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# PROBLEMATISING ADULT BASIC AND SECONDARY EDUCATION IN A GLOBALISED WORLD

*From second chance to school recovery*

## ABSTRACT

*The article problematises the role Adult Basic and Secondary Education (ABSE) plays in response to global challenges, under the influence of global policy. Drawing on a three-year study that assumed a social realism perspective and employed situational analysis, it discusses three dimensions of policy making in adult education: the scales of political mobilisation, the environments for policy-making, and the meanings conveyed. In doing so, it argues that although the perceptions and reception of as well as influence on international policy vary across countries, ABSE has turned today into a school-recovery opportunity for the younger generations who failed in school and people whose educational achievements in a given country are not recognised when migrating to a new one. This calls into question both the way policy in ABSE sees the social problem at stake and how policy solutions in this area of public intervention impinge on broader issues of (in)equality in education.*

**Keywords:** adult education policy, adult basic education, adult secondary education, comparative study

## PROBLEMATIZIRANJE OSNOVNOŠOLSKEGA IN SREDNJEŠOLSKEGA IZOBRAŽEVANJA ODRASLIH V GLOBALIZIRANEM SVETU: *Od druge možnosti do vnovičnega šolanja – POVZETEK*

Članek problematizira vlogo, ki jo ima osnovnošolsko in srednješolsko izobraževanje odraslih (OSIO) kot odgovor na globalne izzive pod vplivom globalne politike. Na podlagi triletnje študije, ki je prevzela perspektivo socialnega realizma in uporabila situacijsko analizo, obravnava tri dimenzije oblikovanja politike izobraževanja odraslih: lestvice politične mobilizacije, okolja za oblikovanje politike in prenašanje pomenov. Pri tem dokazuje, da čeprav se dojemanje, vpliv in sprejemanje mednarodne politike med državami razlikujejo, se je OSIO danes spremenil v priložnost vnovičnega šolanja za mlajše generacije, ki jim je v šoli spodeljelo, in za ljudi, katerih izobraževalni dosežki v neki državi niso priznani, ko migrirajo v novo državo. To pa pod vprašaj postavlja tako način, kako politika v OSIO vidi rešitev socialnega

problema, kakor tudi način, kako politične rešitve na tem področju javnega interveniranja posegajo v širša vprašanja (ne)enakosti v izobraževanju.

**Ključne besede:** osnovnošolsko izobraževanje odraslih, politika izobraževanja odraslih, primerjalna studija, srednješolsko izobraževanje odraslih

## INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, adult education has developed over centuries. Although the similarities and differences that coexist within, and most obviously across, countries, are the result of specific national histories, these are also part of wider global phenomena. Adult Basic and Secondary Education (ABSE), or basic literacy and education up to secondary school levels for out-of-school youth and adults specifically, is just one form of social institutions comprised within adult education (Jarvis, 1993), but as such, in contemporary societies, it falls under the responsibility of the state – even if its provision may be delegated to civil society, organised religions, or the market.

In most countries, law making on ABSE was for the most part initiated in the 19th century, alongside the institutionalisation of public school education for children, as a second chance to first enter school later in life, addressing primarily citizens who, for a number of socio-economic or cultural reasons, did not have access to primary and lower education as children or adolescents. In Western societies, it has been strongly associated with welfare state regimes and reconstruction processes following the Second World War; in most of Latin America, it became a constituent of social protection policies following the economic crisis of the 1980s.

Comparative political sociological studies of adult education across countries and regions of the world have been primarily concerned with the political rationales for state intervention in adult education (see for instance Torres, 2013). But states do not act in isolation; they are in communication with other political structures above, below and across states.

Against this background, this article problematises the role that ABSE has come to play in a globalised world, not independently but also thanks to long-term relations individual countries have had with intergovernmental organisations. It does so drawing on an interdisciplinary study carried out in 2012–2015, the results of which are presented at length in *Global Networks, Local Actions: Rethinking adult education policy in the 21st* (Milana, 2017).

