The Challenges of Adult Learning in Latin America

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The current focus on learning in Latin America is the result of a convergence of diverse factors: the recognition that learning is central to the knowledge-based economy – as is the need to stimulate creative thinking and innovation, the questionable quality and relevance of school contents to daily life, and the filters that social, ethnic, economic and gender variables place on access to learning and knowledge.

Whilst the majority of Latin American countries are well on the way to universalizing primary education, the struggle to guarantee enrolment and permanence in the classroom has been increasingly accompanied by concerns with quality and particularly with what, if anything, children learn during their obligatory years of schooling. International assessments like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and other nationally developed programmes1 have shown that, in comparative terms, Latin American children learn little at school and come out badly, especially in mathematics, writing and science, compared with their peers in other continents. There is also concern about the social relevance of what is learnt within the school system. Thus, learning has become a central issue in the formal school system. But, at the same time, the formal school system has continued to fuel the number of semi-literate or functionally illiterate young people who drop out of school, are expelled or leave with minimum literacy and learning skills. These young people become potential candidates for continuing education in adult education programmes as the labour market requires increasingly higher certification as a means of entry to the ranks of the formally employed.

At the same time, international and multinational agencies have long been developing and advocating the concept of lifelong education and, more recently, lifelong learning as an all-embracing concept for the whole educational process, including that of children, young people, adults and the elderly. Within the field of youth and adult education, the question of what is learnt and its relevance has been a longstanding issue, but it has also become increasingly central as more formal compensatory schooling for adults and young people, and technical and vocational training and professional qualification, occupy greater space than programmes and projects oriented by the principles of popular education concerned with active, critical and participatory citizenship.

Discussions on adult lifelong learning were recently given greater visibility in the Region by the holding of the Sixth UNESCO International Conference on Adult Education – CONFINTEA VI – in Belém de Pará, Brazil in December 2009. This was the first time that an edition of CONFINTEA had been held in...
an emerging economy in the southern hemisphere. In a certain sense, the willingness of Brazil to host the Conference represents the renewed interest of the region in this area. After a period of near-abandonment in the 1980s and 1990s, many Latin American countries have begun to invest in policies of youth and adult education, although at levels that could hardly be termed to express priority and that frequently give greater attention to initial learning in the form of literacy than to continuing education.

What are the possible motives that have led to this small but steady interest in offering learning opportunities to young people and adults? The relative failure of the formal school system must be considered as one element. Young people either abandon school because they cannot understand its relevance for their lives or leave without having learnt what the school is supposed to teach. There is growing disquiet with youth, youth unemployment and violence. For many countries, according to Torres (2009): the increasing number of unattached youths – youths who do not study and do not work (in Spanish, no estudia ni trabaja – NET) – is a cause for deepening concern. In Paraguay (2004), 65 per cent of urban youth and 78 per cent of those living in rural areas were in this situation, as were one out of every 20 youths in Argentina (2005) and 27.1 per cent in Brazil (2006). In Mexico (2007), 30 per cent of students completing secondary education continued studying, 25 per cent found a job, while the remaining 45 per cent had no activity (Rivas, 2007).

Another motive for investing in adult learning is the realization that poverty cannot be reduced without investing in education. Clearly, education is not identified as the unique tool for reducing poverty, but evidence suggests that, without greater investment in education, it will be almost impossible to reduce poverty. The Millennium Development Goals have served as a stimulus to several Latin American countries to set ambitious targets for the reduction of poverty. At the same time, in recent years countries like Brazil, Peru, Colombia and Ecuador have enjoyed above-average economic growth which is at times threatened by the lack of trained manpower. The recent boom in the Brazilian building industry, for example, has been threatened by the lack of qualified professionals, such as civil engineers, and of qualified workers like bricklayers, electricians and plumbers.

