



## COMMUNITY EDUCATION THROUGH TIME: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF IDEAS AND THEIR IMPACT ON CONTEMPORARY EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

### ZAJEDNIČKO OBRAZOVANJE KROZ VRIJEME: HISTORIJSKI PREGLED IDEJA I NJIHOV UTJECAJ NA SAVREMENU OBRAZOVNU PRAKSU

Lidija Črnko<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD student at the Department of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana

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#### ABSTRACT

The article explores the historical development of ideas in community education and their influence on contemporary lifelong learning practices. Community education combines formal and informal approaches to foster social cohesion, democratic values, and sustainable development, based on principles of participation, local relevance, and connecting individuals with their environment.

The article focuses on the analysis of key community education models, including Danish folk high schools, the American community school movement, British village colleges, and French sociocultural animation. Grundtvig's philosophy of "schools for life" in Denmark emphasizes individual cultural and personal growth in a democratic context, while American community schools, founded during the Great Depression, integrate social justice and local problem-solving. In Britain, village colleges connected education with the everyday life of communities, while French socio-cultural animation links education with cultural empowerment. The article also provides insight into Freire's critical pedagogy and Dolci's maieutic method as examples of emancipatory approaches that promote collective reflection and social transformation through dialogue.

The author concludes that community education transcends traditional educational models by encouraging active participation, social justice, and sustainable development. This contribution enhances the understanding of key historical, cultural, and social influences shaping modern concepts of community education and raises questions about future possibilities for their development.

**Key words:** Community Education, Adult education, Danish Folk High School, Village Colleges, Sociocultural Animation, Danilo Dolci, Paolo Freire

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\* Correspondence author: Lidija Črnko, Department of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana

E-mail: lidija.crnko@gmail.com

## SAŽETAK

Ovaj članak istražuje historijski razvoj ideja u obrazovanju zajednice i njihov utjecaj na savremene prakse cjeloživotnog učenja. Obrazovanje zajednice kombinuje formalne i neformalne pristupe s ciljem podsticanja socijalne kohezije, demokratskih vrijednosti i održivog razvoja, oslanjajući se na principe učešća, lokalne relevantnosti i povezivanja pojedinaca s njihovim okruženjem. U fokusu su ključni modeli obrazovanja zajednice, uključujući danske narodne visoke škole, američki pokret školskih zajednica, britanske seoske kolegije i francusku sociokulturnu animaciju. Grundtvigova filozofija „škola za život“ u Danskoj naglašava kulturni i lični razvoj pojedinca u demokratskom kontekstu, dok američke škole zajednice, osnovane tokom Velike depresije, integrišu socijalnu pravdu i rješavanje lokalnih problema. U Britaniji su seoski kolegiji povezivali obrazovanje sa svakodnevnim životom zajednice, dok francuska sociokulturna animacija povezuje obrazovanje s kulturnim osnaživanjem. Članak također donosi uvid u Freireovu kritičku pedagogiju i Dolcijevu majetičku metodu kao primjere emancipatorskih pristupa koji promiču kolektivnu refleksiju i društvenu transformaciju putem dijaloga. Autor zaključuje da obrazovanje zajednice nadilazi tradicionalne obrazovne modele potičući aktivno učešće, socijalnu pravdu i održivi razvoj. Ovaj doprinos produbljuje razumijevanje ključnih historijskih, kulturnih i društvenih utjecaja koji oblikuju savremene koncepte obrazovanja zajednice, te otvara pitanja o budućim mogućnostima njihovog razvoja.

**Ključne riječi:** obrazovanje zajednice, obrazovanje odraslih, danske narodne visoke škole, seoski kolegiji, sociokulturna animacija, Danilo Dolci, Paolo Freire.

