

Chapter 10

Lifelong Learning in Multicultural Brazil: Challenges for Higher Education



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10.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to discuss how lifelong learning and adult education have been conceived in political and policy discourse in Brazil, particularly focusing on the potential role of higher education. The meaning of these two expressions have yielded different perceptions and interpretations. Drawing on Slowey and Schuetze (2012), lifelong learning in a higher education context comprises four main concepts, involving: the life stage of the learner (age at entry to higher education, older than the average); mode of study (including e-learning, students studying on part-time or flexible bases); type of programme (a continuing professional development orientation); and organization of provision (open universities and centres for continuing education).

However, in Latin America, the expression ‘adult education’ refers mainly to primary and secondary educational provision for adults with minimal levels of literacy- most of whom who dropped out of the initial education system. In contrast, the expression ‘lifelong learning’ tends to be met with some suspicion amongst adult educators in Brazil as being more associated with neo-liberal and market-orientated perspectives. The argument in this chapter is that lifelong learning should not be reduced to such perspectives, but rather that it can offer an opportunity for a framework that incorporates – and is not reduced to – the remedial perspective embedded in the term ‘adult education’. The relevance of this study is its potential to contribute to analysis of the thinking behind policies that are implemented in Brazil concerning adult education, with a particular focus on access for indigenous sections of the population.

In order to develop the argument, the chapter utilises documentary analysis methodology to make a critical analysis of narratives in central policy documents

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produced in recent years, namely: the Brazilian National Plan for Education (Brazil 2014), which delineates Goals for education in Brazil for the next 10 years; and articles presented by scholars of higher education institutions (HEIs) who were invited by government to present their ideas about that field of research so as to contribute to the formulation of policies in adult education. These papers were presented at the Conference for Lifelong Learning and Adult Education – CONFINTEA 2016 (Brazil 2016). This international conference was hosted by the Brazilian Government in partnership with UNESCO and geared towards discussing lifelong learning (using epistemological and practical frameworks) along with the potential contribution of higher education.

The analysis of the narratives within these policy papers address the extent to which the terms ‘adult education’ and ‘lifelong learning’ have been a territory of debate in the thinking behind those Brazilian political discourses, particularly suggesting that higher education strategies and extension projects could move that debate beyond entrenched dichotomies. Also, this chapter stresses the importance of the fact that higher education scholars researching adult education and lifelong learning were invited to contribute to a conference in this field, and their subsequent strong input to the final policy document concerning this issue. The chapter concludes by presenting possibilities for higher education to enhance lifelong learning through a multicultural approach, so as to contribute to education that promotes the valuing of diversity in an increasingly multicultural world.

10.2 Multicultural Perspectives in the Context of Brazil Adult Population

Amongst many conceptions of multiculturalism, for purposes of this chapter it is defined as a set of strategies that can blend scholarship and action to improve the lives of marginalized groups, by responding to the need for inclusion (Banks 2016; Canen 2009; King 2016; Warren and Canen 2012). Ng and Bloemroad (2015) contend that much of the rhetoric and debates surrounding multiculturalism can be attributed to how it is understood and implemented, and whether it is successful in achieving its explicit or implicit objectives. Multiculturalism is generally perceived as moving within a continuum from more liberal, folkloric approaches (in which multiculturalism is understood as the valuing of cultural diversity that tends to emphasize e.g. holidays, black consciousness days, recipes and rituals from diverse cultures), to more critical perspectives that stress the need for interrogating prejudices and unfair power relations that marginalize identities on the basis of race, gender, social class, religion, culture, language and other markers of identity (Ivenicki 2015; Ivenicki and Xavier 2015). Colonization and its ensuing policies that operate in terms of control and denial of pluralism have also been discussed in multicultural decolonial paradigms such as those proposed by Assié-Lumumba

(2017), and are considered central in order to conceive alternative ways to promote democratic and plural education.