There is growing awareness that current forms of predatory development are unsustainable and that paradigms of development based on radically different approaches to production and consumption are essential for the future of the planet. Changing the way that people think and act is an important element of this process. The fight against disease and epidemics like AIDS and malaria involves changing attitudes and learning processes. Learning is an essential element for increasing rural productivity as well as social, cultural and economic productivity in general. Learning is essential for the autonomy of young people and adults of all ages and for their self-esteem, as well as their capacity to question and to learn more. The multiple crises of recent years – of food, of fuel, economic and financial, and environmental – all depend on our capacity to seek solutions, to learn from experience, to change behaviour.

Despite growing tensions within countries and between countries based on ethnic, religious, cultural, ideological or economic differences, there exists an enhanced acknowledgement of the need to learn to live together. Living together in peace is a process of construction, a learning process that has to be continually renewed and reaffirmed. For most Latin American countries the age structure of the population creates a further demand for learning opportunities. People live longer and better and remain productive for longer. They have to learn to deal with change in a critical fashion, whilst being prepared to retrain and be geographically mobile. There are thus a multiplicity of potential arguments to validate the need to invest in processes of youth and adult learning.

From the lifelong learning perspective it is important to comprehend learning as a natural and continuing process in which different phases of life pose specific demands and challenges. In this chapter, whilst the focus is on youth and adult learning and strategies currently being developed in Latin America, I also argue for the need for educational policy and investment to consider the whole life cycle – from
pre-school through to the third age – rather than concentrating investments in phases that apparently offer greater economic return. For those not familiar with Latin America, I will outline some of the complexities of this highly heterogeneous continent that governments and civil society face when attempting to respond to the learning needs of specific groups in society. I intend to discuss the different approaches and understandings of the functions of adult learning and how regional policies have attempted to face these challenges. Finally, I shall present one example of the challenges of attending to the learning needs of a specific segment of the population – the adult prison population.

The Latin American context

The term Latin America generally refers to that group of countries within continental America and the Caribbean whose inhabitants speak either Spanish or Portuguese (UIS, 2001). As we will see, this is a gross simplification of the region’s linguistic heterogeneity.

Latin America covers an area of more than 21 million km² and in 2010 had a population of 580 million. The number of countries included in the region varies: in this chapter we shall adopt the UNESCO definition, which includes 19 republics: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela (UIS, 2001: 6).

Although Spanish and Portuguese are the two main official languages in Latin America (in Paraguay, Spanish and Guarani are both official languages) this tends to hide the incredible linguistic diversity and wealth of the region. Beneath the few main official languages, the region has a highly complex linguistic reality that is often hidden in regional diagnoses and studies and not properly acknowledged in education policies and programmes. Nahuatl is, for example, one of 62 native languages spoken in Mexico. Quichua, Quechua, Guarani and Aymara are widely spoken in Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, Paraguay, Chile and Argentina. In Brazil there are more than 180 different indigenous languages, many spoken by small numbers of original peoples. This linguistic multiplicity is a clear reflection of the ethnic diversity. The region is home to more than 60 million indigenous people and a large population of Afrodescendents, particularly in Brazil, where blacks and mulattos make up 45 per cent of the population.

Latin America is at the same time the most unequal region in the world in terms of the distribution of wealth and income. According to CEPAL/ECLAC (2010: 14) the huge gaps between rich and poor in Latin American countries can be gauged by comparing the income of the four poorest deciles, which is less than 15 per cent of total income, with the income of the richest decile, which embraces approximately one-third of total income. Data from 2008 show that per capita income in the richest quintile is on average 20 times higher than it is for the poorest quintile, and in Honduras this reaches 33 times. In 2009, 33.1 per cent of the population (183 million in absolute terms) lived in poverty, including 13.3 per cent of the population (74 million) who lived in conditions of extreme poverty. Those living in poverty are largely the subjects of adult education programmes.

