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Educational policies in French-speaking Belgium faced with the challenges of adults returning to school: A critical analysis

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Abstract

Resumption of adult education is an increasingly common phenomenon in today's society, due to individual, social and economic factors. It represents both an opportunity and a challenge for educational policies, which must promote access, success and recognition of adult learning pathways. The aim of this study was to analyze educational policies in French-speaking Belgium with regard to adults returning to education, situating them in the European context and comparing them with the needs and expectations of the players involved. We conducted a qualitative study based on semi-directive interviews with policy-makers, institutional players and adults returning to school. The results showed that educational policies in French-speaking Belgium are marked by a certain ambivalence between a logic of emancipation and a logic of standardization, resulting in tensions between stated principles and observed practices. We have identified four areas for discussion: definition of the target audience, access to training, pedagogical support and validation of prior learning. We have suggested ways of improving the coherence and effectiveness of educational policies to encourage adults to return to school.

Keywords: Resumption of studies, adults, educational policies, French-speaking Belgium

Introduction

Adult education is a growing phenomenon in contemporary societies, driven by a number of individual, social and economic factors. On the one hand, individuals are faced with rapid and unpredictable changes in their professional and personal environments, prompting them to update their skills or reorient themselves towards new professions (Boudard & Kogut-Kubiak, 2017) ^[3]. On the other hand, societies are faced with major challenges such as an aging population, globalization, ecological transition or the fight against inequalities, all of which call for higher qualification levels and active citizen participation (CEDEFOP, 2019) ^[6]. In this context, adults' return to education appears as an opportunity to foster professional integration, personal development and social engagement for individuals throughout their lives (Jarvis & Watts, 2014) ^[12].

However, adults returning to school also represents a challenge for educational policies, which must adapt their systems and practices to meet the specific and diverse needs of this audience (Merriam & Bierema, 2014) ^[14]. Indeed, adults returning to school have a variety of characteristics in terms of age, gender, socio-professional status, previous career path, motivation, project or even personal or family constraints (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009) ^[15]. They also face institutional or structural obstacles such as financial cost, lack of time, mismatches between training supply and demand, or lack of recognition of prior learning (Schuller & Watson, 2009) ^[16]. Thus, education policies must take these factors into account to promote access, success and recognition of adult learning pathways (UNESCO, 2015) ^[18]. With this in mind, the aim of this study was to analyze educational policies in French-speaking Belgium with regard to adults returning to school, situating them in the European context and confronting them with the needs and expectations of the actors involved. We adopted a critical approach, questioning the discourses, norms and practices that underpin educational policies, highlighting the power relations, interests and values that run through them (Ball, 2013) ^[2].

We also adopted a participatory approach, which consists in involving the actors directly concerned by educational policies, valuing their experiences, opinions and proposals (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005)^[13].

Methodology

We conducted a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews with three categories of actors: political leaders, institutional actors and adults returning to school. Politicians are people who hold or have held decision-making or representative positions in the government or parliament of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (French-speaking Belgium). Institutional players are people who work or have worked in structures or departments involved in implementing or evaluating educational policies. Adults returning to school are people who have resumed or are considering resuming a course of university studies after an interruption in their school career.

We conducted a total of 18 interviews, divided as follows: 6 interviews with political leaders, 6 interviews with institutional players and 6 interviews with adults returning to school. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and a half. They were recorded and transcribed in full. The interview guide included open-ended questions on the following themes: the context and motivations for returning to school, existing or desired measures to facilitate returning to school, difficulties and opportunities encountered or anticipated when returning to school, evaluation and prospects for improving educational policies. The guide as a whole was intended as a means of re-launching discussions if the interviews were not optimal. The aim of the qualitative approach was to highlight the corpus and the link between our study and the feelings and experiences of the interviewees (Bourgeois, 2010)^[5].

