Rethinking the Role of Adults for Building the LIFELONG Learning Society

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Abstract

Today, the world is changing, re-establishing the role of education in order to have a developed society. Ideas as education and lifelong learning society must be present in every people’s mind, because a good education starts with a better perspective on parent education, on rethinking the role of adults in order to respond to the educational challenge of an ageing population in Europe. In reality, adults are not only supervisors; they are educators whose actions have many consequences for the schooling system and for the future decisions on lifelong learning activities. All these ideas are very present in European policy and EU strategic documents. A big step towards new pedagogical patterns, which involves reflecting on some educational relationships and situations, require re-thinking the role of adults, of the informal learning, and understanding that formal education must be completed by the parent’s education, adapted to the global society.

Keywords:

1. Education and lifelong learning society

Lifelong learning’s direction in the 21 century, emphasized by the biggest international organisms (European Union, European Council, OECD), represents the desirable idea of transforming this society in a globalized one, available to do whatever it takes to raise up the economy, to ensure performance in education and not only.

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It is important to know that “Lifelong learning includes people of all ages learning in a variety of contexts – in educational institutions, at work, at home and through leisure activities. It focuses mainly on adults returning to organized learning rather than on the initial period of education or on incidental learning” (Schuller, T., and Watson, D., 2009).

We need to create educated peoples, to develop this society, to ensure equity of chances for everyone, to accept the alterity and the adults have the most important role, to educate children to achieve these major objectives. In this context, it is crucial to rethink the adults’ role, to be seen as educator rather than as simple supervisors, this is so important to invest in parent education, as we can see in the figure 1:

![Lifelong learning perspective](image1)

**Figure 1: Lifelong learning perspective (Boström, 2002)**

1.1. *The parent education*

Parent education is one of the most important family literacy which follows to help parents to improve their skills, becoming the primary teacher for their children, and to learn them to be full partners in the education of their children.

The National Parenting Education Network (NPEN) describes the goal of parent education as “strengthening families by providing relevant, effective education and support and encouraging an optimal environment for the healthy growth and development of parents/caregivers and children.” (NPEN Core Principles).

Parent education programs are developed all over the world, having different structure and being the same for all parents. Only few of them take into account the specific needs of parents. These programs can be realized individually, in group or online through a platform. These programs have been proven to be a real success and many parents ask for other parent programs which respond to their specific needs and help them to understand better with their children, to educate them to be performing and good citizens; so, evaluations of effective parent education
programs typically describe population characteristics and assess program features and processes. (Powell, D. R. 2005)

Parent education programs follow to enhance parenting practices and behaviors, such as developing and practicing positive discipline techniques, learning age-appropriate child development skills, promoting positive thinking and interaction between parents and children. In the same time, parent education programs provides opportunities for parents to discover their strengths; to enhance life competencies; and to learn more about children’s cognitive, literacy and developmental growth.

Parent education comes in many forms and teachers must be true models for parents who make huge efforts to learn new ideas, new paradigms, new abilities and new ways of thinking.

1.2. Intergenerational learning

Intergenerational Learning is part of Lifelong Learning which means that at least two generations to work together to enrich skills, values and knowledge. It develop respect between generations, better understanding, mutual support, creating reciprocal learning opportunities, but “Intergenerational Learning should not be mere supervision of the younger by the older as the young attempt to chart a path into adulthood by themselves. Intergenerational learning programs should bring young and old together in similar numbers as that each may get to know the other, see the other in action and learn from one another.” (Loewen, J., 1996-97)

Some of the aims of the international learning are:
- Improving communication and interpersonal skills;
- Solving personal and professional problems;
- Awareness of the local and global problems;
- Recognizing the others needs;
- Working together to perform better;
- Strengthening the relation parents-children and so on.

Children and adults must work together and cooperate with special educators to learn strategies of communication, of interactive and solving potential conflicts, to find common activities which may bring joy and happiness for both parts, but, in the same time, to acquire knowledge and learning opportunities: “Intergenerational programs are vehicles for the purposeful and ongoing exchange of resources and learning among older and younger generations.” (Boström, A-K., Hutton-Yeo, A., Ohsako, T., and Sawano, Y., 2000)

2. Adults between caregivers and authentically educators

About adult’ education there are many writings, some of them showing that an adult has the moral duty to learn throughout life in order to improve his skills, abilities, to be a good educator for the others and, especially, for his children. It is important to know that an adult is more than a caregiver, he can be au authentically educator, this is why so important to increase participation in adult learning. The stakeholders and the public authorities have a crucial role in removing all types of barriers and promoting demand, with a special focus on the low-skilled. So, “Raising the overall level of skills of the adult population by offering more and better learning opportunities throughout adult life is important for both efficiency and equity reasons (…) . Not only does adult learning help make adults more efficient workers and, better informed and more active citizens. It also contributes to their personal well-being (EC COM 2006)

Many policy priorities for Lifelong Learning Programme from 2013 and not only, emphasize the need to develop the sector of adults’ education: The strategic goals of the Grundtvig Programme are:
- to respond to the educational challenge of an ageing population in Europe;
- to help provide adults with pathways to improving their knowledge and competences.
2.1. Adult education

The role of an adult educator was defined in different ways. Some authors consider that an adult may accomplish some roles, as: teacher, instructor, helper, facilitator, consultant, broker, change agent, counselor, partner, friend and mentor. Cunningham (1996, p. 1), has a traditional view on adult education, arguing that adult educators should work in socially responsible and relevant ways "to actively promote continuous societal change by promoting the ideals of participatory democracy defined as full citizen participation, freedom, equality and social justice". But Johnson (1998) found that responses about appropriate roles could range from the liberal to the technical/functional to the more radical, but she proposed that adult educators work in ways that foster a social purpose without co-opting learners. (Johnson, R., 1998)

Many theories show that adult education is “a practice in which adults engage in systematic and sustained learning activities in order to gain new forms of knowledge, skills, attitudes, or values” (Merriam, Sharan, B. & Brockett, Ralph, G., 2007).