As argued by Nesbit (2015), throughout the world, more people from more diverse sectors are participating in social protests, about issues such as indigenous peoples' and immigrants' rights, women, labour and workers' concerns, LGBT+ issues, disability and other concerns, which impact adults and their learning. In Brazil, as suggested by Canen (2012), it is important to note that the educator Paulo Freire has been central to reconfiguring the idea of teaching for cultural diversity in adult education, taking into account generative themes issued from the marginalized adults' lives as the cornerstone of transformative adult education in Brazil. His influence on multicultural thinking has been recognized in many countries as he epitomized the idea that it is possible to promote adult education and pedagogy that build on oppressed groups' world views and promote constructive possibilities for a society that is fairer to all groups, and that does not exclude those with plural, marginalized cultures and world views from the educational system.

The multicultural nature of the adult population of Brazil is evident in its diversity. Brazil has a population of almost 208 million people, making it the largest in South America in terms of both geographical area and population. Its cultural diversity can be perceived not only from the fact that it has seen waves of immigration throughout its history (including Europeans, Japanese, Chinese), and Africans bought for slavery until 1888, but also the local indigenous population that lived in Brazil for millennia before 1500, when the Portuguese arrived. Nowadays, indigenous peoples are represented by more than 240 ethnicities with their own different cultures and languages, with a total estimated population of 900,000 people. Also, over the last 10 years, the number of immigrants has increased 160%, comprising particularly people from Haiti, Bolivia, and more recently from Venezuela, most fleeing from dire economic conditions and looking for better lives in Brazil. Black people represent 54% of the population, and there are more than 30 million elderly people (this latter group having increased by more than 50% in the last 10 years).

There is evidence of considerable educational inequality in Brazil. More than 81 million people aged 18 years old and over have not completed secondary schooling, of which 58 million have not even finished primary education, and 13 million who are not able to read or write. Furthermore, 41.5 million Brazilians aged 18 years old and over are regarded as functionally illiterate (Brazil 2016). As contended elsewhere (Ivenicki 2015), the multicultural and unequal population profile may explain why adult education in Brazil has been associated with a compensatory, remedial perspective- geared mainly towards adults who have not acquired basic literacy and numeracy skills.

The diverse nature of Brazilian society can also be perceived in terms of the results of educational policies across the different states. Carnoy et al. (2017) illustrate how local, municipal and state spheres in Brazil may produce different educational results depending on local conditions. The authors argue that in diverse countries with federal systems as Brazil, an appreciation of subnational state differences in educational reforms is necessary for national and international comparisons. In political terms, Brazil has been a federal country since 1988, when the

Brazilian constitution was developed in the aftermath of the demise of military dictatorship in 1985. In this form of democracy, the central governing authority shares its power (including that of issuing educational policies) with political units that 'are bound together by a constitution that spells out the rights and obligations of the constituent members' (Carnoy et al. 2017, p. 727). In terms of education, the Conselho Nacional de Educação – the National Council of Education (CNE) (composed of 24 members, half of them having been chosen by educational associations through lists of names sent to the Ministry of Education, responsible for the final choice, and the other half chosen at the discretion of the Presidency of the Republic) – has the mission to review educational projects and reforms, and help the Ministry of Education to make decisions.

Concerning inequality, it is recognized within government policy documents that

there still lingers the persistence of inequalities related to social, ethnic, racial, gender, indigenous, black, and ageing groups ... that should be considered when talking about adult education in Brazil (Brazil 2016).

That seems to reinforce the need for education within a multicultural perspective, meaning educational measures that value cultural, ethnic, linguistic, age and racial differences, and that are sensitive to the cultures and specificities of those groups. In relation to older people, the International Center of Longevity in Brazil (ILC-BR), highlights the need to take ageing identities into account when thinking about adult education and their access to higher education. Inaugurated in Rio de Janeiro in March 2012, the ILC-BR is defined as a think tank that addresses a full range of strategy issues arising out of population ageing, so as to address inequalities, including educational (Kalache 2012).

The above emphasizes the need to take into account the diversity of the adult population when thinking about continuing education in the Brazilian context. I contend that universities have a role in helping devise strategies conducive to the successful participation of lifelong learners, including teacher training for working with culturally diverse adults, as well as extension programmes aiming at supporting local educational authorities in developing curricular guidelines geared towards these groups. Because adult education in Brazil is a public policy embraced by the government, Ireland (2012) suggests that policies demonstrate how universities can play a central role in preparing educators and teachers for adult education.