It is important to comment on three other characteristics of the region for their relation to the capacity of education to meet diverse learning demands. The first concerns the process of urbanization of the continent. Over a period of 55 years (between 1950 and 2005) the urban population in the region grew from 41.9 per cent to 77.6 per cent. This rural–urban shift results in important and systematic gaps in most countries, the education gap being just one of them. Access to learning opportunities in rural areas in most countries of the region remains a challenge, despite the new technologies. The second dimension is what CEPAL/ECLAC (2008: 37) refers to as the ‘demographic bonus or dividend’, which it defines as a favourable stage in which ‘the proportion of people in the potentially productive age bracket grows steadily relative to the number of people of potentially inactive ages (children and older persons).’ This provides countries with an opportunity in which to improve coverage and progression rates in secondary education, which are considered critical for escaping from poverty, thereby impacting on equality of
opportunities, and on which to pave the way for greater competitiveness and economic growth and to strengthen democratic citizenship in societies in which knowledge becomes a central asset. However, whilst investing in secondary education, it is urgent for these countries to invest in adult and youth education as a means of offering learning opportunities to the vast numbers who have still not completed basic education and have consequently had difficulty in accessing technical and vocational training and other forms of job qualification. The demographic dividend is the result of a combination of factors which include a reduction in population growth, an increase in life expectancy and an increase in per capita GDP growth, particularly in the period 2003–07 (CEPAL/ECLAC, 2008).

The third characteristic is related to the political stability of the region. The 1970s and 1980s were decades of right-wing military rule for a large number of the countries in Latin America, fuelled by what the USA saw as the threat of ‘Cubanization’ after the revolution in Cuba in 1959. The late 1980s and 1990s saw the restoration of political democracies, and the continent has experienced a relatively long period of political stability and moderate economic growth, the latter partially interrupted by the financial crisis in 2008. The region now has a series of what are generally considered as progressive governments in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Honduras.

Access to learning and education opportunities in the region

Inequality, poverty and exclusion, linguistic and ethnic diversity, regional differences, poor employment prospects, rural–urban migration, demographic factors and political stability all impact on education and the learning opportunities of different segments of the population and at the same time pose enormous challenges that education must face if it is to contribute to change in contemporary Latin American societies. Although being close to achieving universal primary enrolment (97 per cent) (EFA/GMR, UNESCO, 2010), the region has major quality and equity issues to solve, related to (a) socio-economic conditions, (b) zone of residence (urban–rural), (c) ethnic identity and language, and (d) gender, as confirmed by numerous studies and evaluations in the region. According to Torres (2009):

There are no indications of improved student learning over the past decade in any country, despite the many education reforms and the increased investment in evaluation efforts, as revealed by the two regional studies conducted so far by the Latin American Laboratory for the Assessment of the Quality of Education (LLECE, coordinated by UNESCO-OREALC), in 1997 and 2006 respectively.

The Education for All Global Monitoring Report in its Regional Overview of Latin America and the Caribbean (UNESCO, 2010: 2) comments that:

Being born a girl still carries an education disadvantage in many countries. Extreme poverty, social exclusion, geographic isolation, disability and conflict also take their toll. Getting all children into and through primary education requires a far stronger focus on the marginalized.

These multiple variables lead to a situation in which, despite the undeniable advances and investment made, approximately 3 million children were out of school in 2007. Of those enrolled, over 16 per cent will drop out before completion and a large number will repeat grades. In 2007, repetition accounted for over 15 per cent in Suriname and 19 per cent in Brazil (2005). According to UNESCO-OREALC (2007): it is estimated that USD 12,000 million are wasted every year in primary and secondary school repetition.

Whilst gender, income and location interact with other factors of disadvantage, such as language, ethnicity and disability, to create multiple barriers to those learning opportunities that schools offer and in so doing generate conditions for continuing levels of youth and adult illiteracy, the very incapacity of the
schools to create conditions for learning also contributes to the number of young people who emerge from school lacking basic reading, writing and numeracy skills. The most recent application of the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment – PISA – evaluated students of 15 years of age from 62 different countries and three regions of China. These included students from seven Latin American countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Uruguay and Peru. Whilst the main focus was on reading, PISA 2009 also updated performance assessments in mathematics and science. According to the OECD (2010): the emphasis of the assessment is on ‘mastering processes, understanding concepts and functioning in various contexts within each assessment area’. In all three fields, Chile, of the seven participating Latin American countries, occupied the highest place in the rankings: 44th place in reading, 49th in mathematics and 44th in science. The other six Latin American countries occupied lower positions. It is important to note, in comparative terms, that Shanghai, Hong Kong, South Korea and Singapore all occupied top positions in one of the three fields, Shanghai coming out top in all three. While PISA represents one way of assessing learning by young students, it does provide a comparative measure of the weaknesses of formal schooling in Latin America in these three crucial fields.

