

## ADULT POVERTY AND EDUCATION METHODS

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*People who read dailies regularly often face the notion of child poverty. They also learn that there are disadvantaged children at school and governments take different measures to help them. The disadvantages of adults are presented in entirely different contexts.*

*Either we can think of material deprivation in the context of unemployment or our feelings are intensified concerning changes in benefit payment, or sometimes the problems of the homeless are highlighted in one or two news items. These days there are different schemes to help non-paying mortgage loan owners which can refer to the fact that the government is making efforts to deal with the problems and financial troubles of people from different layers of society. At the same time, we know very little about the multitudinous forms of existing, actual adult poverty. Most adults find this problem very threatening because the vast majority have the feeling that their financial security can collapse at any time and they can easily get into a severe, helpless financial situation. I study adult poverty because I firmly believe that without treating this problem it is impossible to “tackle” child poverty, which always shows up in the different scenes of institutionalised education.*

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### Adult life situations

It is very important to face up to special adult life situations to be able to identify a situation of being disadvantaged (e.g. Óry, 2005; Welshman, 2002). Factors to be considered are changes in marital status or other changes in the family (entering a new relationship, breaking up, childbirth, death of a relative). We must also consider processes that are connected with growing old: the “soaring” of the twenties and thirties are followed by a stagnation period in the forties and fifties and a certain position hold after the fifties. Workplace changes and longer or shorter periods of unemployment (being a job seeker) result from the incessant changes in labour market demands as well as the changes in places and positions held in the workplace hierarchy – and also adults’ cultures within a given society or micro-environment.

There are references in literature to disadvantaged adult groups who need help, e.g. the list compiled by Adermann et al. that identifies these adult groups on the basis of EU documents. I use a slightly modified list presented below (Cserné Adermann et al., 2006):

- ✓ people with low education level and without qualification;
- ✓ people with low employability qualification;
- ✓ people with disabilities (formerly known as handicapped);
- ✓ people with reduced capability to work (permanently ill);
- ✓ permanently unemployed people;
- ✓ people above 45-50 years;
- ✓ mothers and parents in single-parent families;
- ✓ adults with criminal records.

To this list, we can add other items. For example people who are in considerable debt and whose only resource is their last property, their flat. Or people whose living conditions are very bad (they have no electricity, water, sewer, or they cannot pay for these utilities, so their chances of showing up in their workplaces well-groomed and clean are very low). The list does not include those groups whose residence is located in an area with low infrastructure (e.g. they cannot go to work because there is no adequate community transport available), and those whose income from legal work is so low that they cannot afford to buy even the most essential articles of subsistence. There is one more group whose presence is not yet felt in Hungary but who form considerable disadvantaged groups in Western European countries: people who migrate from their original home countries, from the so-called “third world”, because of economic, political, or religious reasons. These people need care, their problems must be solved, and they must be reintegrated into the labour market. Neither does the list include addicts – alcoholics, drug, medicine, and game addicts, etc. – who also need special care: in their case, labour reintegration trainings must be coupled with addictiveness treatments (provided that the people themselves want this, i.e. they want to get rid of their self-destructive lifestyle).

In Hungary, significant changes have been initiated in the field of tackling unemployment and changing the system of benefits. One necessary condition for the eligibility to get an unemployment benefit is to do a required amount of community or public work. People who do public work in Hungary are mostly working age people with low education, bad living conditions, and a combination of disadvantages. The question is how we can prepare these people for work and lead them back to the labour market.

At the same time, everybody seems to ignore the fact that even the simplest-looking semi-skilled work requires a certain amount of training and education. Let us just take a simple example: weeding using a hoe. People must learn and practise how to hold and operate the tool with both hands, the right angle between the soil and the tool’s edge, the right force, and also how to proceed during work. The whole process is more efficient if we explain why weeding is necessary and how it benefits the plant for which we are doing the work. If we find the optimal quality and quantity of our explanation, we can be quite sure that the public worker will perceive the hard and monotonous manual job as something purposeful. He will do the work and he might also find pleasure in it.

In the following part of my article I am going to focus primarily on adults with low education.

