always in movement and changing (Giddens 1991, Usher 2000). Therefore, identity today tends to be seen as something much more changeable and unstable: a person may take on different identities in different situations, or there is only a limited stable core identity and in extension of that a zone of more fluid layers (Illeris 2002b).

However, the majority of the participants in adult education still have grown up at a time when the formation of what was conceived as a stable identity was both a possibility and an ideal. What today is interpreted as inflexibility was recognized as stability 20 years ago. For people who managed to build up a stable identity at that time, it is hard to face the fact that today this very identity may function as armour preventing the mobility that has become necessary. The formation of a stable identity is usually accompanied by the formation of a strong identity defence. What has been built up with so much trouble and sacrifice is not so easily broken down.

In our research project, we have seen many adults who try to use elements of their old identity under circumstances where it no longer fits. They talk about their old trade and the qualifications needed there, etc. They gradually realize that in adult education today it is something else that matters—but what? The problems of identity are part of the baggage participants bring with them into the adult education institutions. The breakdown of biographical continuity—the uncertainty or loss of a job, of family relations, and maybe of political, cultural, moral or religious orientations—means that they are very anxious about the future and of their social identity. Their former experience does not seem to be relevant.

At the same time, the discourse of the possibilities of modernity also dominates the educational institutions. When they were young these adults did not expect everything to be possible—they just got married, got a job and

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generally did as they were expected to do. Now they are suddenly told that everything is possible and that it is their own responsibility to succeed. In reality, everything is certainly not possible for them, and they are not sure what the purpose of education is when their prospects are so doubtful. Are they just being kept busy at the educational institutions because they are not needed in the labour market or are they actually qualifying themselves for a new and stable situation? In the educational institutions, they may be talked to as responsible adults who are able to make their own decisions about what is relevant for them to do, at the same time as being placed in the position of vulnerable children who have to be taken care of and not over-challenged.

Anna, a day high-school participant in her mid-30s, puts it like this:

> Many of the frustrations people bring here, including myself—I am also unemployed—are confirmed by the way one is treated as a pupil. [. . .] Some feel even worse than when they started. [. . .] These grown-up people are stripped of their personal responsibility in a number of areas where they very well could be involved and allowed to take responsibility and make actual decisions right here. An incredible lot of things are forbidden without any other explanation than that experience with them has been bad. (Ahrenkiel *et al.* 1999: 157)

On their way most participants learn to play the role of interested learners, but they are still very uncertain about the rationality and sense of the educational project. What happens in the adult educational institutions cannot be understood without realizing that most participants deep inside are questioning the fundamental meaning of the situation. Adult education can very often be characterized as the compulsion to develop without a clear perspective.

Employment perspectives as the key factor

The most important general factor behind the ambivalence described is no doubt the employment situation and perspectives of the participants. For those who are unemployed without any realistic possibility of getting any sort of job, the ambivalence tends to develop towards resignation and despair. But it is remarkable how long many people are able to keep up at least a tiny hope for just a simple and temporary part-time job, although their odds are minimal—for example, women in their late 50s hoping for some sort of dishwashing or canteen job. As long as the hope survives, they will also do whatever they believe may better their chances, even when their ambivalence is overwhelming because they know how unrealistic their efforts are. At IT courses, many elderly people are heroically struggling with their computers to qualify for jobs that they will hardly ever obtain.

Birthe—a divorced woman of 59 who has been fired from her job as a sales agent after more than 20 unexceptional years and has found it impossible to get a new job—is now attending a computer course. She says:

> You see, I have no higher education, so it is a sort of feather in my cap if I can get that 'PC licence', and I also hope that I can get to use it somehow. And if not, then I have at least the same product at home—Microsoft—and I am the

> secretary of an association that I took part in starting myself. Who knows, maybe I can get some sort of a writing job at home, that there will be some company saying: 'Can you sit (at home) and send out some mail for us?'. I know it has been done. (Ahrenkiel *et al.* 1998: 31–32)

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Another group of participants are in the situation that they have a job but know that if they do not succeed in developing better professional and/or personal qualifications they will be fired. They will usually immediately focus on the professional qualifications because they are more concrete and because it is less humiliating to lack practical rather than personal skills. But if teachers take up the discussion, they know very well that it is usually the personal qualifications that are crucial, and they will really do their best in this respect, although they may be very confused as to what it really is about. In contrast to this, participants who are employed and do not feel any uncertainty about keeping their job will very often be proof against any talk about personal qualifications. Men especially tend not to accept such issues if they are not in a situation that makes it unavoidable.