In what follows, I first introduce the conceptual framework and methodology guiding the study, the main scope of which was to appreciate (not explain) transformations in adult education policy in response to global challenges, on a global level and in four countries (Argentina, Brazil, Italy and the United States) located in the traditional North or South of the Americas or Europe. Then, I present selected findings. Overall, I argue that although the perceptions and reception of as well as influence on international policy vary across countries, there is a tendency in countries that have achieved mass schooling to utilise

ABSE as a response to public school failures (e.g., high drop-out rates, poor learning outcomes, inadequate response to the ethnic and linguistic diversity of students), rather than to increase access to public education in line with more traditional state rationales. This thus constitutes a substantial shift in ABSE from a *second chance* to a *school-recovery* opportunity targeting the younger generations (who failed in school) and people whose educational achievements in a given country are not recognised when migrating into a new one as nostrification (diploma recognition) is not possible.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Globalisation as a multi-dimensional process points, among other aspects, to transnational arrangements, collaborations and forms of integration across geopolitical, social and cultural territories, which reshape and transform the power and authority of the state (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt and Perraton, 1999), also in education. A factor complicating the picture is that adult education is the most complex institution of all educational institutions, and the one that presents the highest degree of variation across countries.

With a point of departure in sociological approaches to adult education (Jarvis, 1985; Torres, 2013), I assume a scalar approach to public policy and construe the public domain of adult education policy, in any given country, as comprised of different scales, above and below the national. Simply put and following Smith (1995) and Brenner (1998), a scale is here conceived as a territorial organisation that is nested in socio-political systems, following some kind of hierachal structure, and which contains social relations and collective social action. This is in line with geographers' thinking stressing that territories are not just bounded spatial entities, but they are rather the result of a mix of power, ideology and authority (Delaney, 2005).

Against this backdrop, a major transformation in adult education policy occurred in the aftermath of the Second World War through the expansion of a global or non-territorially bound polity (Corry, 2010) that construed adult education as an object distinct from education, schooling, etc. (Milana, 2012). This is reflected in the increased involvement of policy actors who are mutually interdependent and somewhat coordinated in their actions (Enroth, 2011; Jessop, 1998, 2002), thanks to a number of governance mechanisms, instruments and tools which occasionally serve what Woodward (2009) defines as four interrelated and overlapping dimensions of governance: cognitive, normative, legal and/or palliative. While the cognitive dimension deals with shared values, the normative dimension refers to the convergence of knowledge, the legal dimension points at the consensual codification of knowledge in legal texts, whereas the palliative dimension refers more to what some organisations help their members or other organisations to do and accomplish, for example, by compensating for their lack of resources and expertise or by filling the gaps in the work of other organisations.

The way these developments relate to state policies is highly dependent on different forms of policy crossings, as I argue elsewhere (Milana, 2015). This suggests that the ways

international policy developments relate to state policies in adult education (and subsequent ABSE provision) in different parts of the world and different political systems are not always predictable.

Complementing the conceptual framework is my ontological positioning in social realism, thus I understand the real world as made of a combination of the domain of the empirical, or what human beings experience, the domain of the actual, or what happens, and the mechanisms that make things happen (Collier, 2011). It is people's (and collectives') instrumental, strategic and communicative actions that re-elaborate past cultural and structural conditions and generate (often unintended) consequences, which in turn produce the observable outcomes we call facts (Archer, 2011). In this study, one observable outcome is the institution of adult education as a subsystem of the state educational system in various countries. But the properties and power of such a subsystem vary across Argentina, Brazil, Italy, and the United States of America, as well as within each of these countries; so do the social positioning of the population, divided, for instance, between those whose motivation and strategic action aim (intentionally or unintentionally) for maintenance or change of this sub-system.

## METHODOLOGY

In my research, the methodological scaffolding was a case study (Stake, 2006). I designed a single case study to investigate transformations in adult education policy at a global scale that incorporated four mini-cases at the country level. Countries were selected on the basis of their continental positioning so that they would be geographically located in what is generally referred to as the global North vs. global South; their level of economic development within the respective continent, and international recognition as major economies; their long-term membership in intergovernmental organisations active in the field of adult education, with a global and/or continental reach (i.e., the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation – UNESCO, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – OECD, the Organisation of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture – OEI, and the European Union – EU); their system of government and administrative organisation, i.e., the degree of institutionalisation of adult education as a sub-system of the national education system; the overall literacy level of the country's population; and, in the case of Latin America, also the country's colonial history and whether it had been under Spanish or Portuguese rule.