Evidence shows beyond doubt that there exists a strong correlation between poverty and illiteracy and low levels of formal education for those 183 million who live in poverty or absolute poverty. Of that total, approximately 9 per cent, or 34 million, are considered illiterate and a further 20 per cent or 80 million are considered to be functionally illiterate.4 In general, these rates are much higher for those living in rural areas and over 50 years of age. Thus, the provision of youth and adult learning programmes is largely directed at those segments of the population who suffer the most acute forms of exclusion. This explains in part why adult education in many countries of Latin America has been historically associated with social transformation and political action. More recently, government policies and programmes of education for the adult population have been directed at ‘poverty alleviation’, ‘social exclusion’ and ‘social cohesion’, using the terminologies employed by many of the international agencies and banks (Torres, 2009).

**Approaches to adult learning**

During the last half century Latin America has suffered diverse influences with regard to approaches to adult learning and the adult learner. These have come principally from North America, where for a time the work of Skinner and Carl Rogers was influential, and from Europe, where the contributions of Piaget in the field of constructivist theory were adapted to adult learning theory and later those of Vygotsky and other social constructivists strongly influenced approaches to adult learning. However, it would be difficult to identify a truly Latin American approach or, for that matter, a learning style that characterizes the Latin American adult learner. The varied ethnic composition of the countries of the region makes it difficult to generalize about a Latin American learner or specific learning style, although there is increasing interest in researching native American Indian learning processes. If, however, we consider popular education as one of the most important expressions of Latin American pedagogy in the last 60 years, there is little doubt that Paulo Freire’s contributions to how we understand the adult learning processes have exercised enormous influence.

Thus, whilst recognizing the complexity of generalizing about approaches to adult learning in Latin America, I suggest that it is possible to identify two broad tendencies – popular education and youth and adult education – whose subjects are pre-eminently those young people and adults suffering from the multiple exclusions outlined above. Clearly, popular education has a wider remit, in that its concern is with the education of the popular classes and not exclusively with the young and adult population. In this chapter, our focus is on strategies developed with and for the young and adult population.

There is a tendency for strategies guided by the principles of popular education to be developed by organizations of civil society, whilst adult education has increasingly become the subject of government policy. Again, in general terms, programmes and projects of popular education have been concerned with
questions related to the environment, human and animal rights, gender, sexual orientation, critical citizenship, social economy, etc., whilst adult education, despite the recognition of the need for multi-sectorial approaches designed to attend to the diverse needs of its subjects, has become increasingly dedicated to school equivalency or compensatory educational programmes and to those dedicated to preparing young people and adults for the world of work. Perhaps what most differentiates the two approaches is their pedagogical and epistemological understanding of the subject and his/her learning needs. Popular education understands the subjects as cognisant beings who bring to the learning process their own knowledge and experience of being in the world. This learning then becomes the basis for further reflection and analysis leading to action and new learning. Thus, it attempts to deal with the subjects in their diversity and heterogeneity. Within the adult education movement there is a tendency towards homogeneity – to treat all subjects as equals with similar needs – the idea of one size fits all. Learning is largely curriculum-based, following the standard school structures and seeking to impart knowledge based on pre-established competencies and skills that are seen as necessary for successful entry to the labour market.

For Holliday (2010) the major difference between the two trends is that one argues for an education that adapts itself to the changing globalized world and the other in favour of an education that contributes to changing the world, making it more humane. As he points out, it is more common than we imagine to consider that the only way to learn is from books or courses and to relegate our own experience as a fundamental source of learning to a minor role. He concludes by stating that, unfortunately, we have been formed in an educational scheme in which ‘life and study are seen as two separate things, and we neither generate the habit nor the belief in the importance of “studying” our own practice’ (Holliday, 2006: 61).