### Breakthrough with education and training

It seems to be clear that the most important introductory task is the *formation of a motivational basis* for disadvantaged or deprived adults. Role plays and series of games can make them recognise the simple fact that if they do not learn, others can easily cheat them. There is another task of the same importance: a *vision of the future* must be presented and formulated. This is closely connected with the motivational basis, but its formulation is a more complicated task. When forming the motivational basis, several obstacles must be removed. The first of these is that they are continuously fighting for their everyday existence. If they get an occasional job, they leave the training. If the work is no longer there, they usually do not return to the training. When dealing with the vision of the future, we can use a method well-known in psychology: the *proactive test*, which places an everyday situation into the future; while the adult is speaking about what will happen in ten years' time, he basically narrates his own present. With a little help, new desires can be planted in him, and he can be made to discover solutions to his present life situation.

The formation of a motivational basis will only prove effective and long-lasting if there are *flexible adult education possibilities* behind them. It is an illusion that these people do not work. This is a misconception. In reality, they usually do very hard (unskilled or semi-skilled) work which is compensated by their employers with very low wages that are kept from the sight of the authorities. This means that they get very little money for very hard work. They accept these unfavourable conditions because they do not have any other options.

I must also mention here the importance of organising *mentoring help* for them. People with low education and several disadvantages can benefit from meeting others who started their lives in conditions similar to theirs and then made their lives better through education and work. In Hungary in the 2010s one of the most important social problems is the lack of human success stories that can serve as examples, ones that on the one hand present exemplary human development, and at the same time look like attainable and realisable.

In this respect, programmes like "One Step Forward" or "Ladder" (and also many other names) were very successful. In these, the mentors were people who were just "one step" away from the disadvantaged adult, for example they had finished the 8<sup>th</sup> grade of primary school, and after an adequate training (adult education) they mentored those who got stuck in one of the grades below. These programs can only be successful if adult learning is actually available, and if it helps people find jobs with higher salaries that enable them to lead a more secure life. Mentors must regularly meet those they are helping, they must be trustworthy people who can lead other people, move them forward, and they must also get methodological help in the meantime.

When all the initial conditions are met, there is a very important step which investigates the literacy level of people with low education or without any kind of education. This can practically mean text comprehension skills, which are prerequisites to any kind of education. At the same time we also know that among uneducated people, oral communication skills are much stronger compared to people who are literate. Thus literacy and text

comprehension skills must also include oral communication skills besides written tasks. This means that a combined use of existing assessment devices is necessary when conducting these tests.

Using the literacy tests and text comprehension tasks it is possible to separate illiterate and functionally illiterate people. People in the first group are usually illiterate because they did not go to school, in the second they usually forget what they had learnt because of non-use. Their common characteristic feature is that they cannot read, comprehend, and reproduce written messages in their own words. It goes without saying that those who do understand oral instructions can also be divided into two groups: some people can only follow simple work processes, some can also memorise and execute more complex tasks.

*Literacy programs* for illiterate people can be conducted most efficiently by primary school teachers. Their professional and didactic experience – especially in the case of older, more experienced teachers – and training is the most suitable means of teaching letters corresponding to sounds, connections of letters and words, sentences, stresses, intonation and reading aloud; it usually takes two years to teach text comprehension. Adult learners may find it easier to work with older teachers. It is also important that older teachers get some kind of andragogy (pertaining to adult education) training and tolerate that uneducated adults may miss classes, learn with less effort, and forget more easily than children. At the same time they can use their previous life experience, meaning that a more varied battery of examples can be used to help their learning of sounds and images than in children's textbooks and readers.

Most disadvantaged adults, fortunately, have completed their primary education but this does not mean they actually understand written texts. It is to be expected that their education will primarily be based on oral communication and using memory.

### We have to rethink our teaching methodology

I think it is not an easy task to delineate what educational and methodological culture would be necessary to be able to deal with disadvantaged adult learners. It is an uncontested fact that most teachers in Hungary belong to the middle class. Because of this they have to be prepared for working with deprived adults, for leading and directing them consciously. It seems that for teachers dealing with disadvantaged people traditional teaching methods seen as typical are much more efficient.

Let us now see some teaching methods that can get an important role when dealing with adults with low education (or no formal education at all). We must also note that the more disadvantaged the people are, the more important immediate positive feedback is to reward serious achievement. At this level, oral praise is no longer enough: it is also crucial that the adult can use his freshly gotten knowledge immediately, in practice, in his own life.