I combined the case study format with situational analysis (Clarke, 2005), an analytical strategy rooted in grounded theory that studies social processes by using social worlds/arenas maps as heuristic devices which help to lay out collective commitments at meso-level. Derived from the work of the Chicago School of sociology (see, among others, Strauss, 1978), social worlds refer to specific groupings of people (e.g., teachers of adults) or ideas (e.g., theoretical positions, such as that adult education is a human right) forming shared perspectives that can frame collective action (Shibutani, 1955).

Hence, they are identifiable social spaces that, unfolding over time, become visible through action and discourse (Clarke, 2003; Shibusaki, 1955). Accordingly, social arenas represent bigger aggregates in which multiple social worlds meet (e.g., the Californian adult education system).

Finally, the data set for the whole study consisted of documents (i.e., reports on official policy agendas, action plans, decisions, budget allocations, research reports); 119 interviews with people with different levels of involvement and political influence in adult education (i.e., representatives of states, local governments, intergovernmental organisations, non-governmental organisations, workers' unions and professional organisations, and teachers and learners who appropriate policy in their everyday practice); and 44 written ethnographic entries based on approximately 120 hours of class observations, and 145 pictures taken at the educational sites where fieldwork took place.

## **SELECTED FINDINGS**

The first level of analysis looked at international policy developments in adult education between the end of the Second World War and 2016, by illustrating the relative role of, and links between, major intergovernmental organisations with a global or continental reach and a few non-governmental organisations that lobby for adult education at a global scale. In a nutshell, this analysis highlights that since their establishment, intergovernmental organisations have played different roles in coordinating the expansion of polity in adult education at both continental and global scales. Such coordinating roles benefited from different forms of cognitive, normative, legal and palliative governance (Woodward, 2009).

Major intergovernmental organisations with a global or continental reach (e.g., UNESCO, OECD, EU), but also non-governmental organisations that lobby for adult education at a global scale (e.g., DVV International, International Council for Adult Education – ICAE), contributed to cognitive governance through the publication of reports, white papers, and professional journals, sometimes addressing the same audiences (i.e., more economically developed countries), sometimes targeting different policy or professional networks across geographical and socio-political territories (see also Milana, 2016); however, UNESCO is the only organisation that from its early days supported this action through the organisation of international conferences on adult education open to representatives from national governments, the academia and non-governmental organisations from different regions of the world.

All intergovernmental organisations also contributed to normative governance, but in ways that at least at times embedded distinct conceptual features. As amply debated in specialised literature, and with the simplifications that this requires, there is a tendency to associate the work of UNESCO with a humanistic conception of adult education that sees it as a human right; to connect the work of the OECD to a functionalist conception that considers adult education as a means of achieving better skills or higher economic goals;

and to link the work of the EU to that of the OECD, however openly, sporadically and to a limited degree, considering the role adult education has in learning to live together across cultures and in participating in a democracy.

But it is also at the level of legal governance that intergovernmental organisations differ. For instance, UNESCO was the forerunner in the use of traditional soft law mechanisms (i.e., Recommendations) to codify knowledge and promote governmental initiative in adult education in less economically developed countries; the OECD was the precursor in the application of peer-reviewing also in the field of adult learning; whereas the EU is the only one to redistribute financial means in favour of people's mobility, exchanges and joint multilateral projects within the field of adult education, which here includes vocational training.

Finally, with reference to palliative governance, UNESCO had a primacy in reaching out and collecting information and statistics from the majority of countries worldwide, but over time the OECD has developed a knowledge management system capable of connecting the inputs and outcomes of education and learning in ways that have come to be seen as having greater authority.

By the turn of the 20th century, however, all intergovernmental organisations under consideration had put into motion additional policy instruments to encourage conformity to given shared norms and standards, to distribute financial means, to coordinate activities, to provide consultancy and technical assistance to others, or to stimulate policy debate around adult education.

All of the above has brought about transformations in the working of multi-scalar governance (Jessop, 1998, 2002) in adult education. Interpersonal exchanges were the prevalent mode of governance until the Second World War, then inter-organisational exchanges turned into the primary mode of governance since governments came together and established intergovernmental organisations to support their respective interests in favour of world peace, European recovery and integration as well as national economic growth and betterment of people's living standards. However, after the 1990s, and even more so in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis with its consequences for a large number of national economies, inter-systemic steering has emerged as the prevalent mode of operation in the governance of adult education at continental and global scales. Obviously, all of this has varying kinds of impact at regional and national scales.