## INTRODUCTION

Community education represents a dynamic approach that links formal and informal education with local needs and civic values. Social responsibility within the context of community education is manifested through projects and initiatives carried out by the community to address local challenges such as environmental protection, fostering social cohesion, and ensuring equal opportunities for all. Social capital, encompassing networks, norms, and social trust, plays a particularly significant role in the process of sustainable development. A community with strong social capital can more effectively address shared problems, respond more quickly to crises, and better manage natural and human resources.

Integrating community education into local development strategies could enable individuals to acquire practical skills that directly contribute to reducing environmental footprints. Additionally, it could foster innovation and entrepreneurship, leading to new local employment opportunities. Community education plays an essential role in shaping civic awareness and responsibility, promoting human rights, and strengthening democratic institutions.

In an era characterized by complex challenges, the question arises: how can education become a force for positive change at both the local and global levels? Lifelong learning refers to educational processes occurring throughout life, including informal education that encourages personal development, the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, and improved quality of

life. Informal adult education takes place in various settings outside formal educational institutions and under different circumstances, tailored to individual needs, enabling knowledge acquisition beyond formal frameworks. Adult education also occurs within local communities, where the connection between individuals and the strengthening of communities allows education to contribute to the comprehensive development of individuals throughout their lives.

This article will examine various approaches and models of community education through time that have proven successful in promoting adult education, focusing particularly on informal adult education as part of the lifelong learning and education paradigm. Of particular interest is community education closely tied to the lives of people in the environments where they live and operate. Subsequently, the paper will outline the development of community education concepts in Denmark, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Slovenia. Each of these models represents a unique approach to community education based on specific cultural, historical, and social contexts, as well as local needs, social frameworks, and political circumstances. The analysis is based on a review of existing literature, including classical works and contemporary research on community education.

### **Development of the Danish Folk High School**

The historical overview of community education begins with the Danish folk high schools, which are closely tied to the principles of social equality and inclusion. The intellectual father of Danish folk high schools is Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783–1872), whose ideas and efforts significantly influenced the formation of the Danish education system. Grundtvig believed in the power of education for all social classes and advocated for the democratization of access to knowledge (Hancks, 2022). His ideas were shaped by the Enlightenment, an intellectual movement that played a vital role in advancing science, education, and political thought (Rasmussen, 1985). Grundtvig's vision for establishing schools was linked to the challenges faced by Danish society during its transition to democracy (Davis, 1969). His ideas were also influenced by the threat of war from Germany, as Denmark began losing territory during the war with Prussia and Austria in 1864 (Lindhardt, 1950). The loss of territory sparked a sense of national identity crisis and sovereignty among the Danish population. Grundtvig, already an advocate for educational reform, recognized the need for an educational system that would strengthen national consciousness and unity.

His idea was that folk high schools should be institutions where adults could engage in lifelong learning, develop their intellectual, cultural, and spiritual capacities, gain self-awareness, and understand their ties to their nation's history and language (Korsgaard, 2000). Grundtvig was inspired to establish folk high schools during a trip to England in the 1830s. While visiting Trinity College in Cambridge, he observed an education system emphasizing open and intense dialogue between students and teachers, both during and outside class hours (Lindhardt, 1950). Although Grundtvig himself did not establish a folk high school, he witnessed the creation of the first school and the spread of his ideas. One of the founders of the folk high schools was Christen Mikkelsen Kold (1816–1870), who transformed Grundtvig's visionary ideas into educational practice. The first Danish folk high school was

founded in 1844 in Rødding, where Christian Flor, a professor of Danish literature influenced by Grundtvig's ideas, purchased land and established the school (Rørdam, 1965). With his educational concepts, Flor initiated changes in education. As a result of revolutionary ideas and persistent efforts, Danish folk high schools, open to all, began to emerge. These schools prioritized the personal development of individuals over the mere teaching of subjects (Rørdam, 1965).

