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How the Issue of Unemployment and the Unemployed Is Treated in Adult Education Literature within Polish and U.S. Contexts

Abstract

This paper, based on a qualitative analysis of adult education literature, presents a comparison of approaches to unemployment-related problems in Poland and the US. Unemployment serves here as a lens through which attitudes towards various areas connected with adult education can be viewed. The conclusions drawn from the research can be both the source of reflection for adult educators in different socio-cultural contexts as well as the starting point for further research related to the topics explored in the text.

Keywords: adult education, literature research, unemployment, comparison, Poland, US

Introduction

In this paper, the authors compare approaches to the issue of unemployment and the unemployed in adult education literature in two different socio-political settings: Poland and the US. As in comparative studies in general, this one is aimed, first of all, at better understanding another socio-educational environment in order to better recognize rules and criteria of assessment of one's own country, a fundamental step in looking for new ideas and inspirations (Harris, 1980). The choice of the topic is not coincidental. The authors treat unemployment as model lenses through which one can filter the approaches of adult education theorists to the problems of social exclusion, poverty and either adaptive or transformative character of their area of interest.

Background – situation in Poland

The Polish context is marked by socio-political transformation from the late 80s which was accompanied by the economic crisis that affected average citizens and had its far-reaching consequences: unemployment, social inequalities, poverty, disappearance of state-guaranteed safety, marginalization of many social groups (Kawula, 2004, p. 22; Bogaj, 2010, p. 7; Bogaj, 2007, p. 18). These phenomena were new experiences for Polish citizens as they were either absent in the country life before 1989 or hidden by the communist propaganda. Their size and rapid growth after 1989 were unexpected for most Polish people and the case of unemployment is one of the best examples of the loss of stability for a big part of Polish society: its rate in January 1990 was 0.3% and amounted to 16.1% in 1995 (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2015). Within these indicators, some groups were exposed to a higher rate of unemployment, e.g., women, the unemployed under 25 and over the age of 50, people with disabilities (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2015, pp. 80-81), as well as those living in rural areas.

Joining the European Union (EU) in 2004, Poland became a part of European legal system and adjusted the country policy to European recommendations, also in

the field of adult education. The main documents that guided adult educators (Commission of the European Communities, 2000; European Commission, 1995) emphasize a key value of economic growth, competition, and employment. The subordination of education to the economy and prioritizing the latter was criticized by numerous scientists within adult education (Frąckowiak, 2005; Muszyński, 2005; Pierścieniak, 2009) and inevitably influenced the way unemployment-related issues were treated in the examined literature.

U.S. cultural context

Within the time period of the literature review, a Great Recession in the US took place after a housing bubble burst in mid-2007 and the economy went into a recession. Unemployment peaked at 10% in October 2009. As stocks fell and a Wall Street bailout ensued, this period was deemed the most serious financial challenge in the US since WWII.

Dominant cultural themes and values originally compiled by Williams (1970) and then further adapted by Ginsberg and Włodkowski (2009) are helpful in examining the current dominant cultural paradigm in the US and how unemployed adult learners are situated. Dominant cultural beliefs emphasize the rags to riches story, or those who have achieved success have worked hard and deserve this success. Disciplined productive activity and the desire for the “good life” are central within dominant US values (Williams, 1970). Within these values, a nationalism-patriotism exists to that which is called American, including a high appreciation of the economic system.

Methodology

The literature review of adult education in Poland is based on the analysis of the contents of a quarterly *Polish Journal of Continuing Education (Edukacja ustawiczna dorosłych)* and *Andragogy Yearbook (Rocznik Andragogiczny)* published 2004–2013 (90 texts total). The timespan was determined by the year 2004 which was marked by Polish access to the EU and the 15th anniversary of Polish systemic transition from a centrally steered to a free market economy. Using dates corresponding to the Polish search, literature from the three adult education journals associated with the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education were examined: *Adult Education Quarterly*, *Adult Learning*, and the *Journal of Transformative Education* (65 texts total). The texts were qualified to further research by the key words, or, if they lacked them, by the content analysis in which unemployment and unemployed were identified as the main topics of the text. Following the qualitative research procedure, the data was coded, i.e. classified in the categories or frames that emerged during the analysis (Babbie, 2003, pp. 342–353; Rapley, 2010, p. 216; Silverman, 2012, p. 149).

Poland – main findings

Within Polish literature, 90% of the examined texts were related to unemployment seen through policy, institutions, and their programs. First of all, they viewed state employment policy related to combating unemployment, the issue

of job counselling, and vocational training. Thus, the texts were focused on *Act of 20 April 2004 on the Promotion of Employment and Labour Market Institutions* (Gawlik & Kupidura, 2004, p. 48), the ways of improving standards of labour market and job counselling (Śmigiel & Żurek, 2011, p. 46), and vocational training as ways of combating exclusion and adjustment to the labour market (Kuhn, 2010, p. 80; Delgado, 2010).

Many articles were devoted to describing various institutions dealing with unemployment: employment agencies, city and regional councils, community information centers, non-profit organizations, academic carrier offices, and centres of professional in-service training. The same number of texts dealt with description of the E.U. funded programs, including trainings, requalifying courses aimed at combating unemployment or mitigating its effects, and their evaluation (Kupidura & Maleńczak, 2006; Religa, 2010).