Focusing attention on political agendas for adult education advanced by intergovernmental organisations with a continental reach in South America (i.e., OEI) and Europe (i.e., EU), each of these agendas identifies major topics of concern, and advances plans for action to be undertaken by national and local governments as well as intergovernmental organisations. Moreover, each agenda builds on prior policy priorities and targets agreed and/or advocated at both continental and global scales, to promote the right to education for all in the global South and a lifelong learning system in the global North. As such, each of these agendas embeds ways of connecting knowledge, ideas and experience from

different parts of the world that result in region-specific political discourses, contextualising what is meant by adult education and why it is an important objective for public policy. A closer analysis of these agendas brings to light distinctive ways of understanding adult education and what it should stand for.

In South America adult education equals basic literacy and education for those young people and adults who, for economic, social or political reasons, have not had the opportunity to access education as children or adolescents, despite their right to it. But such a way of encapsulating adult education implies a sense of what Hart (2001) called big D development, namely what occurs through interventions that are intentionally oriented towards the achievement of economic progress. When the intention of countries in the global South is to ‘catch up’ with those in the global North, development does not necessarily promote local interests or empowerment.

In Europe adult education corresponds to any form of learning, among younger and older adults, that is either the result of formalised paths or could be certified as such ex post, to either enter into or remain active in the labour market. This way of delimiting adult education is again linked to the above-mentioned conception of big D development, but in an explicit way, as in this case specific and deliberate interventions are intended to maintain the economic advantage of the countries in the global North.

In conclusion, despite their different discursive framing and their rather diverse plans for action, none of the examined region-wide agendas for adult education seems to address adult education as a small D development project (*Ibid.*, 2001) that, particularly in capitalism, could contribute to broader processes of change, and thus unleash the potential for shifting existing power relations among individuals, social groups, and geopolitical orders, and this between, and within, the global South and the global North.

Against this backdrop, the discussion in the following section draws on a comparison of the social worlds/arenas in each of the countries under investigation (see Milana, 2017 for an in depth country-led analysis), to present and discuss three dimensions of policy making in adult education: the scales of political mobilisation, the environments for policy-making, and the meanings conveyed.

## **SCALES OF POLITICAL MOBILISATION**

On a theoretical level and at urban, regional, national, continental, and global scales, different types of collective actors may promote but also resist transformations in ABSE, yet collective actors, including individuals who speak on their behalf, may participate with their knowledge and ideas in systems of government at more than one scale, and may act to introduce changes in ABSE praxis either out of choice or due to legal obligations.

On a practical level, however, when we consider specific geographical continents, such as North America, Latin America, and Europe, and selected countries within these continents, the collective actors involved and the nature and extent of their active involvement

in ABSE vary across continents and countries. Thus, I first focused on the social worlds (in terms of groupings of people) that compose ABSE as a social arena in each of the countries under consideration, then made a cross-country comparison. This led to the identification of eight typologies of collective actors that were somewhat present in each of the countries' social areas. These include: legal authorities; administrative authorities; educational institutions run by public authorities; workers' unions; organised civil society; academia; research institutes either run by or mostly financed by public authorities; and intergovernmental organisations of which the countries are members.

Brazil and Argentina have a public education system that, on a national level, recognises adult education as a distinct teaching modality. In Italy, even if not legally defined as such, ABSE has a similar status. By contrast, in the USA, where no centralised education system exists, ABSE is according to federal law a social service catering to certain populations. When it comes to its provision, ABSE may be under the aegis of state-run schools only (Italy), municipally-run educational institutions only (USA), or both state- and municipally-run schools and a number of other educational settings in partnerships with the organised civil society and workers' unions (Brazil and Argentina). For the most part, state- and municipally-run schools provide ABSE at comprehensive institutions that also host primary and secondary education for children and adolescents, with the exception of California (USA), where ABSE is offered at specialised educational institutions (i.e., adult education centres and/or community colleges) run by independent boards.