Adults have accumulated life experiences which help them to understand better different theories, situations and events. Adults come to courses with a different know-how in specific areas or fields and this may prove to be a good aspect for designing and creating different projects, papers or practical activities.

Andragogy is essentially a “model of assumptions” (Knowles, 1980) about the characteristics of adult learners that are different from the traditional pedagogical assumptions about child learners rather than an actual theory of adult learning.

Adult education is strictly related with lifelong learning experiences, and “...it is important to note that lifelong education does not imply organizing or “taking over” those educational influences which are on the left hand side of the barrier. This does not mean, however, that lifelong education is not concerned with them. On the contrary, one of its major principles is that learning is supported by a much wider range of influences than those provided by schools, and that the formal or institutionalized aspects of education.” (Cropley, A.J. 1980)

Cropley (1980) where he put different learning experiences on a continuum of learning, from informal to formal, in this case, and including a barrier between his “two zones”. He tried to explain that people are exposed to different educational influences which can be institutionalized or not, as we can see in the figure 2:

![Figure 2. From Cropley (1980) the continuum of influences of learning](image)

This field of roles for adult educators is complex and related to the goals of adult education. Even if much information can be used to predict future roles of adult educators, those roles will be exactly connected to what an adult believe are appropriate behaviors.
2.2. Parents as first educators

The parents have a crucial role in children’s destiny, they have to prepare infants to handle different situations related to school, life and play. The best way to prepare a child for life is by building a healthy attachment bond with child, to make him believe that his opinions are important, that he is extremely loved and appreciated.

What should a parent do to strengthen the good relationship in his family? Maybe to encourage a good communication between kids, children and parents, brothers and sisters; in the same time, it is important to provide the tools and support families’ need to expand their roles as family members, workers, and community members; to create lifelong learners which are able to become active citizens, to help the society to grow up and to become, in the future, parents themselves.

Parents must learn how to improve their skills in being the primary teacher for their children, and to become full conscious about the necessity of playing this role, as educator, for their kids.

A parent should create affective environment for his children, to help him to feel that he is loved and appreciated, that his opinion counts, that everything is possible if, parent and child have a positive goals and they are willing to work together in order to touch it.

A parent should create an affective relation with his child, should develop to him the eagerness to learn, an optimal self-esteem, trust and consideration for others. For a child, it is important to know that his parent will always be there to support him, to help him to understand better the world, the life problems, the joy of playing and the real happiness which is so important for everyone.

Parents have to accomplish some important roles for children development, such as:

- **model for learning** - parents are their children’s first teachers (exploring the world, reading, accounting, drawing, singing together);
- **connect theory with practice** – it is important to apply in real life what a child learn at school; he will become more pragmatic and will understand easy the theory;
- **learn children how to learn** – so much time may be saved if children will acquire learning skills;
- **play with children as much as time will allow them** – a child enjoy playing and the parents should play with them because learning is easier when the information are presented as a play, being interesting, not boring;
- **reducing watching TV, playing games on PC to a minimum time** – expending the time for these purposes mean that the child will not interact so much with children of his age and can develop, in time, many social problems which will be very difficult to overcome.
- **give more time to children** – time spent with them will be appreciated as a prove of loving them, of taking into account their needs, their wishes and feeling important and valuable for their own parents;
- **encouraging children if they do well or for the hard work** - children need feedback, especially positive one because it will give them the power to go on, to perform better;
- **discuss with the children about their problems** – they will have the feelings that the parents pay attention to their issue, help them to find solutions and create opportunities to develop different skills.

**Author’s contribution on this topic**

The author establishes, in a personal perspective, the most important aims of the intergenerational learning, a concept which is relatively new in the educational field. We managed to construct the most important roles of parents, as the first educators, in order to ensure a proper education for their children.

In the same time, the author finds the latest writings in the literature toward this topic, emphasizing the new roles of adults in the lifelong learning society.
Conclusions

Education is a necessity for all people around the world in order to become experts in different fields of knowledge, in interpersonal relationship or in order to become good parents. But the formal system, which is rigorous and directive, cannot help them to achieve these goals. The terminologies, such as, continuing education, adult education, lifelong learning and lifelong education, have been used by different bodies to stress that education should be complementary with life.

The more affected peoples of this continuous change of educational paradigms and patterns are the parents because they don’t have contact with the latest information from the educational field, they are not updated to the society’ needs and their children’ needs.

Yes, the most important role of an adult is to be a parent, but, it is not easy to be a good one; it never was and it never will be. There are no real books which teach adults to become good parents, but there are many parent education programs and many teachers from school may help adults how to be real parents for their children.

Parents have to learn more about the lifelong learning education, to achieve some techniques which will allow them to be the best educators for their children, which means to participate in different educational programs in order to achieve some knowledge about how to be better parents for their children.

Although a parent’s role in their children’s life and education evolves as kids grow, it is important to remember that we, as adults, are our children’s learning models. This is why we need to be models for our children, to have strong attitudes about education which may inspire theirs and help them to perform in schools, in society, in life.

References

EC COM, (2006), 614-final, communication from the Commission “Efficiency and equity in European education and training systems”, paragraph, p. 5)