Generally, all these texts carry the message of necessary adjustment to the job market and being flexible to survive in the changing and demanding requirements of the economy.

As stated above, unemployment in Poland has some characteristics with particularly disadvantageous situations of some groups, e.g. the unemployed in rural areas. These people, in many cases, lost their jobs with the socio-political transformation of 1989 and now are living in industrially undeveloped areas. With insufficient education, their unemployment has a tendency to be a generational and permanent state. Yet, the reflection on these problems is hardly traceable as it appears in just a few texts (Kicior, 2007; Kupidura, 2007; Kupidura & Bednarczyk, 2008). Another group that is presented only occasionally, although their share in labour market is below the European average, are people with disabilities, the main theme of two texts, focused either on concrete programs aimed at their vocational activation or general analysis of their situation in the labour market (Dycht, 2009; Paczula, 2011). The biggest age group of the unemployed is constituted by people aged 18-25. However, in the analysed material, only four texts were devoted to this group: two highlighted the problem of the unemployment of university graduates in Poland (Tomczyk, 2011; Tomczyk, 2012), one concerned a very high percentage of young people in a region (Sitek, 2013), and the third described a program aimed at their inclusion in the job market (Religa & Ippavitz, 2011). Moreover, although after joining the European Union Poland experienced massive waves of economic migrations, there is only one text devoted to this problem (Flaszyńska, 2005).

U S – main findings

In the U.S. literature, unemployment or to be unemployed as a characteristic of a learner was related to the main area of examination, but was not the primary inquiry.

A critique of neoliberal ideology centering on alleviating the individual from unemployment or educating an individual for employment was a focus of a body of literature (Formosa, 2010; Glastra, Hake & Schedler, 2004). The critique is that lifelong learning has become an apparatus to train for a vocation rather than emancipatory purposes. The contexts for these works are outside the US, e.g. Netherlands.

A main focus of the U.S. literature centered on workforce development in several areas: green jobs and the green economy to retrain semi-skilled workers (Killingsworth & Grosskopf, 2013); urban workforce training programs (Martin & Smith, 2011); and welfare education programs (Alfred, 2007; Sandlin, 2004).

Low literacy skills and lack of basic education were areas cited as contributing to an adult's unemployment (Blunt, 2005; Marschall & Davis, 2012). For example, Blunt (2005) discusses the use of evaluation of adult education and development programs for low-literate adults. Marschall and Davis (2012) address the need for critical reading skills in adult students returning to college and for subsequent employment. In these cases, unemployment is not the primary focus; however, unemployment is a status to be avoided or eliminated.

Social structures and identities also were discussed as systems and positionalities related to unemployment. Worker education and the labor movement history (D'Amico, 2011; Parrish & Taylor, 2007) and globalization and education in revolutionary organizations with the US (Holst, 2004) were topics emphasizing a historical examination of the learner as worker. The role of communities for women (Flemming & Nelson, 2007) also was addressed.

Social identities relating to the intersectionality with unemployment include second language learners (Adamunti-Trache, 2013), refugee status (Morrice, 2013), or immigrant status (Andersson & Osman, 2008) related to those entering a new culture. Other intersectionalities include gender (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007), race and gender (Alfred, 2007; Bridwell, 2013; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007), and age such as nontraditional students returning to college (Bye, Pushkar & Conway, 2007).

Conclusions

A comparison of how unemployment and unemployed are situated within U.S. and Polish adult education contexts can provide areas for further inquiry.

The absence of a critical approach in adult education in Poland normalizes the issue of unemployment and severely limits discussion on the systemic roots of unemployment. The learning adult and institutions of adult education are not seen as creators of transformation, but rather means to teach how to adapt and subordinate to change. Although in the U.S. literature a critique of neoliberalism as well as structural barriers is present, articles lack deep examination of what "work" means with regard to identity. The U.S. literature does not fully examine a bridge between two basic areas: the need of jobs and emancipatory education. However, the very presence of a critical approach in U.S. literature could inspire Polish adult education theorists and policy makers to further interrogate issues of unemployment.

In the Polish context the unemployed are presented mostly as the recipients of different forms of support. In the U.S. literature, to be unemployed is a status to be ameliorated through whatever means, which is rooted deeply within U.S. dominant cultural paradigms. U.S. belief of what success is and how it is achieved from within the dominant paradigm may overlook complex systems or view socio-economic status as that which has been earned.

Marginalization is addressed within U.S. literature to a higher degree than in Poland. However, the primary source of marginalization is first on identities other than being unemployed. The intersectionality of the problem of unemployment is hardly present in Polish literature whereas homeless women of color (Bridwell,

2013) and different impacts of workforce education for men and women (Hawley, Sommers & Melendez, 2005) are addressed within U.S. literature.

To sum, the presented article can be the starting point for the search of an adult education model that is sensitive to the challenges of the contemporary world and employs critical analysis of emerging issues. In this paper, unemployment served as a lens through which the model of adult education can be viewed. The picture that appears after the research of the literature shows that Polish approaches may provide more focused ways for U.S. scholars to situate unemployment and U.S. approaches in this field, still far from the ideal, but growing on socio-cultural diversity and criticism towards the neoliberal agenda, can be the source of inspiration for adult educators who aim to integrate transformative educational activity.

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