The most flexible group regarding the employment situation is, no doubt, those who are unemployed but with realistic chances of qualifying for a job that they consider as acceptable and satisfying. In this situation, people can be at the same time very goal-directed and broad-minded, really doing their utmost and being sensible about any challenge or advice.

Three generations of adult participants

Two other very important and, to some extent, integrated variables of mental and attitudinal differences among adult education participants are age and gender. Three age groups or generations are easily identified: the older age group of 45–50 years or more, the main and middle group from 25–30 up to 45–50 years, and the young adults from 18 to 25–30 years. This grouping is empirically based in the very obvious differences of consciousness, ways of thinking and attitudes towards education that we have found among the participants. The limits between the groups are imprecise as to age, but usually rather sharp as to mental indicators. Inside the two oldest groups, there are some further quite significant gender differences, whereas such differences seem to be much smaller and also subjectively denied in the youngest group.

In the *older generation*, the attitude towards education is generally dominated by the form of identity that has been characterized as 'wage earner consciousness' or 'wage worker life mode' (cf. Popitz *et al.* 1957, Goldthorpe *et al.* 1970). The core of this form of identity is that wage work is regarded as the necessary and inevitable foundation of life. As a wage worker, one has to adapt and do what others have determined. In return, one receives a wage for which one can make one's own existence outside working hours.

The attitude towards work is, therefore, basically instrumental. Work is the means of existence, ultimately a necessary evil, an exploitation that one has to come to terms with. Basically, the attitude towards education is following the same line. The necessary qualifications are acquired through basic vocational training or directly through work. Further work-related training is only meaningful if there is an explicit need of new qualifications, which cannot be acquired through work.

Only instrumental qualifications are considered, whereas general competencies and attitudes are a private matter. Training and education are basically considered undesirable, sometimes even degrading, as a need to train or educate oneself must be due deficiencies in one's working ability.

In training courses, there is a wish for clear objectives and rules. Preferably, everything should be like when one went to school, and learning is something that happens when you are taught. The teacher or trainer is, therefore, positioned in a role parallel to the employer or foreman who has the power and right to rule, carries the responsibility and knows how things should be done.

John is in his mid-40s and attending an adult vocational training course. He says:

> If there are too many noisy elements who are busy making fun or trouble in class, the teaching will be disturbed, and if the teacher then is unable control the situation and . . . then I feel it is better when the teacher is in command and . . . is in control of the class. Then I learn better. [. . .] Because otherwise I cannot concentrate on anything. (Ahrenkiel *et al.* 1999: 159)

However, these conditions are strictly limited to school hours. In school, the teacher is in command and the only responsibilities of the trainee are to show up on time and do as he/she is told. If the teacher or trainer suggests something else —for instance, some more trainee-directed activities—one is on guard and prepared to resist, at least until a convincing performance has been demonstrated.

The sort of consciousness and attitudes described is clearly most significant with males of this age group. Women tend to be less clear cut in their orientation towards regularity and personal delimitation, more open to adaptation, more social in their behaviour and sometimes even express gratitude to the teacher and the system that offers them the opportunity to learn and qualify.

The *middle generation* comprises the majority of the adult education participants. The members of this generation are also typically carriers of a wage earner identity, but in this case it is less distinct and in various ways and grades affected by tendencies and trends that have developed parallel with the welfare society, i.e. developments that go from a material and collective value orientation towards more immaterial and individualistic attitudes (as documented in a large-scale Danish survey project, Bild *et al.* 1993).

In our research, we have, in many ways, observed the softening of the middle generation as seen in relation to the older generation. Regarding training and education, there is generally a more accepting attitude. It is in no way experienced as personally or socially degrading to 'go to school again', but neither is it just natural, and it is not something that is desired. There is still an idea that training and education are mainly for children and adolescents, but it is, at the same time, accepted that for many adults a requalification may be necessary and it is sensible to try to get the most out of it. '*After all, we are adults*' is an expression that is heard again and again from middle generation participants (and their teachers as well), actually implying that they feel they are in a childlike position.