The higher education system in Brazil comprises the following types of higher education institutions: universities; university centres; isolated higher education schools ('grandes écoles'); technology higher education centres; and integrated higher education schools. There are around 6000 public federal and state universities, and 700 city public universities. The private higher education sector is made up of around 6500 nonprofit and 12,000 for-profit higher education institutions. Public, as well as non-profit private universities have been highlighted for their commitment to research, as well as to teaching and to society at large through their extension projects, which include those geared towards adult education in a remedial perspective.

Taking into account the need to provide wider access to the diverse adult population, Brazilian government instituted public university entrance quotas for black people, indigenous groups and students coming from public primary and secondary schools. Also, the Brazilian government has been implementing a programme (PROUNI) with tax breaks for for-profit private higher education institutions that give scholarships to students that manage to pass the national university entrance exam (ENEM). However, as will be discussed in the next section, there still seems to be room for improvement in that area.

10.3 Lifelong Learning and Adult Education in a Multicultural Perspective: Policy Dilemmas in Brazil

As argued by Slowey and Schuetze (2012), it is important to explore the extent to which lifelong learning may be dominated by a very narrow human capital approach as opposed to the vibrant, critical perspective defended by Paulo Freire and reinforced in multicultural approaches. In the same vein, Nesbit (2015) stresses that we should go beyond the idea that lifelong learning should necessarily be viewed as individually focused and a-contextual, as opposed to adult education that would be perceived as a more inclusive term. That means that both expressions run the risk of being oversimplified and reduced to stereotypes. That view of adult education arguably underscores societies' commitment to long-term educational and social development, and lifelong learning shifting attention away from organized structures of education provision towards marginalized groups. Nesbit (2015) suggests that 'policy documents that conflate adult education and lifelong learning, or view diversity as uncomplicated, cause difficulties ...[since] ignoring difference supports already dominant perspectives' (Nesbit 2015, p. 243). In line with this thinking, adult education should arguably be a relevant part within a broader higher education framework of lifelong learning, in a multicultural perspective. Németh (2015) defines such a perspective in terms of an integrated approach to lifelong learning with special concern for the disadvantaged.

While lifelong learning as an explicit paradigm had not been in place in Brazilian education until recently (Canen 2012), it has started to gain prominence both in the National Plan for Education (hereafter referred to as the National Plan) (Brazil 2014) and in the policy documents produced as a result of the debates and articles produced by scholars of higher education in response to the CONFINTEA 2016 conference (Brazil 2016).

An analysis of the narrative of the National Plan shows that adult education in Brazil has been viewed as a responsibility of the Federal Government since the introduction of the National Constitution, in 1988, which considers it to be a way to address persistent high rates of adult illiteracy among the country's disadvantaged groups (Ivenicki 2015).

The National Plan comprises 14 articles in which 20 Goals, and associated strategies, are delineated for 10 years. Those specifically referring to adult education (Goals 3, 8, 9, and 10) emphasize that, in the future, all adults in Brazil should be literate. Thus Goal 9 aims for a literacy rate of 93.5% for all aged 15 years and over by 2024; with complete illiteracy being eradicated and partial illiteracy being reduced by 50% during that period.

Goal 3 addresses the need to universalize primary school for those between 15 and 17 years old with the aim of increasing participation rates in secondary education to 85%; Goal 8 discusses the need to make the average level schooling of white and black people equal. It reinforces the policy that concepts of ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’ should be based on self-declaration of individuals to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), which has also been the criteria for other measures in Brazil concerning affirmative action, including access to higher education. Even taking into account the dilemmas of such a system, particularly with a large interracial population, which makes it difficult to distinguish between black and white people unambiguously in Brazil (Warren and Canen 2012), it reinforces the multicultural idea embedded in such a narrative.

Two sets of commentaries can also be made about those Goals. Firstly, in terms of their financial feasibility, economic upheavals in the current environment in Brazil may pose challenges for implementation, at least within the intended timelines. Secondly, in terms of adult education and lifelong learning, it should be noted that the analysis of the Brazilian National Plan shows that the expression ‘adult education’ is used, but no mention of lifelong learning is made.