Over the last decade, nationwide ABSE policy interventions by federal and national states have been of a fairly divergent nature in the countries under consideration. Both the federal government of Brazil and the national government of Argentina have introduced new programs to which individual states (Brazil) or provinces (Argentina) could voluntarily adhere totally or in part. In Argentina, educational institutions also hold a similar discretionary power. Both the national government of Italy and the state government of California (USA) have enforced state-wide massive structural reforms that leave no discretionary decisions to the administrative authorities operating at either a regional (Italy) or urban (California) scale. It is this distinctive legal quality, namely the discretionary vs. non-discretionary implementation of nationwide policies, that puts in motion different mobilisation processes within each social arena, and across levels.

In California top-down imposition mobilised both civil society organisations that promote adult education at the state level and workers' unions that protect the rights of adult teachers at both national and urban scales, for instance, to oppose the cuts in public funds earmarked for ABSE. Both types of collective actors reacted to the terms of systemic reforms defending their own interests and the interests of the professionals they represent. In addition, educational institutions also acted at the urban level to protect and re-affirm their relative areas of expertise in Adult Basic Education (mostly adult education centres) and/or Adult Secondary Education (typically community colleges). These mobilisation processes blurred the boundaries between these distinctive social worlds, and between these and adult learners and the citizenry at large. Moreover, protests that took place at

the urban and at the national level reinforced each other, further blurring the boundaries between socio-political systems and scales.

A similar mobilisation among educational institutions occurred in Italy, although for different reasons. Here Permanent Territorial Centres for Adult Education (CTPs) urged for higher administrative independence from state-run schools, but also for resisting legal restrictions on the overall adult education provision they administer. Upper secondary schools were specifically mobilised to protect their rights to deliver Adult Secondary Education. However, CTPs and upper secondary schools also joined forces through the establishment of a formal network across administrative regions (i.e., Italian Network for the Instruction of Adults and Lifelong Learning – RIDAP), and found an ally in the academia, where a similar formal network in support of adult and lifelong education (i.e., Network of Italian Universities for Lifelong Learning – RUIAP) was already in existence at a national scale.

In Brazil and Argentina, administrative authorities could discretionarily adhere to the initiative launched by their federal and national governments, respectively. However, the widespread use of formal agreement protocols between administrative authorities at different scales of the political system facilitated different forms of mobilisation on the part of the administrative authorities, the educational institutions, the organised civil society and the workers' unions. Yet, when we consider the specific provision of Adult Basic Education (Brazil) and Adult Secondary Education (Argentina) that was made the object of closer examination at the urban scale, such mobilisation processes were quite distinct. In Brazil, at the urban scale the administrative authorities had links with educational institutions, on the one hand, and the organised civil society, on the other hand, but the organised civil society in turn had close ties to the local workers' unions; all of this facilitated different ways of circulating knowledge and ideas among these social worlds to make sense of Adult Basic Education. However, the mobilisation of a multi-scalar structure of Adult Education Forums also created opportunities for knowledge exchange and cross-fertilisation of ideas not only across scales, but also, at each scale, across social worlds as well as social arenas. In Argentina, on the contrary, although accountable to the local administrative authorities, educational institutions were mobilised in rather autonomous ways to make sense of Adult Secondary Education.

But in both Brazil and Argentina there is a strong presence of intergovernmental organisations that have local offices (e.g., UNESCO – Brazil, OEI Office for Argentina) or that rely on a network of sponsored agencies and affiliated organisations, either based in these countries (e.g., Latin American School of Social Studies – FLACSO of Argentina), or that have Latin America as their focus of attention (e.g., Centre for Regional Cooperation for Adult Education in Latin America and the Caribbean – CREFAL). This presence of intergovernmental organisations rooted in national soils has facilitated global-regional-national knowledge exchange and cross-fertilisation of ideas between intergovernmental organisations, the academia and research institutions in both Brazil and Argentina. Yet, while in Brazil, for instance, these exchanges have prompted the emergence of the

above-mentioned Adult Education Forums, in Argentina they have mostly benefitted the legal and administrative authorities to make sense of education conceived more broadly, and only marginally facilitated knowledge exchange and cross-fertilisation of ideas about ABSE specifically.

In the USA, when it comes to the national scale, administrative authorities and intergovernmental organisations like the OECD, and to some extent UNESCO, have forged stronger links overtime. This has brought about extensive exchange of knowledge and cross-fertilisation of ideas that have been passed down to the urban scale, but also spread out towards education institutions, at both state and urban scales, by the US Department of Education.