The original aim of the folk high school was to enlighten adults, enabling them to participate in political life within a democratic state. Enlightenment as a movement of the 17th and 18th centuries emphasized rationality, knowledge, freedom, and individual rights. Grundtvig's philosophy of education had specific features that may not have fully aligned with certain Enlightenment principles. Danish folk high schools emphasized education in the national language and folk literature rather than practical vocational skills, distinguishing them from Finnish folk schools, which focused on agricultural training. As Himmelstrup (1985, p. 17) notes, folk high schools did not teach farming to rural populations, as this was handled by agricultural societies. For this reason, they did not teach technical or natural sciences but instead enlightened individuals through national and folk culture.

Grundtvig advocated a Nordic concept of freedom, where individual responsibilities to society formed the foundation of freedom. The individual was connected to society and developed through it, yet remained autonomous and independent. Grundtvig emphasized that learning must be voluntary, believing that no one could be forced to learn against their will. He cautioned teachers against adopting a superior attitude, asserting that everyone must have the freedom to decide for themselves, as learning would otherwise be ineffective (Warren, 2011). For Grundtvig, life itself was the greatest school, offering questions, dilemmas, challenges, and problems to which folk high schools sought to respond through vibrant discourse and shared experiences. This approach to life could only be realized in community with others, as individual experiences alone were insufficient for a clear understanding of life. Understanding life meant engaging in a lifelong process of education and learning, which folk high schools considered central to personal and holistic development. Education improved the quality of life for individuals and communities. A "school for life" had to be deeply connected to its environment, intertwined and complementary, yet free and independent enough to bring new knowledge to that environment (Kump & Majerhold, 2009).

Grundtvig's educational philosophy focused on individual and societal development, emphasizing independent thinking, critical assessment, and personal growth. A key concept in his educational approach was the idea of education for all people, regardless of their social status or background. He believed that education for everyone was essential for preserving culture and national identity, tailoring it to the needs of individuals and communities, and making it accessible to all, irrespective of their position in society.

## **Community Education in the United States**

Community education in the United States dates back to the Great Depression, which began in 1929 and brought about fundamental changes in economic institutions and macroeconomic policy. The origins of community education are closely associated with the work of Frank J.

Manley (1904–1972), considered the founder of the modern community school movement. Manley established the first community school in Flint, Michigan, in 1930 and laid the groundwork for contemporary community education in the U.S. (Decker, 1999). As a physical education teacher in a public school in Flint, Manley spent over five years unsuccessfully promoting his educational ideas to the local school board and other civic groups. However, in June 1935, a speech he delivered at the Flint Rotary Club captured the attention of Charles Stewart Mott (1875–1973), the director of General Motors. Together, they developed the philosophy of community schools, both believing that "schools are the core of democracy" and play a vital role in providing educational opportunities for everyone. They upheld the principle that everyone has a personal responsibility to pursue common goals.

Their guiding principle was that community schools serve all people in any community— young and old, rich and poor, of all faiths, races, and backgrounds. No racial, religious, political, or other barriers should divide people in these schools (Decker, 1999). This philosophy led to the establishment of the Mott Community Education Foundation, which initiated significant changes in American education.

During the economic recession in the United States, marked by a 23% unemployment rate, doubts arose about the outdated educational system, which was seen as ineffective and unable to meet society's evolving needs. Manley recognized that education had "failed" those with the greatest needs and challenges—the most disadvantaged, impoverished, and uneducated individuals. He sought to ensure that education in community schools was based on democratic and ethical ideals, respecting each individual's right to participate in community affairs. These schools aimed not only to prepare people for a profession but also to foster self-respect and mutual respect within the community.

Manley's work, encapsulated in the book *Community Schools in Action: The Flint Program* (1960), initially focused on reducing juvenile delinquency through expanded recreational opportunities. Over time, the program evolved to include adult recreation programs, addressing unemployment during the economic depression by engaging men and women in meaningful activities that encouraged social connections. Manley and his colleagues realized that many community issues were interconnected and could only be addressed through education. They developed programs such as home visitation by teachers, health initiatives, industrial and vocational training, adult homemaking courses, and programs for parents and seniors. These efforts aimed to tackle the economic and social problems faced by the Flint community (Decker, 1999).