The argument being made in this Chapter thus seems to hold, namely that adult education is an expression that is politically more acceptable in Brazil than lifelong learning, suggesting that a dichotomy between those concepts still lingers in the narratives of political documents. Noteworthy in this respect is that Goals relating to adult education and those relating to higher education are quite separate. The rationale being the lack of a perceived link between adult education and what universities can, or might do, by, for example, providing programmes that include, but are not limited to, remedial and compensatory literacy and numeracy acquisition. In that sense, the National Plan seems to reinforce a separation of adult education and lifelong learning. The potential ways in which universities might contribute to provision of lifelong learning for adults is thus not addressed.

It is important to note that whereas that separation can be noted in the discourse of the National Plan, documentary analysis of the work produced by higher education scholars invited to contribute to the CONFINTEA 2016 seminar (Brazil 2016) shows both the need, and potential opportunities, to bridge this gap – for example, expansion of part-time and night courses for working adults, as well as adopting affirmative actions, such as quotas for black and indigenous people to better reflect their proportion of the population.

In general, the texts tend to emphasize critical transformative, Freirean and multicultural approaches deemed necessary for adult education in unequal and multicultural contexts such as Brazil, so as to contribute to the development of empowered and autonomous adult citizens, as can be noted below:

We should understand that we need an ample and decolonized adult education, considering essential aspects, such as: eliminating hierarchies of knowledge; adopting forms of language and methodologies that are according to adults' demands; include people that are experts in their jobs in all educational institutions (Bispo 2016, p. 360, author's translation).

However, a dichotomy between those views and the expression 'lifelong learning' seems to hover in some of those discussions, apparently reinforcing stereotypes related to both, meaning that Brazilian literature concerning lifelong learning still views that expression as associated with more individualist approaches (Nesbit 2015), to the detriment of perceiving its many meanings and possibilities.

In recent decades, the concept of lifelong learning (inside and outside school) has been adjusted to the economy and the new capitalism, to productivity and to economic growth, to employability and competition. The idea of democracy and transformation ... has been weakened (Lima 2016, p. 15, author's translation).

This is useful in that it seems to show that lifelong learning has been viewed as a concept more attuned to neoliberal, market oriented perspectives, by some of the higher education scholars that produced texts related to the conference. That may explain why it is an expression that has been avoided in political narratives in Brazil. The above quotation clearly shows that Lima (2016) considers the term 'lifelong learning' to be associated with economic concepts in such a way that it is perceived as detached from ideas of 'democracy and transformation', which are very strongly valued in Brazil.

Other texts, to a lesser extent, contend that there is a possibility, perceived by higher education scholars, to understand lifelong learning in multicultural approaches that build on cultural specificities and popular knowledge, and serve transformational Goals. For example:

It seems to be clear that lifelong learning, even when it is linked to the educational system, can still be imbued with the principles of popular education. It could benefit from the enormous richness brought about by that movement down through the decades in Brazil. In that case, the big question is: How can lifelong learning represent a counter-hegemonic education like popular education within a formal, official framework?... In order for lifelong learning to assume the perspective of popular adult education, it will have to break the hierarchy of traditional knowledge and value those of indigenous, quilombolas¹ and other cultural groups (Gadotti 2016, p. 62, author's translation).

As can be noted, the scholarship of adult education and lifelong learning in higher education is not homogeneous, and higher education scholars are somewhat polarized with regard to the interpretation of lifelong learning and its possibility to represent a counter hegemonic, transformative perspective on the education of adults.

Another aspect to be highlighted in those texts is the role of universities in lifelong learning framework or adult education more generally. In fact, the texts that refer to partnerships between universities and actors from civil society tend to be

¹The descendants of Afro-Brazilian slaves who escaped from plantations that existed in Brazil until the abolition of slavery in 1888.

presented as isolated experiences, albeit implicitly highlighting the role of the former. That is the case, for example, in partnerships between federal universities and the intermunicipal union of workers of civil construction in states of Brazil, where the extension university programmes have aimed both at providing literacy to those workers and competently preparing future teachers to act in a diverse adult education world. Such experiences show the importance of extension projects of higher education in the field of adult and lifelong learning in Brazil.