Similarly, in Italy, the national administrative authorities have close links to intergovernmental organisations like the EU and the OECD that favour exchange of knowledge and cross-fertilisation of ideas about adult education; exchange and cross-fertilisation that are substantiated by the hierarchical ties the national administrative authorities have with financially dependent research institutions (i.e., National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education and Training System – INVALSI, former Institute for the development of vocational training for workers – ISFOL, now National Institute for the Analysis of Public Policy – INAPP). These research institutes contribute to the transfer of knowledge and ideas to the regional scale, but also to spreading them out towards the academia and educational institutions.

To summarise, discretionary vs. non-discretionary interventions in ABSE by public authorities always lead certain collective actors to mobilise in support of or against them. However, who is mobilised, at which scale, and what for is dependent on the historically determined structure of social relations in place in a definite geographical and/or social territory (Archer, 2011), as well as on the gains and losses that discretionary vs. non-discretionary interventions bring in terms of upholding or reconsidering these relations.

## **ENVIRONMENTS FOR POLICY-MAKING**

Knowledge exchange and cross-fertilisation of ideas among policy actors happen first and foremost through physical encounters of individuals who speak on their behalf. For instance, at continental and global scales, physical encounters among individuals from different social worlds/arenas have been encouraged through different activities sponsored by intergovernmental organisations and non-governmental institutions, among which UNESCO's International Conferences on Adult Education (CONFINTEAs) or the annual meetings of ICAE are just two examples.

In the 21st century, however, the growing use of new technologies has expanded the environments in which policy actors meet. Thus, for instance, in 2012 and again in 2014, in the process of revisiting the 1976 UNESCO *Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education*, people speaking on behalf of the academia, the public as well as private educational institutions, the organised civil society, national administrative authorities, and

intergovernmental organisations exchanged knowledge and ideas also through written entries in online consultations coordinated by the UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning, among other environments.

Independently from the physical or virtual environments in which policy actors meet, the process also always embeds non-physical or ideational environments, which consist of the imaginaries and other conceptual apparatuses conveyed through the selection and use of words and concepts.

Again using UNESCO as an example, the text of its 2015 *Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education* (that revised the 1976 Recommendation as mentioned above) constitutes an ideational environment in itself. It consists of written words advancing a conceptual apparatus that, promoted by UNESCO, intermixes, mediates or establishes a distance from the views of a number of other collective actors that, over several years, have shared knowledge and ideas about adult learning and education in a number of environments.

A myriad of such physical, virtual and ideational environments for knowledge exchange and cross-fertilisation of ideas on ABSE surfaced during the period of fieldwork and regional-led or country-based analysis, so it is not possible here to consider them all. Nonetheless, a cross-country comparison brings to the fore a few of them that, in one or more countries, were a key factor for cultural hegemony in ABSE.

Introduced in its *Quaderni dal Carcere* by Gramsci (1975), the concept of cultural hegemony is inseparable from that of political hegemony. In a nutshell, political power, according to Gramsci, is grounded in the simultaneous presence of force and consent. For instance, in authoritarian regimes force may prevail, and thus those holding powers dominate the citizenry. But for the most part, force is balanced by a consensus-based power, or what Gramsci calls political hegemony, when the citizenry adheres to a particular political project through persuasion rather than domination. In this line of thinking, cultural hegemony is an unavoidable artery of political hegemony as it represents the ability to direct the mind and the symbolic elaboration of the citizenry's language and lifestyle by those in power. In other words, consensus-based power entails adherence not only to a political project, but also to a corresponding cultural one.

Created to comprehend and explain the working of political power and the relation between the state and its citizenry, the concepts of political and cultural hegemony particularly aptly capture not only the inherently political nature of adult education but also the cultural function that public policy has in this field. By extension, I here refer to cultural hegemony as a kind of soft power exerted by any collective actor in an attempt to persuade others to adhere to a given understanding of ABSE as a political project.

Due to space constraints, among the environments that were found in the countries studied to support (or openly contrast) cultural hegemony in ABSE, only one of them is highlighted here for illustrative purposes: the organisation and hosting of either national

or international conferences. This is the most effective means of bringing together representatives from different social worlds/arenas in just one place or physical environment for a certain amount of time, and of mobilising their knowledge and ideas around a given topic. In doing so, those organising and hosting these events set the agenda for what is worth considering and what is not, and thus create space for consensus building on certain things, but not others. Moreover, the more information circulates before such a conference, also through ad hoc preparatory activities, the higher visibility the conference receives, and the more likely it is that its focus is perceived as a policy priority (or an issue that is more important than others at a given point in time, to justify policy intervention). But the organisers can control participation in such a conference, for example, when it occurs only upon invitation, or when participation follows a specific protocol. The resources (in terms of time and money) required by prospective participants to partake in the conference can further hamper participation.