We analyzed the data with NVivo software, using a thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006)^[4]. This method consists in identifying, coding and organizing the data according to themes or categories that emerge from the participants' discourse, the aim here being to highlight recurrences and occurrences. After analysis, we identified four main areas of discussion: definition of the target audience, access to training, pedagogical support and validation of prior learning. We then compared and contrasted the points of view of the various players on these axes, highlighting the convergences and divergences between them.

Results

The results of our thematic analysis are presented below, according to the four areas of discussion identified.

Defining the target audience: Our analysis of the interviews revealed that the notion of an adult returning to education is a vague one, encompassing a diversity of situations and profiles. Political leaders tend to favor a quantitative and statistical approach to the target audience, based on criteria such as age, level of education or socio-professional status. Institutional players tend to favor a qualitative and contextual approach to the target audience, based on criteria such as motivation, project or previous career path. Adults returning to school tend to favor a subjective, identity-based approach to the target group, based on criteria such as experience, feelings or the meaning given to returning to school. These different approaches

reveal contrasting logics between a logic of subjectivities (Bourgeois, 2010)^[5] of the learner and a structural political approach (Van Zanten, 2004)^[17].

Conditions of access to training: We found that conditions of access to training are variable and sometimes restrictive for adults returning to school. Politicians tend to highlight existing measures to facilitate access to training, such as the Landscape Decree, the Lifelong Learning Decree or the Inclusion Decree. This politico-educational prism favors political actors, as they are in the role of evaluators of their political actions, and are assessed at election time. Institutional players tend to underline the limits and constraints of these schemes, such as the rigidity of the structures, the complexity of the procedures or the lack of resources, which calls into question the consolidative approach of the educational management of institutional players. Adults returning to school tend to express dissatisfaction and frustration with the obstacles they encounter, such as financial cost, lack of time, mismatch between training supply and demand, or lack of information and guidance. These different perceptions reveal contrasting logics between a logic of promotion and a logic of regulating access to training.

Pedagogical support: We have observed that the needs and expectations of adults returning to school in terms of pedagogical support are varied and often unsatisfied. Political leaders tend to value the initiatives and pedagogical innovations implemented by institutions, such as distance learning, project-based teaching and formative assessment. Institutional players tend to qualify the effectiveness and relevance of these initiatives, citing the difficulties and resistance they encounter, such as lack of training, support or recognition. Adults returning to school tend to criticize the lack of adaptation and personalization of educational support, lamenting the lack of dialogue, feedback or follow-up. These different opinions reveal contrasting logics between a logic of innovation and a logic of tradition in educational support.

Validation of prior learning: We have found that recognition of the prior learning of adults returning to education is a major but underdeveloped issue. Political leaders tend to affirm their willingness and commitment to develop the validation of prior learning, with reference to European recommendations and the principles of equity and quality. Institutional players tend to recognize the importance and usefulness of validation of prior learning, but also stress the challenges and limitations it poses, such as the complexity of the system, lack of resources and resistance from academic players. Adults returning to school tend to express their interest in and need for validation of prior learning, but also their ignorance and mistrust of the system, citing its lack of transparency, reliability or recognition. These different attitudes reveal contrasting logics between a logic of openness and a logic of closure to the validation of prior learning.

Discussion

The discussion aims to interpret the results obtained by comparing them with the hypotheses and previous work. It should also highlight the implications, limitations and prospects of the research.

In this section, we will discuss the main findings of our study, linking them to theoretical frameworks and empirical studies that have addressed the issue of educational policies and adult return to school.

Our first observation is that educational policies in French-speaking Belgium are marked by a certain ambivalence between a logic of emancipation and a logic of standardization, resulting in tensions between stated principles and observed practices. This ambivalence can be understood in the light of the concept of governmentality, developed by Foucault (2004) ^[9], which refers to the way in which individuals are led to behave according to norms and objectives defined by power. In the field of education, power is exercised through devices, discourses and practices that aim to guide, regulate and control individuals' educational paths (Ball, 2013) ^[2]. Thus, educational policies can be analyzed as instruments of governmentality, which aim to produce subjects who conform to social and economic expectations (Fejes & Nicoll, 2008) ^[8].