Manley's perspective on education reflected his belief in the power of knowledge to promote social solidarity and mutual understanding. He argued that education is the only ethically acceptable way to motivate people to work and think for the common good. He emphasized that the more educated an individual is, the greater their understanding of and empathy for others. In pluralistic societies where diverse cultural, ethical, and religious groups coexist, education can help reduce conflicts and promote social cohesion. Manley believed that intolerance and prejudice thrive in the absence of education. He argued that educating people not only equips them with knowledge and skills but also empowers them to develop empathy, engage in community issues, and realize their full potential.

The movement for community schools in the U.S. grew rapidly, perhaps because it originated in urban areas, unlike Britain's rural-based initiatives. Community schools initially provided facilities for education but soon expanded to include social welfare. These schools had a dual educational and social function. Manley and Mott's shared vision upheld the idea that schools serve as the core of democracy, providing equal opportunities for all and addressing shared community problems through collaboration and available resources.

The success of community education in the United States was supported by a strong sense of community ownership over local schools. This legacy dates back to the pioneer era when settlers established the first public buildings for schools, worship, and civic gatherings. The U.S. remains the only country that, in 1974, passed the Community School Development Act, ensuring the national implementation of community education programs (Poster & Krüger, 1990). This legislation played a significant role in advancing community education in the U.S. by promoting educational equity and fostering stronger collaborations between schools and communities.

Between Danish folk high schools and community education in America, there are numerous similarities and differences stemming from their historical, cultural, and educational contexts. Both forms of education focus on fostering personal and community development but in distinct ways. Both address disadvantaged groups who have less social power and limited access to education, emphasizing the importance of education that extends beyond mere academic or vocational skills. They prioritize community engagement and development, encouraging participants to contribute to their local communities and promote collaboration and civic involvement. Community education arises in response to emerging needs for knowledge or collaboration (e.g., Denmark's cooperative decision-making context or America's economic crisis). Danish folk high schools, inspired by Grundtvig's idea of "education for life," aim at personal and cultural growth. In contrast, community education in America often addresses specific local needs, such as workforce training and immigrant integration, and incorporates children into community school programs.

### **Community Education in the United Kingdom**

Community education in the United Kingdom is closely associated with Henry Morris (1889–1961), who served as Secretary for Education in Cambridgeshire from 1922 to 1954. During this period, Cambridgeshire was the third poorest county, plagued by challenges such as rural decline due to poor local and economic conditions. The global economic depression of 1929 further exacerbated these issues, including in Britain (Watts, 1990). The future of the rural economy was uncertain, as mechanized farming practices began displacing workers. Despite some modernization in agriculture, many people left rural areas in search of better opportunities in industrial cities.

In 1925, Morris published a memorandum titled *The Village College: Being a Memorandum on the Provision of Education and Social Facilities for the Countryside, with Special Reference to Cambridgeshire* (Downes, 2014, p. 156). This document proposed reforms to rural education and led to the establishment of village colleges. It was pivotal in introducing the concept of community education as envisioned by Morris, significantly influencing educational practices and policies in the UK, especially in rural areas.

The model of the village college was designed as a comprehensive community center that offered not only non-formal education but also served as a hub for social, cultural, and recreational activities. These schools catered to the educational and social needs of rural adults and provided diverse programs tailored to the local community. The idea of village colleges emerged from a tradition of radical liberalism, aiming to attribute significance to rural life. The design of the buildings played an integral role, with the intention that they would act as "silent teachers" serving the entire community, not just children.