In Brazil the federal government, in agreement with UNESCO, decided to hold CONFINTEA VI in 2009. Here it suffices to note that although the specific physical environment chosen for this conference brought about a far higher participation of delegates from Brazil and other Latin American countries when compared with previous CONFINTEAs, it also favoured the organisers' interests in enlarging the venues for knowledge exchange and cross-fertilisation of ideas well beyond the conference venues and the official delegations. In fact, a number of parallel events were organised around the conference in other physical environments, including university buildings all around the city of Belém, thus widening the basis for participation to include the academia, among others. In the meantime, the organisation by ICAE of an International Civil Society Forum (FISC) that also took place in the city of Belém, amplified participation by the organised civil society, further extending the ideational environment embedded in CONFINTEA VI.

Also in Brazil, the federal government backs regular conferences on youth and adult education (i.e., National Meetings on Youth and Adult Education), each time focusing on a different topical area, and in which only a limited number of delegates from the Youth and Adult Education Forums that exists in all states have a right to participate and vote. However, regional meetings (i.e., Regional Meetings on Youth and Adult Education) in which state forums at large discuss and start building consensus now precede these national conferences. State forums, it is worth mentioning, gather individuals who speak on behalf of different social worlds/arenas, comprising at least the administrative authorities, the educational institutions, the academia and the organised civil society, although their relative weight varies across states, and over the years.

Even if ABSE was not the focus of CONFINTEA VI, and is not necessarily always the topic on which regular national conferences on youth and adult education focus attention, given the high numbers of illiterate people in Brazil, as well as in a number of other UNESCO member states, basic literacy has been and still is a central concern at least touched upon, if not the main theme, in these conferences.

## MEANINGS CONVEYED

Having considered the scales at which collective actors mobilise and the environments in which they meet, one aspect has remained in the background, namely the different meanings (and negotiated concepts) assigned to adult education, and specifically to ABSE, which shape different cultural ideologies.

Once again, I refer to Gramsci's work to clarify the concept of cultural ideologies. For Gramsci (1975), different ideologies are present in political and cultural thinking by different social groups, but these ideologies hold no clear-cut distinctions. Building on this (despite limiting attention to political ideologies), Freeden (1996) maintains that ideologies represent coherent frameworks of meanings that result from constant interaction between social actors and the socio-historical contexts in which they are embedded. These frameworks emerge from selection among inevitable contested and contestable meanings, and attribution of specific meanings to a given concept, to avoid what would otherwise be "the messiness and indeterminacy of perceptions and comprehensions of the political world" (Freeden, 2013, p. 118). In line with this thinking, an ideology is formed through the interdependency of concepts that gain relatively stable significance and weight, and this thanks to their proximity, permeability to different ideological positions, but also to the relative relevance of their conceptual component and the priority that core concepts allocate to adjacent ones or adjacent concepts ascribe to peripheral ones (*Ibid.*, p. 134). Yet, as already discussed, like political and cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1975), political and cultural ideologies are also inseparably linked. Furthermore, as Griffin (2006, p. 83) notes, ideologies can be considered both products and constitutive elements of the formation of culture. As such they form links between ideological hegemony and the coercive reproduction of culture. But both ideologies and culture also have creative potentials and allow for different forms of adaptations.

On a theoretical level cultural ideologies thus tend towards homogenisation in the ways social problems are perceived by different social worlds/arenas at national, continental and global scales, and in the desired solutions achievable through changes in ABSE praxis and the way that ABSE systems are governed. Accordingly one could identify, for instance, a global (humanistic) ABSE ideology, grounded on the interdependency of concepts such as development, human rights, the public good etc., whereby cultural hegemony connects adult education to other human rights. Similarly, one could speak of a different global (functionalist) ABSE ideology that, rooted in the interdependency of concepts like economic progress, production, labour, etc., results in the cultural hegemony of skill development. At the same time, the homogenisation tendency also arouses, across geo-political borders, social territories, and their cultures, either contextual reinforcement or resistance and contestation of (or establishing a distance from) such homogenising cultural ideologies.