Our second observation is that the needs and expectations of adults returning to school are varied and often unsatisfied by current educational policies. This dissatisfaction can be understood in the light of the concept of biographization, developed by Alheit (1994) ^[1], which refers to the ability of individuals to construct their own life path based on their experiences, projects and aspirations. In the field of education, biographization implies that individuals are able to choose, negotiate and give meaning to their training path, taking into account their personal and social context (Dominicé, 2004) ^[7]. Thus, the needs and expectations of adults returning to education can be analyzed as expressions of biographization, aimed at realizing their personal and professional potential (Schuller & Watson, 2009) ^[16].

Our third observation is that the views of the various players on educational policies are divergent and sometimes conflicting. This divergence can be understood in the light of the concept of deliberative democracy, developed by Habermas (1992) ^[19], which refers to the ability of actors to participate in public debate on issues of general interest. In the field of education, deliberative democracy implies that stakeholders can express their opinions, listen to those of others and seek consensus on the directions and actions to be taken (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) ^[13]. Thus, the views of different actors on educational policies can be analyzed as contributions to deliberative democracy, aimed at improving the quality and effectiveness of educational policies (Ball, 2013) ^[2].

Our fourth observation is that the avenues for improving educational policies to encourage adults to return to school are numerous, but difficult to implement. This difficulty can be understood in the light of the concept of educational change, developed by Fullan (2007) ^[10], which designates the process by which actors involved in education modify their practices, structures or cultures in order to achieve defined objectives. In the field of education, educational change implies that actors are able to understand, accept and support proposed innovations, taking into account the internal and external factors that influence change (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) ^[11]. Thus, avenues for improving educational policies can be analyzed as proposals for educational change, aimed at meeting the needs and expectations of adults returning to school (Merriam & Bierema, 2014) ^[14].

Conclusion

The conclusion aims to summarize the main findings and contributions of the research. It should also make recommendations or suggestions for practice or future research.

In this section, we conclude our study by summarizing its contributions and proposing some recommendations.

Our study has analyzed educational policies in French-speaking Belgium with regard to adults returning to school, adopting a critical and participatory approach. We have shown that these policies are marked by an ambivalence between a logic of emancipation and a logic of standardization, resulting in tensions between stated principles and observed practices.

We have also shown that the needs and expectations of adults returning to school are varied and often unsatisfied by current educational policies. Finally, we have shown that the viewpoints of the various players involved in education policies are divergent and sometimes conflicting.

Our study has shed original and relevant light on the issue of adults returning to school, by bringing together the perspectives of policy-makers, institutional players and adults returning to school. It has also helped to enrich the scientific debate on educational policies, by mobilizing theoretical concepts such as governmentality, biographization, deliberative democracy and educational change.

Our study also has practical implications for improving educational policies to encourage adults to return to school. We propose the following recommendations:

- Clarify and harmonize the definition of the target audience, taking into account the diversity of situations and profiles of adults returning to education.
- Make access to training more flexible and diversified, taking into account the constraints and opportunities of adults returning to school.
- Adapt and personalize educational support, taking into account the needs and expectations of adults returning to school.
- Develop and promote validation of prior learning, taking into account the experience and skills of adults returning to education.

Our study nevertheless has certain limitations, which open up perspectives for future research. We mention the following limitations:

- The limited number of participants, which makes it impossible to generalize the results to the entire target audience or all the players involved.
- The choice of a qualitative method, which does not allow us to quantify or measure the impact of educational policies on adults returning to school.
- The focus on French-speaking Belgium, which makes it impossible to compare or contextualize results with other countries or regions.

To overcome these limitations, we suggest the following avenues for future research

- Increase the number of participants, by including other categories of players such as teachers, advisors or employers.

- Combine a qualitative method with a quantitative one, using surveys, tests or indicators to complement the interviews.
- Broaden the geographical scope, for example by carrying out a comparative study with other countries or regions with similar or different educational policies.

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