‘Popular’ education refers to those political–pedagogical processes that seek to overcome relationships of domination, oppression, discrimination, exploitation, inequality and exclusion. Seen from a positive point of view, it refers to all educational processes that seek to build egalitarian and fair relationships that respect diversity and equal rights amongst people.

(Holliday, 2010: 290)

Within the field of youth and adult education in Latin America, Di Pierro (2008a) identifies four specific functions. First, programmes of adult education offer a welcoming space for rural and other migrants who need to adapt to life, employment, language and culture in new and challenging environments. The second function is that of raising the educational level of that segment of the adult population that has not enjoyed the same opportunities as the younger generations. Diverse types of equivalency programmes are offered, from basic literacy, to secondary education, although, as Torres (2009) points out, there is an over-emphasis on literacy expressed in a new wave of ‘illiteracy eradication’. This tendency has been driven both by progressive national governments in countries like Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Panama and Ecuador and by new supranational and international actors, which include the Cuban Government with its ‘Yo, si puedo (YSP)’ (Yes I can) system6 and the Organization of Ibero-American States – OEI with its Ibero-American Literacy and Basic Education Plan for Young People and Adults – PIA.7

The third function attributed to adult education is that of providing a space, not normally offered by the formal education system, in which social problems and those of socio-cultural diversity can be contained and dealt with. Finally, adult education can be seen as the provision of opportunities for further qualification, updating knowledge and general cultural activities in the spirit of lifelong learning independent of the level of schooling of the participant. This is perhaps the function that finds less concrete expression in Latin America, despite the rhetoric and the adherence to the principles of the Declaration and Agenda for the Future agreed in Hamburg at the CONFINTEA V in 1997.
Whilst popular education and adult education have developed as distinct tendencies, there is also little doubt of the influence that popular education exercised and continues to exercise over adult education. From the historical perspective, popular education played a particularly relevant role in the movement of resistance to the military regimes installed in the continent and in the processes of national reconstruction and transition to democratically elected governments thereafter. In this process, the pedagogy developed within the popular education movement, with its respect for the individual in his relation with others, and the drive towards autonomous organization and the mobilization of civil society also impacted on the development of adult education to the point where programmes proclaimed to be characterized as adult education in the perspective of popular education. In reality, whilst the discourse of lifelong education and learning has penetrated the political and educational discourse of the continent, that of popular education continues to express a more autochthonous understanding of the relation between learning and life.

With the return to democracy in the great majority of Latin American nations, the education of the young and adult population with little or no schooling has become a space for competing rationales: what the Global Report on Adult Learning and Education – GRALE (UNESCO/UIL 2009: 23) defined as the instrumental and empowering rationales of adult education:

In recent decades, it is the former that have become more prominent, with human capital approaches shaping policies more strongly than in the past. In contrast, the original vision of adult education as contributing to political empowerment and societal transformation has receded: it is rarely considered in policy-making.

According to Di Pierro (2008a): this dispute between educational projects structured on distinct rationalities can be identified in the fields of popular education and youth and adult education in the twenty-first century:

on the one hand, conceptions, discourse, policies and practices which, informed by human capital theory, project on education economic benefits for individuals and society, giving priority to the qualification of manpower for globalized capitalist development; on the other, those who, privileging the values of justice and equality, in addition to endowing the popular strata with the competences and credentials required by the labour market, as a means of protecting them from unemployment and extreme poverty, offer technical, human and political formation for fighting for societal transformations which guarantee a dignified life in sustainable environments and democratic conviviality with respect for diversity and human rights.

