

Maeve O'Grady 'Review of *Gendered Choices: Learning, Work, Identities in Lifelong Learning* by Sue Jackson, Irene Malcolm, Kate Thomas, editors, (2011) London, Springer' in *The Adult Learner Journal 2011*, AONTAS, Dublin pp149-151

Gendered Choices deals with the reality faced by different groups in availing of the lifelong learning opportunities that are increasingly available in contemporary societies. It deals with transition points, points at which different groups make decisions about higher education, for example, or workbased learning. Policies promote such opportunities, but there are still features of under-participation by particular groups. Common sense may tell us that women, for example, participate more in adult education. Research, on the other hand, shows that the choices available to women are very restricted. If they are based in a workplace, women are more likely to be in a learning-poor environment rather than a learning-intensive one, and so are less likely to be offered and supported in good learning opportunities. The discourse of the 'responsible learner' means that adults who do not avail of lifelong learning are regarded increasingly as responsible for their own failure, and this ignores the fact that their original educational experiences were poor in the first place. Lack of supports for lifelong learning will further widen the gap for such groups. We've moved well beyond the deficit model of educational failure, where the individual is deemed lacking in some way, and these chapters explain the gaps in terms of policy and provision failures.

The various contributors are concerned with *praxis*, using reflection and research for the purpose of action. The aim is to gather and use information to bring more benefits to women's lives. They show the limitations of equal opportunity policies throughout Europe. Many EU countries form policies based on male norms. Studies of choices made by young females show that they perform to occupational stereotypes at the school-leaving age, but in later years have more confidence in their interests and abilities and are ready to make non-traditional choices. Yet the focus of policy is younger groups rather than older ones. Policies focused on encouraging women into non-traditional occupations need to take this into account.

There are sites of informal learning, on the other hand, where women can participate. Research shows that these are valuable sources of informal learning, and they address the personal and social needs that, when met, enable further learning activities. The authors of articles dealing with this issue advocate strong resistance to the idea that learning supports need to be for the knowledge economy, as this ignores less obvious learning sites. The European trend of supporting only certified programmes is pushing out and ignoring the value of informal, non-accredited learning.

The book is a very rigorous analysis overall of how gender, when combined with other factors such as class, age/lifestage and race impacts on choices, and how policies to encourage the participation of under-represented groups miss these vital factors that would enable participation. The emphasis appears to be about participating in higher education, yet there is welcome consideration of other sites for lifelong learning. Naturally, because of the policy emphasis, workbased learning receives research funding, yet I would encourage community-based providers to read these chapters as they draw on very relevant theories and give recognition to new or under-recognised and undervalued forms of provision. The chapters range from micro-level studies, meso-level, and macro level., encompassing the relationships between these levels.

There is still a considerable participation gap. We still have gendered occupational structures. One very interesting insight in relation to the latter is that it is younger women who look to the traditional occupational structures (and the reasons why are identified) and it is older, more mature women who are more open to working and studying in areas that more reflect their interest and abilities rather than 'how things are done' or 'how things should be done'.

All EU countries are called to account for how they are encouraging adults to gain qualifications and upskill for the sake of the 'knowledge economy'. This means an undue emphasis in various countries on using available funds for skills-based and vocational education and training. This neglects the social cohesion and social purpose role of adult education. We need to do both. We need to fight for both. Lifelong learning has been shown to be a splendid vehicle for lifewide, horizontal learning, with many choosing to investigate, explore and draw on other aspects of their lives. If this is neglected in funding, we will all be the poorer.

The language and theoretical framework of most of the authors place them in a poststructuralist framework and many use Foucault's idea of discourse as shaping identities and experiences. This is what allows the circulation of power to become visible, and enables the different levels involved in adult education, the individual, the provider, and state policy and funding, to be connected.

The context for all European lifelong learning policies is neo-liberalism, that contemporary form of ideas of freedom, equality of opportunity, competition and meritocracy we can hardly imagine living without. Education makes these ideas a reality, but only for some, not for all. The discourse of lifelong learning represents these opportunities as open to all. This ignores the gendered, classed and racialised structures of European societies. Globalisation expects social mobility, with workers expected to travel to where work is: this is a very gendered and classed idea that expects workers to detach from their families and communities. Each author shows, in a different way, the difference between the policy rhetoric, the funding structure, occupational structures, cultural ideas, and what women can, in fact, feel able to do, and feel safe in doing.

Intelligence is universal: opportunities are not, however much they are presented as available under the discourse of equality of opportunity.

Choices are dependent on class and culture, with gender a main constraint. The writers show how this is a feature of societies worldwide. The authors argue for attention to be paid to the situation of women in order to counteract the perception that the fact that women are outperforming men in education, that there is equality between men and women in education. There isn't. They provide evidence of that to show that access to certain occupations are limited, roles are still gendered, and women still carry the double burden of work and home responsibilities. The figures are provided to show that men have access to high-level knowledge work, and women are still confined to low-paid and low-skilled jobs.