Regarding soft and personal qualifications, the middle generation's attitude towards education and training is primarily about the 'hard' qualifications, i.e. the professional content matter, but a simultaneous personal qualification is neither turned down nor misinterpreted as in the older generation. It is possible to see and understand the meaning of it, and it is accepted that it should be included, but there is a certain hesitation and uncertainty as to what it actually is about.

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Fundamentally, education is 'going to school' like a child, and the teacher has a large job to do if he/she wants to change it into something else.

In this connection, there is a typical feature that the middle generation seem to carry with them from their school time into adult education. It is often very striking, sometimes almost comical, how grown men in adult education 'infantilize' themselves and start behaving like 'naughty boys', talking and whispering in class, provoking the teacher, competing to be rude and witty, and even shooting paper pellets and the like. Women also often undertake a similar sort of infantilization, typically in the direction of the role as the 'good girl', self-effacingly fulfilling what they experience as the endeavours of the teacher, and supporting him/her with indignation when 'the boys' are called to order. When adults find themselves in a childlike position, it is somehow also legitimate to behave in childish ways.

Another typical gender difference in this age group is between the very professionally oriented men who tend to regard anything but professional skills as irrelevant, and the generally much more socially oriented women who are often struggling to keep an acceptable balance between job and family orientation even when everything in the educational setting is strictly job-oriented.

The deepest distinction between the generations of adult education participants is, no doubt, between the middle and the *young generation*, which includes all participants under 25 years and most participants between 25 and 30. This generation is strongly influenced by what has been called 'the cultural liberation', 'the late modernity' or 'the postmodernity'. Culturally, it is about the dissolution or relativization of traditional structures, norms and attitudes, which at the same time have liberated the individual from the ties and limitations of former times. This demands from everybody a personal choice and shaping of his or her own lifestyle, biography and identity, as well as daily choices in a universe of apparently endless possibilities of material and immaterial gain. Societally, it is about the breakthrough of information technology, globalisation and the market society (Giddens 1990, 1991).

For the young generation, education and training is not only about qualification, but also, more fundamentally, a central element of the continuing identity development, which has always characterized adolescence, but now seems to expand into eternity or at least into a period of searching and unbound youth that can last far into the 30s. Consequently, this generation is not primarily goal-oriented towards working life, public provision or casual part-time jobs are experienced as quite alright, and various offers of training and education are regarded as something to try out or consume. Lifelong learning is an accepted life condition, a support of the continued process of identity development and change. Educational content is directly related to personal demands and actual projects, and if it is not experienced as relevant and supporting it is always a possibility to get off, either by leaving for another option, by just not showing up or by mentally turning off any engagement or reducing it to selected parts of interest.

Henry, a typical young participant in an adult vocational training course with a good school education and a series of different jobs behind him, said:

> I also think it is a challenge to try to . . . personally I have tossed around quite a bit. But that is, after all, just to see what is going on, because I think it must be boring—just imagine, I have pals who have been in the same job for 10 years now. It's damn boring. It is not my cup of tea, there is much too much

> pep in me, so I think it is fun to try something different and widen my horizon. But it is not so well accepted here in little Denmark, you know. One should rather be stable and do what everybody says and what is expected. (Ahrenkiel *et al.* 1998: 58)

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Teachers typically experience these new young adults as self-centred and demanding, often unreasonably demanding. They are troublesome because they insist on personal attention and do not do just as they are told. However, if the situation is viewed from their perspective, these features are evidently necessary if courses are to contribute to their process of identity development, and they are truly much more independent, self-directed and responsible than the older generations who leave it to the teacher, the subject and the curriculum to decide what goes on. They do actually take responsibility for their own learning, but mainly in the way that they only learn what is worth learning from their own and very personal point of view (Simonsen 2000).

In years to come, this generation will become more involved in adult education, and it will no doubt fundamentally challenge the flexibility and openness of the systems and clash with institutions and teachers, and also with the older generations of adult students.

Adult learning and subjective defence strategies

The strategies adult learners develop to deal with the contradictions of the educational situation are not always conscious endeavours that participants and teachers are aware of as mechanisms for coping. These strategies derive from our interpretations of classroom interactions combined with our awareness of the ambivalence that fundamentally characterizes the participants' approaches to adult education. At a general level, there are two dominating strategies, which are somewhat contradictory in their ways but not more so than that it is possible to use both strategies at the same time. The 'positive' general strategy is for the single participant to find out what may be *personally useful* in a course and concentrate on that in order to maximize the personal outcome. The 'negative' general strategy is that of *instrumentalism*, i.e. getting through as easily as possible in relation to formal sanctions.

