



Adult literacy policy and practice: From intrinsic values to instrumentalism

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BOOK REVIEW

Adult literacy policy and practice: From intrinsic values to instrumentalism, by Gordon Ade-Ojo and Vicky Duckworth, Basingstoke, UK, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 135 pp., £45, ISBN 9781137535108

It is reasonable to say that there is a consensus among researchers and practitioners that the field of adult education, and specifically adult literacy, has changed tremendously since the 1970s not only in the UK, but also internationally (e.g. Hamilton and Hillier 2006, Tett *et al.* 2012). This is notably visible in the shifts in vocabulary used in policy documents, for example, from emancipation to empowerment (Barros 2012) and from adult education to lifelong learning (Wildemeersch and Olesen 2012). The prevailing neoliberal ideology has crept into the field, imposing the use of terms such as standards, skills, competitiveness, employability, etc.

In their book, Ade-Ojo and Duckworth engage in an ambitious journey to explore the changing nature of adult literacy policies and practice from a philosophical point of view. From the beginning, the authors are clear about their argument; instrumentalism is now the dominant ideology in adult education. The aim of the book is therefore to put this argument to the proof by retracing its origins, both philosophical and historical. The book is divided into four chapters.

In the first chapter, Ade-Ojo and Duckworth endeavour to define the term instrumentalism by situating it in the larger field of the philosophy of education. The authors first explore the meaning of 'philosophy of education' itself by discussing the work of Phillips (2013). Ade-Ojo and Duckworth concede that defining 'philosophy of education' is a challenging task. From this discussion however, it emerges that one of the concerns of the philosophy of education is 'providing guide to action through the formation of goals, norms and standards' (p. 10). According to the authors, ideologies derive from philosophical perspectives and can also influence the values associated with education and in turn curriculum design. As a result, the central question of this book is 'what we ought to teach and the values that we associate with education' (p.21) Ade-Ojo and Duckworth identify two overarching value positions in education that influence curricula: social capital and human capital. According to them, the human capital value position in education is directly related to an instrumentalist ideology whereas the other is more centred on people's needs and lives.

The second chapter includes a detailed historical portrait of adult education in the United Kingdom (mainly focusing on England) from the 1970s until the mid-1990s. They retrace the shift in value positions from an emphasis on social capital to human capital. Ade-Ojo and Duckworth explain that the government was only marginally involved in adult education in the 1970s. Practitioners had more freedom and could tailor their work based on the adult learners' needs and aspirations. The authors retrace key events (economic crises, the introduction of Worldpower and Numberpower, the creation of the Further Education Funding Council, etc.) and institutions (ARLA, ALBUS, BSA, ERA, TECs, etc.) that gradually moved the focus to a human capital value position in adult education. The authors look at this major shift from different angles, intertwining practitioners' voices with findings of academic studies and also their own analysis of the events. This amalgam of perspectives is fruitful and as the narrative unfolds key themes progressively emerge and contribute to the creation of a rich and complex historical overview of adult education in Britain. For example, Ade-Ojo and Duckworth mention how

the notion of ‘entitlement’ (p. 38) – education and literacy as a human right – slowly faded out and was replaced by a concern for employability and investment, that is to say, a ‘value-for-money approach to education’ (p. 42). As the government increased its interest and involvement in adult education, standardisation and monitoring systems were imposed on practitioners.

Chapter 3 focuses on the Moser Committee (report published in 1999) and the adult education and literacy policies that followed (for example, the Skills for Life Strategy launched in 2001). Ade-Ojo and Duckworth draw on interviews conducted with former members of the Moser Committee to explore various themes such as the reasons for their memberships on the committee, their contributions, the mandate of the committee, their views on the OECD data used, etc. The authors conclude that the vast majority of the people involved were not adult literacy specialists, but rather had backgrounds in employment and economics. Also, the Committee used OECD data without questioning it because it served adequately a human capital value position. The authors hint that the Moser Committee’s mandate was predetermined and was motivated by the fact that the UK was not doing well economically speaking compared to other European countries. For the authors, the Moser Committee represents the apogee of the human capital value position that consolidated the focus on employment and employability above all in adult literacy.

In the last chapter, Ade-Ojo and Duckworth present an alternative to human capital value. The authors present various approaches – transformative learning, emancipatory learning, critical pedagogy, New Literacy Studies, and creativity – that can counteract an instrumentalist perspective on education and literacy. This discussion is supported by empirical examples illustrating the fruitfulness and potential of these approaches. For example, Duckworth’s work (Duckworth 2013) with adult learners is presented and offers a good example of how social theories (e.g. Bourdieu’s habitus) can be applied to practice.

The main argument in this book – the prevalence of instrumentalism in adult literacy policy and practice – is not new but the book’s main merit is to critically revisit this idea using philosophical and social theories. The detailed and systematic approach used by the authors is commendable. Yet, at times, the narrative seems slightly repetitive and the pace in the progression of the argument could have been faster. That said, the author’s framework (social capital versus human capital value positions) is valuable and could potentially be applied to other fields of education. The book starts with a rather ambitious aim – situating the concept of instrumentalism in the wide field of the philosophy of education – but the authors have coped admirably well with the task. Ade-Ojo and Duckworth mention that they have ‘legitimate grounds for engaging’ (p. 12) with philosophical work, and indeed the entire book is evidence for that.

Anyone who is teaching critical approaches to adult education at Master’s level in the UK may find that this book is a useful resource. The Palgrave Pivot format was perfect for this book; long enough to elaborate the complex argument, but short enough to keep it focused.

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