When dealing with people with low education, we can mention among the most efficient methods of convincing and formation the *talking method* and the *debating method*. In the talking method, adults carry on each other's thoughts, in the debating method different opinions are shared and debated through reasoning. To unfold the life situation and lifestyle of people with low education we can also use *brainstorming* methods. During this, people can narrate one by one what is important for them in life, what they spend on (i.e. what they need to earn money for), what they want and what their desires are. If the method works, the group leader teacher – discovering and

using their ideas – can lead the participants to recognise what role learning can play in their lives and make them see that with more knowledge they can find better work and continuous employment with a reasonable salary.

Among the practical methods the *role-playing method* might also be used (this does not always work, some groups find it a waste of time) to increase motivation for learning. Similarly, the method of *didactic games* might not be used successfully in a direct manner – although all adults like playing – still it might be accepted if we use another name to label the game. The *simulation method* should also be given another name but it can be used very well as groups of adults usually benefit from direct presentation and straight access to practical information. The *presentation method*, which we have just mentioned, has a crucial role. When speaking about children education we often use the term *demonstration method* which can also play an important role when dealing with disadvantaged people who have low education.

Teaching people with a combination of disadvantages requires the continuous development of the teacher's ability of posing questions, that is, the permanent and consistent use of *questioning methods*. The teacher must be very up-to-date about what the members of the group know, what he can build upon, what to expect from the group. At the same time, he needs to assess continuously what the learners have acquired and at what level (e.g. whether they can re-tell what they have learnt in their own words). Thirdly, it is worth paying attention to what the everyday problems of these people are.

The methods that are unlikely to work with disadvantaged people are methods that build upon individual learning. We must take into consideration – as I have mentioned it before – that most of these people are illiterate or at least functionally illiterate. Methods that are based on reading and written text comprehension will not work even if we can give them a permanent mentor. (This is, however, almost absolutely impossible as the mentor has to travel and is responsible for more than one learner; moreover, learning adults usually work for a living during the whole day.) In their case, instead of methods that are efficient for individual learning, methods based on personal presence can be much more effective if teaching includes a skilful and extensive use of the elements of the methods presented above.

The efficiency of teaching methods based on teamwork as a work form remains to be assessed. Adults with low education and a combination of disadvantages are even ready to fight for a job or any kind of work that gives them money – among the cruelties of everyday existence they are forced to accept that it is the stronger who wins. As this is their primary, everyday experience, in the beginning of any kind of training they are incapable of working together in smaller teams involving cooperation. It takes a longer period of being and working together in a classroom for them to accept the different forms of teamwork. The experienced adult educator can use the talking method to achieve this.

Using *co-operative techniques* also looks like a bold venture as it requires already existing learning skills and another skill which involves the acceptance of the opinions and observations of others. People with low education usually display a sort of competitive behaviour: as they want to get the jobs or any kind of work that they are capable of doing, they have a tendency to devalue and belittle the performance of others in the hope of getting in a more advantageous situation. With their level of education they find it hard to accept that together they might get much further. The significance of imparting information and knowledge simply does not work in the case of simple menial tasks. This is the reason for the fact that

similarly to co-operative techniques it is also impossible to expect the implementation of teamwork in the form of *project work* and take co-operation for granted during the education process. Project work inevitably involves a long-term co-operation the complicated and time-consuming nature of which would not make it possible to use it efficiently with disadvantaged groups with low education because of the reasons detailed above.

It would be a mistake to think that people with lower education are “unintelligent”. During their common work the educator will find how open-minded and inquisitive they are; they have a sense of humour, and they can use their life experience very well. They have their own opinions and it is possible to talk to them in an intelligent manner. Care must be taken to match the teaching materials to one of their *concrete* experiences in life, which requires a kind of mental flexibility from the teacher. New knowledge must be tangible, imaginable, and ready to put to use in real-life situations. And the most important thing: these people must be treated and spoken to with respect, similarly to the way they respect learned people, teachers, and adult educators.

There is another misconception too. This supposes that people who are permanently out of work and get benefits do not work. They conduct a very hard and bitter fight for their everyday living, albeit not in a traditional “civilian” sense of the term. They often work in black economy doing dangerous, health-threatening menial jobs and day labour. Their education must be formulated according to this, taking these factors into consideration, and an adequate measure of flexibility must also be part of the course.

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