When we consider the different constellations of social worlds/arenas within and across the countries under consideration in this article, a cultural ideology that homogenises the

views shared among politicians, civil servants, academics, educators, and activists (within and across countries) is a common belief that ABSE is a public good, as it contributes to social and economic development. Accordingly, the guiding principle is that ABSE ought to be offered free of charge. This is so in all the countries under consideration.

Moreover, adult education was legally reaffirmed as a service by the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act of 2014 in the USA, while in Brazil it was enshrined as a teaching modality to guarantee the right to education by the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law of 1996. In the following decade, adult education, also as a teaching modality, was codified in Argentina more boldly as a right (i.e., to ensure equity in the right to education) thanks to the National Law of Education of 2006, but never achieved such legal status in Italy, despite a few attempts between 2007 and 2009 to loosely do so by enshrining in law the right to lifelong learning.

Despite this, different views emerge when we question the value that ABSE holds across social worlds and cultural contexts. For instance, UNESCO civil servants I spoke to claimed that ABSE is a fundamental human right, American civil servants consider it to be a job or a family support service, Argentinian civil servants stressed some kind of social necessity, and Brazilian civil servants addressed its subjective significance. Academics and school staff I have met in Brazil, Argentina, the USA, and Italy as well as activists from the international non-governmental organisations ICAE and the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) had more nuanced interpretations, which stem from a mix of the above conceptions. Surprisingly, however, the learners I observed and spoke to tend to adhere more to broader public cultural ideologies. For example, second-generation Latinos in Los Angeles mentioned that ABSE was functional in the sense of helping them better support their children in school or of improving their work qualifications. Similarly, young adults in Buenos Aires also pointed out the functional purpose of ABSE with a view to obtaining their secondary school diploma that the labour market found imperative. Finally, low-literate learners who were attending literacy training in Brazil mentioned that they were gaining new identities and thus becoming empowered to be less dependent on (or exposed to) the will of others.

Similarly, interrogation of what social norms guide patterns of behaviour globally and locally shows that heterogeneity prevails. As already mentioned, ABSE opportunities, for instance, may be funded and offered by the state through its own educational structures, funded or co-financed by the state but offered through the organised civil society, funded or co-financed by intergovernmental organisations but offered either via the state or the organised civil society, or any combination of these.

## **CONCLUSION**

In short, multi-site and multi-actor perspectives (as applied in this study) help to deepen the knowledge about the materiality of the changes that complex relations between states, intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations are (or are not) able to produce

in terms of state policy in ABSE. Although the perceptions and reception of as well as influence on international policy differ between countries, and although generalisations are not possible, the findings also point towards a common trend in illiteracy-free societies (i.e., countries with an overall literacy rate equal to or above 95% of the total population). In these societies, and despite country-specific characteristics, public rationales in ABSE have shifted substantially. Once seen as a *second chance* to first enter school later in life, now ABSE is for the most part a *school-recovery* opportunity for the younger generations. This phenomenon was observed in Northern as well as Southern countries like the United States, Italy or Argentina. In fact, the restructuring of the California Adult Education System emphasised credit courses that prepare for higher education, at the expense of non-credit courses providing a broader variety of learning opportunities for adults. Similarly in Italy the reorganisation of Adult Education Centres in Provincial Centres for Adult Instruction also emphasised credit courses that prepare for higher education, in addition to Italian as a second language for migrants, while shrinking non-credit course opportunities offered in the past. In Argentina, program interventions in adult education at the national level also privileged credit-recovery courses leading to the completion of primary and secondary education. As a consequence, in each of these countries (as observed in classes and confirmed through interviews with teachers), ABSE provision is aimed more at, as well as attracting, younger adults than in the past, and primarily young adults who have had access to primary and secondary education and dropped out before enrolling in ABSE. By contrast, ABSE remains a second chance opportunity in Brazil, a society with persisting lower literacy rates and with a limited access to primary and lower secondary schooling for a large section of its population, where public interventions in adult education keep privileging the acquisition of basic literacy in more mature adults. All of this calls into question both the way policy in ABSE sees the social problem at stake, and how policy solutions in this area of public intervention impinge on broader issues of (in)equality in education.

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