Despite the quantitative achievements demonstrated by the near-universalization of primary education and by significant gains in secondary and tertiary education, in which the percentage of youth aged 20–24 years who completed upper secondary education grew from 27 per cent to 50 per cent, and the percentage of youth aged 25–29 years who completed at least five years of tertiary education grew from 4.8 per cent to 7.4 per cent, the major part of these increases benefited mostly the middle and upper classes (CEPAL/ ECLAC, 2007). Learning conditions for poor children at school and at home continue to result in the non-completion of formal studies and in the precarious acquisition of relevant social learning. Equal learning and educational opportunities for all remains a distant reality. Data for adult education are often neither fully reliable nor comprehensive. However, figures for Brazil, for example, show that less than 10 percent of those who have not concluded fundamental education (eight years) – almost 60 million young people and adults – are presently studying. Whilst education is propagated as an efficient instrument for reducing social and economic inequalities, it would seem that its capacity to help redress imbalances depends also upon the level and quality of investment in learning opportunities for the young and adult largely poor population.
Learning in and from prisons

In the final section of this chapter, the challenge of attempting to attend to the specific learning needs of different segments of the adult population is illustrated using the example of those deprived of their liberty. With what some may consider a rather extreme case, I would like not only to illustrate the complex realities of adult education, but also call attention to a field that, despite generating more consideration in recent years, has long been marginalized.

Rangel (2009) points out that the problems of economic inequality and social exclusion have tended to result in growing levels of violence and criminality in the majority of Latin American countries and that these are ‘the expression of the violence which is lived in distinct aspects of daily life’. He argues that drugs trafficking has played a prominent role in this process. As a consequence, the prison population in most countries of the region has doubled in the last decade.

In Latin America, the prison population shares several common characteristics. Firstly a significant part of that population is young and poor. In Argentina, 45.5 per cent of those in prison are between 18 and 29 years of age. In Brazil, this figures rises to 59 per cent, and in Uruguay it represents 61.4 per cent of the prison population (Rangel 2008). Of these, many are either from ethnic minorities or are afrodescendants. The general level of formal schooling is low, with a significant number of illiterates or functional illiterates included in the ranks and, as a consequence, many have equally low levels of work qualification. The consumption of drugs and controlled medicines is a serious problem in Latin American prisons, as is that of violence. Being deprived of liberty generates a population locked into the present whose past is reduced to the crime committed and whose only future coincides with the date of being freed – and then with a high risk of recidivism, unless their time in prison adequately prepares them for an ethically productive return to society.

The majority of prison systems are grossly over-populated – only Costa Rica maintains a prison population slightly under its maximum capacity – with all the risks implicit in such an environment: poor health and hygiene, frail security, lack of family contact and normal affective relationships.

Prisons are, above all, concerned with security – that is, guaranteeing the secure confinement of offenders, without necessarily guaranteeing the physical security and integrity of the confined. It is by definition the place of non-liberty in which the inmate’s life is controlled by rigid rules, military discipline and schedules – times for eating, showering, exercise, sleeping, working and so on. In this way, it constitutes a space that institutionalizes and reduces the independence and autonomy of the prisoner. As De Maeyer (2007) comments, ‘The prisoner will have to unlearn everything that it would be necessary to acquire in order that, on leaving prison, he might be a dynamic, organized, structured person capable of managing his human, social and affection-based relationships’. In order to survive in the penal institution, the prisoner needs to learn to obey and to adapt to the rules. In the medium term, the imprisoned person adopts attitudes that allow him to leave the prison as swiftly as possible. This is not learning that prepares the prisoner to return to society.