Looking at the final document produced by the Ministry of Education (with the support of UNESCO) related to the discussions undertaken during the conference (Brazil 2016), it can be noted that lifelong learning in a multicultural, popular education perspective has been the dominant tone. This can be noted in some excerpts:

Adult education in the perspective of popular education of lifelong learning goes beyond schooling ... so as to embrace a more ample concept as regards learning. It should be considered a movement in human formation that begins with the birth and goes on throughout life. It includes the schools, but also the multiple lives and experiences of the subjects. (Brazil 2016, p. 94, author's translation)

In order to achieve this aim, the document strongly embraces a Freirean perspective of critical transformative education, as can be noticed below:

[Actions should include]: foster the development of curricula based on a Freirean methodology, so as to promote the success of adult learners as free individuals that can value their own life experiences, according to their interests and dispositions; develop differentiated approaches to plural adult subjects, as related to differences of age, regions, cultures or other facts that impinge on different social groups (Brazil 2016, p. 73).

When we recognize the diversity of adults, as well as the cultural differences in contexts of classrooms and within social relations, we contribute to reaffirm identities in policies related to adult education. [Such a view] fosters political mechanisms in the fight for equality whenever the differences become inequalities. In Brazil, economic and educational inequalities are relevant in terms of gender and ethnicity, and should be taken into account (Brazil 2016, p. 73, author's translation).

Such a tone in the latter document shows that university discussions and studies, as embodied in the higher education scholars' articles analyzed, were indeed taken into account, showing an important link between policy making and higher education, at least at the level of intentions. Also, as a step forward, it should be pointed out that the document recognizes the role of universities in a stronger way than previous policies, within a lifelong learning framework, including its extended perspective in one of its recommendations, as noted below:

Based on the analysis undertaken, the new vision of adult education proposed here emphasises the need for a process of lifelong learning. That means guaranteeing access and opportunities of learning for all.... [In that sense], federal and other public universities have a central role. We suggest universities create specialised bachelor and pedagogical programs specially geared towards preparing teachers to work in adult education, as well as research projects in the post-graduate sector geared towards that level of teaching.... [We also suggest] the articulation of a large national program of university extension that will allow partnerships to work in literacy programs in regions of Brazil (Brazil 2016, p.94, author's translation).

As gleaned from the documents analyzed, the question of how adult education and lifelong learning have been viewed in Brazil seems to reinforce the perceived need for an inclusive, Freirean and multicultural perspective to serve as a foundation. The research articles were based on scholarship about adult education and lifelong learning, apart from the results of their extension university projects geared towards those adult groups.

Although the role of universities seems to be more explicit in what has been denominated in the Brazilian policies analyzed as ‘popular education in a lifelong learning perspective’, universities’ potential within a lifelong framework still needs to be emphasized. Likewise, more concrete measures seem to be lacking in those documents regarding higher education’s impacts on lifelong learning. Some relate to flexibility in admissions, modes of attendance and delivery, flexibility in duration of courses for lifelong learners, and so forth (Osborne and Houston 2012) even though most of these measures are already in place in higher education institutions in Brazil.

In terms of reform of higher education in Brazil, the challenges posed by lifelong learning are not made explicit in the National Plan. However, the fact that the plan highlights the importance of partnerships with municipalities and states to provide continuing teacher education could indirectly impinge on the quality of teachers that work with adult education in primary and secondary levels. At the same time, extension projects developed in the context of partnerships between universities and local authorities seem to be crucial for ensuring that lifelong learning is a framework that goes beyond compensatory teaching processes. For example, one such project relates to a series of workshops with teachers to prepare them for working with gender and sexual diversity. In that kind of project, an interdisciplinary approach has been privileged, with a team of experts coming from education, psychology and medicine. Other extension projects include faculties linked to technological areas that play an important role, in that they provide courses for adults that can better prepare them to face the challenges of working in construction developments with a sound basis, besides increasing their levels of literacy and numeracy.

