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The Foundation of Success in Adult Learning: Dilemmas and Concerns

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Abstract

The discussion regarding what kind of education impacts more on individual success and social wealth is currently ongoing and full of implication for educational policies, including on adult learning. There is no doubt that education correlates positively with wealth, health and success (at both individual and social levels), but there is not clear enough what kind of skills ensure the success in adult life, in terms of earnings and career. On the way of rethinking education, there are increasingly more studies and surveys trying to respond to several dilemmas and concerns regarding the relative importance of different skills and competencies (e.g.: key, general, versus professional, specific competencies), of different contexts of learning (e.g.: formal, versus nonformal and informal; school based versus work based learning), of different contents of learning (e.g. “knowledge” versus “skills” and “attitudes”; “intellectual” education versus “social”, “civic”, “moral” or “aesthetic” education), and of different forms of assessment (e.g. standardized versus non-standardized). This paper tries to present different perspectives and to argue the need for new balance points in approaching the above mentioned topics.

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1. Introduction

Due to increasingly quick and unpredictable changes in economy, societies and technologies, it became obvious that competencies (general and professional) acquired in schools and/or initial education and training (including in Universities), are no more enough to guarantee a comfortable and accomplished life.

For every individual, the tremendous technological progress implies new and permanently updated skills. We depend, more and more, on technology: we pay taxes and relate with public authorities using “e-services”; we shop on Internet (“e-commerce”); we date our partner online and meet people via social networks; we watch TV and movies “on demand”; we travel and visit places using “augmented reality”; we eat genetically modified food etc.

The professional life changes even more dramatically, and not only in sectors like ICT or bio-engineering. For instance: the main tool used, now, for repairing a car is the laptop and not the screwdriver or the hammer; the textbooks used in schools and universities and the assignments for students are, increasingly often, not on paper; the physicians use artificial intelligence to diagnose and the surgeon may operate remotely. And we witness the same developments in commerce, transportation, civil engineering, agriculture and so on.

On top of these new technologies, the globalization changes already the social fabric: most of the modern societies become multi-ethnic and multicultural. Possessing intercultural skills became a must for every citizen (from both perspectives – representing a “host” culture or a “guest” one) and dealing with minorities, of any kind, is, nowadays, the “test of fire” for every democracy.

2. Why Education?

In order to cope with changes, learning (as capacity, ability and willingness) is a pre-condition for survival and success. The growing importance of learning and, consequently, of education, is obvious, illustrating, as well, the aphorism: “If you think education is expensive, try ignorance” (Derek Bok).

At individual level, each extra school year brings 10% in terms of earnings (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2004). At social level, according to OECD – CERI (see, for instance, www.oecd.org/edu/socialoutcomes & Miyamoto, 2010), the level of education correlates positively with life expectancy, health, social trust and involvement (including volunteering), and correlates negatively with crime, obesity, smoking, drugs and alcohol consumption.

We know that, in USA, the performance gap (between the PISA results in US and the results of the best performing systems) has a deeper economic impact than the crisis itself. The crisis produced a GDP decline of around 6%, while the losses due to lack of education produced 9 to 16% GDP decrease. Moreover, correcting the inequities in the US education system, the gain in GDP will be between 2% and 5% from the extant GDP for **each** corrected inequity (among states, among white and hispanic or afro-american kids, or between rich and poor pupils) (The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America’s Schools, 2009).

The impact of education is confirmed by many other studies. For instance, in Romania, following different scenarios, the gain in GDP, due to improved PISA results, might be, until 2090, between 699% and 2056% from the existing GDP. In addition, the GDP growth rate, due solely to education improvement, might be between 1% and 2.4% (Hanushek & Voessmann, 2010).

So, in order to be happy and to earn more money (as individual), in order to grow organically and harmonically (as society) and in order to be competitive on the global market (as economy), learning is a must, lifelong and life wide. We think even that learning became the **most important human activity**: learning is not only intrinsic, but a pre-condition for “good work”, for social integration and individual wellbeing and happiness. But envisaging a thorough analysis of the ways learning is organized, we may find out that “life” and “learning” are still considered as separate entities - learning being assigned to distinct institutions named “schools” or “universities”, with specific structures, functions and cultures. Consequently, we are seeing a lag between “life” and “learning”: whilst “life” (including work) is changing increasingly faster, “learning” is not keeping the pace. In order to prove that, Ian Jukes (2013) proposed a test: let’s consider a person who retired from a company 20 years ago and take him/her back to the office they worked in then. In the last decades everything changed: 20 years ago there were no fax machines, email, the www, cell phones, pagers, wireless networks. Now, let’s take that same person back to the high school or university he/she graduated 50 or 60 years ago. What’s really changed, not culturally or socially but structurally? The answer is: “very little”. Pupils and students still attend schools approximately 180 days a year —about the same

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