According to Lecoq (Rangel, 2009), prisons are complex places in which all the difficulties faced by our societies related to education (school failure, illiteracy, dealing with diversity, social exclusion, etc.) and many more are concentrated. When considering how to respond to educational demands in the prison context, we are faced by a series of potential contradictions and dilemmas that are not easily resolved: the demands placed by confinement and security and those required for education; the understanding of education as an emancipating and democratizing process for a public condemned to the loss of liberty; the learning necessary for survival in the prison environment and the learning necessary for a successful reintegration into society; the ‘unlearning’ that the prison environment imposes, as opposed to the learning necessary for autonomous ‘ethical’ survival in the outside world. Education in the prison system depends not only on learners and teachers, but also on a set of actors that includes prison directors, warders and other staff who possess a great potential for interference – for good or for evil – in the education process.
The majority of Latin American countries guarantee the right of the incarcerated to education and have responded to this situation by offering adult education in the form of literacy and basic education whose content and pedagogies differ little from those used on the outside. The demand for education frequently exceeds the supply, with large numbers of potential learners excluded yet again from the educational process. Work training is also considered as part of the process of re-socialization/rehabilitation, but in most countries it has been reduced to low-paid, monotonous, manual labour for contractors who set up workshops in the prison grounds. Thus, there exists a permanent latent conflict between the learning that is necessary for the survival and physical integrity of the prisoner, the learning needed in order to become a functional member of society on release and the largely school contents transmitted in the prison environment employing pedagogies unsuitable for the public and the context in which they are used. For De Maeyer (2007): ‘It is necessary to transform the prison into a place of education and not to transform the detainees into receptors of educational sequences’. This is one of the major issues with which enlightened adult educators are faced.

Final considerations

The dictates of a rapidly changing world, independent of the shortcomings of formal schooling, place huge demands on adult learning for Latin American countries. Adult learning cannot be restricted to compensatory schooling, but must adopt a more lifelong and lifewide perspective. Young people, adults and the elderly require access to learning opportunities throughout life. As Paul Bélanger (2010) affirms: ‘Lifelong learning can only be lifelong and lifewide if it is also lifedeep. This is the deeper meaning of adult education and that is why lifelong learning has become a fundamental right’.

There is little doubt that the evident need for expanding adult learning opportunities is, in the Latin American context, multiplied by the lack of basic learning tools – reading, writing and science – acquired by a large part of the adult population at the normal school age. Evidence also demonstrates that investment in adult education is equally an investment in basic child education, as literate parents take much greater interest in their children’s schooling. Whilst governments are frequently more concerned with improving statistics, those involved in adult learning face the challenges of meeting the diverse and heterogeneous demands of the young and adult population. Past experience has shown that perhaps more can be learnt from home-grown pedagogies and conceptions of learning based on an understanding of the ways in which different cultural and ethnic groups learn than from imported models. In this sense, popular education, in its different dimensions, is a Latin American expression of the centrality of learning to our lives and the right of all citizens to lifelong learning opportunities. If we wish to contribute to the construction of more just, egalitarian and fraternal societies, the knowledge-base of those societies – how, when, what and why we learn – has to be restructured.

Notes

1 Prova Brasil in Brazil.
2 See also the CEPAL Social Panorama of Latin America (2008) for an analysis of youth and family violence in Latin America (pp. 44–50).
3 Di Pierro (2008a): ‘At the end of the millennium, however, the reduction of birth rates … combined with the raising of life expectancy, modified the age profile of the population, with a tendency to the predominance of adults in the population of the majority of the countries of the region.’
4 UNESCO defines functional literacy in terms of those who have completed four years of schooling. SITEAL (2005) coins the term ‘incipient education’ (the completion of three years of schooling), corresponding to functional illiteracy. CEPAL affirms the need of 12 years of schooling to guarantee full socially useful literacy skills.
5 The term youth and adult education (educación de jóvenes y adultos) appears with greater frequency in the literature and policy documents of Latin America from the mid-1980s onwards in recognition of the growing numerical presence of adolescents and young people in classes of adult education and of the need to offer special attention to this segment of the population.
6 According to the Cuban National Report (2008) prepared for CONFINTEA VI, YSP is used in 27 countries in three continents in contexts as different as New Zealand, South Africa, Mozambique, Mexico and Venezuela, offering classes to more than three-and-a-half million students.

7 www.oei.es/alfabetizacion/b/DOCBASE%20PIA.pdf – according to the PIA, its general objective is to: universalize adult literacy in the region, in the least possible time and in whatever case by 2015, and offer the young and adult population that has not concluded its basic schooling the possibility of educational continuity, at least until the conclusion of basic education, within the framework of lifelong education for all (my translation from the Spanish).

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