When looking closely at the Goals referring to higher education in the National Plan, the emphasis on the development of research, on the one hand, and on evaluation (including self-evaluation) could be a stepping stone towards promoting assessment of the extent to which higher education institutions have been committed to lifelong learning strategies. Higher education institutions, particularly federal universities, have in fact increased provision of undergraduate and postgraduate night courses geared towards working adults, added to strategies such as the adoption of ethnic and racial university entrance quotas linked to black, indigenous and economically disadvantaged groups, as well as the mentioned extension projects targeted at teacher continuing education and adults’ professional needs- all of which can be considered as crucial contributions to lifelong learning.

A more explicit framework could, however, be present in recent educational policies, particularly though further development of the National Plan in order to challenge stereotypes associated with the expression ‘lifelong learning’ in Brazil.

10.4 Conclusions

This chapter used a document analysis to understand the thinking behind policies concerning lifelong learning and adult education, in order to understand how they were conceived in political discourses in Brazil, particularly focusing on the role of higher education. The analysis showed that whereas the National Plan does not explicitly mention either lifelong learning or the role of universities in that framework, some of the articles produced within the CONFINTEA conference (Brazil 2016) go further in suggesting possibilities for articulating these concepts. The analysis in this Chapter suggests this is associated with the fact that scholars engaged in research and extension university projects related to adult education and lifelong learning were invited to contribute to the conference.

The final document by the Ministry of Education reflects the influence of these scholars as – albeit in a somewhat subdued and implicit tone– universities’ role was recognized in the document produced by the government at the end of the conference (Brazil 2016). This could be an important starting point for a full lifelong learning framework to be developed, highlighting projects and strategies that are already in place in higher education institutions. However, as also noted, the discourses are not homogeneous, some of the higher education scholarship still contending that lifelong learning frameworks should not be adopted because they would allegedly be opposed to multicultural adult education.

As argued by Nogueira (2013), a great challenge to higher education in Brazil is coordinating democratization or social inclusion with academic excellence. Policies that refer to access in higher education, as well as programmes that grant private institutions tax advantages provided they offer scholarships to adult students in need may impact adult education and lifelong learning, by increasing the cohort of adult students from all backgrounds enrolling in higher education.

However, as pointed by Osborne and Houston (2012), many of the elements that should be measured as ‘high performance’ higher education, such as widening participation and social mobility, services to business and the community and contributions to other services, among others, are absent. Furthermore, the referred authors state that even though policies may foster higher education institutions to improve their lifelong learning provisions, universities are autonomous and policy levers are few.

In the same vein, it should be remembered that institutional evaluation still plays a central role in higher education priorities. Unfortunately, since adult and lifelong learning is not a main assessment indicator, the proportion of those adults that are targeted by higher education extension projects and by facilitated undergraduate access measures, tend to go unrecognized.

It should be pointed out that the recent economic crisis may impact lifelong learning policies and practices as developed in higher education institutions, particularly affecting financing programmes designed to meet the main Goals established both in the National Plan and in the documents referring to the conference (Brazil 2016).

On the other hand, the challenges of stereotypes and the valuing of diversity in Brazil started to emerge in the policy documents as an alternative way to promote a transformative lifelong learning framework within higher education. Whereas that aspect was not present before, the analysis of the narratives within the policies already shows that the expression ‘lifelong learning’ has been slowly endorsed in ways that take it away from exclusionary market-orientated approaches, which may be seen as a promising road towards multicultural education for all.

Also, it should be stressed that policy texts are intentions embedded in politically and ideologically motivated discourses. Changes in Brazilian politics, as well as the economic crisis meant that calls for government to financially support those intentions should increase. Such political moves should be rooted in the will to move higher education contributions to adult education and lifelong learning towards the centre of debate in Brazil, so as to organize a framework reflective of what higher education can do.

By advancing the possibility of viewing a framework of lifelong learning in a multicultural perspective, educational policies started, arguably, to show that they are starting to go beyond dichotomized approaches hitherto espoused. Such a framework could be a stepping-stone in the way to the valuing of higher education contributions in that field. It could arguably move Brazil to becoming a growing inspiration for other countries, particularly in a scenario where migrations, movements of refugees and other factors have resulted in an international need to encourage higher education institutions to promote education for adults within a lifelong learning framework that values diversity and shuns inequality, in Brazil and elsewhere.

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