However, most people cannot stand not to be active in some way and therefore, some substrategies are also implied, concentrated on how to get through the long and sometimes boring days in school. The most widespread of these strategies involves complaints and passivity (or what Danish authors Berliner and Berthelsen describe as 'passive aggression', Illeris 2002a: 103) in order to maintain and express a certain distance to what is going on. Another substrategy takes in humour and irony as means to be socially present. Further substrategies that we have observed are: a sort of *artificial dynamism* that is used to ascribe meaning and importance to what is immediately experienced as meaningless activities, and *perfectionism*, for example, in the form that selected practical tasks or exercises are repeated again and again until one feels absolutely perfect.

The important point to observe in this connection is the highly differentiated imagination and inventiveness that adults are able to perform, consciously or unconsciously, in order protect their identity and maintain themselves as subjects of

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their own learning processes and behaviour. The defensive strategies are instances of what I, in another study, have found to be the basic characteristics of adult learning (as seen in contrast to children's and adolescents' learning):

- adults have very little inclination to really learn something they do not perceive as meaningful for their own life goals;
- adults in their learning draw on the resources they have; and
- adults take as much responsibility for their learning as they want to take (if they are allowed to do so) (Illeris 2002a: 219).

These characteristics are significantly different from general assumptions behind most adult education programmes, which take their point of departure in the content matter that the adult in question should learn and in this way place the adults as objects of a curriculum or syllabus defined by others. In as much as such definitions are not in accordance with the interests and perspectives of the learners, or the learners can be brought to actively accept them, they will, as responsible and self directing adults, find ways to evade them and even compulsion will only result in mental defence and evasion.

Thus, the main result of our investigating adult education from the perspective of ordinary learners who are alien to such concepts as lifelong learning and lifelong education is that if it is given to or forced upon participants who have not mentally accepted and internalized a wish or need to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes or qualities in question, it will tend to be a waste of human and financial resources.

Adult education: Storage and control, job preparation or emancipation?

In the preceding sections, I have tried to illustrate how most adults are ambivalent in their attitudes to adult education, how adult education as a means of labour market policy affects the vulnerable identities of adults in uncertain life situations, and how adults typically react by developing various strategies to cope with the concrete situations but also to protect themselves and maintain their identities and self respect.

I started the paper by questioning the emancipatory power of adult education, especially in relation to the broad layers of adults with brief schooling who today comprise the majority of adult education participants, and I have further described the background to this questioning. What, then, are the necessary conditions that would make it possible for the participants to learn something of importance and develop themselves in a direction that could be termed emancipatory?

The first and fundamental condition is, undoubtedly, that the problematic situations and ambivalences of the adults in question are recognized and taken seriously. They are certainly not showing up in the schools just to improve and develop themselves and to realize old dreams of knowledge and understanding. They are fundamentally sceptical—school is not a positively valued word to them—but almost always there is a vague element of hope in their attitudes: hope for some sort of help and support to get out of the problematic and unsatisfactory situation that has forced them to go back to school again.

Any emancipatory endeavour must necessarily try to satisfy and link up with such elements of hope. At the core of these elements is (nearly always) a burning, but

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hardly expressible wish to get some work, maybe only part time, maybe not very enriching, but just about any meaningful job that makes it possible to feel like an acceptable member of society once more. (Again, I must stress that the situation is different for the youngest adults, who do not feel it degrading and humiliating to live on public benefits to the same extent.)

Whether one likes it or not, adult education has become an integrated part of labour market policy and the participants clearly also regard it as such. So, any emancipatory notion must be combined with serious endeavours to procure realistic job possibilities for the adult students. However, this is not a question of pedagogics or educational strategies; it is a political issue of very high priority in today's welfare societies.

Therefore, educators—and especially educators with emancipatory notions and orientations—cannot hope to pursue their goals solely by good and progressive educational activities. They will have to inform and to agitate about the everyday conditions of adult education and the situations and attitudes of the students. They will have to seek alliances with progressive politicians and labour market agents. They will have to accept compromises, and they will constantly have to find out how to optimize their endeavours in relation to changing conditions that are always insufficient.

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