THE POLITICS OF ADJUSTMENT AND LIFELONG EDUCATION:
THE CASE OF ARGENTINA

MARIA TERESA SIRVENT

Abstract – This article seeks to indicate some of the aspects of lifelong education in Argentina. Empirical evidence is found for the hypothesis that continuing education reproduces and reinforces social differences. Secondly, the article identifies some of the contradictions in the present socio-economic and political context of the country, which are posing new challenges to critical and participatory lifelong education. Educational practice is having to respond to a model of society which derives from neo-conservative practices in the economic, social and educational spheres. The article is fundamentally descriptive. Qualitative and quantitative data refer to potential demand, actual demand and social demand for lifelong education. The article concludes with some reflections on lifelong education as a global policy confronting a historical crisis situation.


Résumé – Cet article dégage certains aspects de la situation en matière de formation permanente en Argentine. Il existe la preuve empirique que la formation continue reproduit et accentue les différences sociales. L'article établit ensuite quelques contradictions existant dans le complexe socio-économique et politique actuel du pays, qui lancent un nouveau défi à la formation permanente pour prendre un accent critique et participatif. Les pratiques pédagogiques se doivent de tenir compte d'un modèle de société issu de pratiques néo-conservatrices dans les domaines économique, social et pédagogique. L'article est avant tout descriptif; des données qualitatives et quantitatives reflètent les besoins en formation permanente selon les critères potentiels, réel et social. Il conclut par quelques réflexions sur l'instauration de la formation permanente en tant que mesure globale pour affronter une crise de dimension historique.

Adult, non-formal and popular education have often been promoted as an alternative to the inequality and divisiveness of the regular educational system, which reproduces social injustice in society as a whole. There is empirical
evidence, however, that the provision of education throughout adult life actually intensifies social differences corresponding to levels of formal education among the population.

The history of lifelong education is not a linear or cumulative phenomenon but rather a history of struggles between contrasting, and at times even antagonistic, tendencies – a confrontation between opposing points of view coming together at a particular moment.

This article will examine quantitative and qualitative empirical data relating to the demand for education among adults and young people and to the educational, social and occupational stratification of Argentina's population. On the basis of this data, an attempt will be made to do the following:

- support empirically the hypothesis that continuing education reproduces and preserves social differences;
- identify some of the contradictions in the socio-economic and political context of the country and the new challenges they pose to a lifelong education which attempts to be critical and participatory and which opposes the model of man and society underlying current neo-conservative practices in the economic, social and educative spheres.

The economic, political and social conditions associated with adjustment policies and with the “new role of the State” are having a detrimental effect on public education and on attempts to overcome educational marginalization. These conditions also aggravate the difficulties faced by lifelong education authorities who are trying to build and consolidate democratic societies. This presents us with a challenge to our creativity, both in analysing the present reality and in formulating new strategies for action conforming to the “old” notion of the democratization of knowledge and culture.

The potential demand for lifelong education

The term “potential demand” refers to the entire population aged 15 or over with a range of objective needs for lifelong education which may or may not be transferable to the market. In other words, it signifies all the young people and adults who should be making demands based on an educational need, regardless of whether they actually do so or not. To illustrate the nature of this demand, we shall examine various sections of the population, differing in their level of education and employment situation. In these terms, the population can be divided into the following groups:

1. The first group consists of a large proportion of the population with minimal education, who seek to learn basic skills in order to survive. Generally, this corresponds to the working class and workers in marginal occupations (cf. the categorization of social classes by Torrado 1992), amounting to approximately 56.2 per cent of the economically active population. Of the total population aged 13 and over, a broad base of 61.6