Morris believed education should not remain in the hands of administrators but rather be guided by philosophers, artists, scientists, prophets, and scholars who operate freely (Downes, 2014). His vision transformed the understanding of education's role in society, viewing community schools as centers and resources for community welfare. For Morris, the ultimate goal of education was to transform society into a network of cultural communities, where every local community would become an educational society, with education being the foundation of good governance rather than its consequence.

One of Morris's radical ideas, especially for his time, was that education should last a lifetime. He described this as "raising the school-leaving age to 90 years." He envisioned village colleges as centers of community life, integrating education with the everyday experiences of individuals. These were not just spaces for training but environments where life itself was lived. From the age of three to late adulthood, individuals could engage with these colleges to enrich their community life and embrace lifelong learning. Lang (2005) notes that Morris's original vision included housing all public services, such as libraries, information centers, and even healthcare, within the college.

Morris's forward-thinking ideas laid the groundwork for modern educational theories. His approach during the interwar period was revolutionary, addressing issues still relevant in educational policy and practice today. His emphasis on making quality education accessible to all, regardless of geographic location or social class, resonates with contemporary efforts to ensure equitable educational opportunities. He highlighted lifelong education as a continuous process that lasts throughout an individual's life.

The first village colleges were established in the 1930s. They incorporated various activities from rural life—schools, village halls, reading rooms, libraries, women's institutes, British Legions, Scouts, recreation, and athletic clubs. Today, there are approximately 750 community schools and village colleges. Kump and Majerhold (2009, p. 13) describe these colleges as true social syntheses, combining various elements to form a cohesive whole rooted in local needs. Village colleges operated in close connection with their communities and addressed local challenges (Jeffs & Smith, 1998).

This idea spread beyond England to Scotland, Northern Ireland, Ireland, and New Zealand (Poster & Krüger, 1990). In Scotland, the concept of community education has a rich history, beginning in the 19th century with rural and urban schools serving as gathering places for shared learning. By the latter half of the 20th century, Scotland emphasized community participation in education, focusing on skill development, improved employability, and active citizenship. Local authorities played a crucial role in supporting and funding these initiatives, and many communities established their own education centers.

Scottish community education continues to evolve, emphasizing digital skills, sustainability, inclusivity, and creativity. Initiatives include workshops for skill-building, adult education programs, employment assistance, and cultural activities tailored to local needs. The Scottish government's document *Adult Learning in Scotland – A Statement of Ambition* (2014) outlines its vision for lifelong learning and adult education. The strategy is based on three principles: lifelong learning should address various aspects of life, be learner-centered, and remove barriers to access. The goal is to position Scotland as a globally recognized creative and inclusive learning society. Universities in Scotland, such as the University of Edinburgh and the University of Glasgow, play a pivotal role in advancing community education by offering open courses and collaborating with local organizations.

Morris's concept of village colleges, serving as centers for education and community activities, became a model for the development of similar institutions worldwide. In community education in Scotland, cultural institutions did not play as prominent a role as in the socio-cultural animation movement in France. While the role of cultural institutions in Scotland is significant, it has not been as pronounced in the context of community education as in France. This may be due to differing social, economic, and political priorities in the two countries, which shape the direction and focus of their educational strategies.

### **Sociocultural Animation in France**

Sociocultural animation (fr. *animation socio-culturelle*) is a French concept that has its roots in popular education. After World War II, the term "popular" began to be phased out and replaced by "sociocultural animation," which became a foundational element of France's cultural policy. This development led to the systematic advancement of sociocultural animation and the democratization of culture, with the state supporting the creation of cultural centers of various types and subsidizing activities led by individuals, groups, associations, companies, institutions, and ministries (Findeisen, 2009).

The concept evolved from organized popular education initiatives, which were already present during the French Revolution. Culture was perceived as a tool for social empowerment, particularly for the bourgeois ruling class. However, it soon became evident that the culture of the bourgeoisie was not relatable to the working class, who sought to develop their own culture. In France, this often manifested as a "worker's culture" during the revolutionary period (Kump & Majerhold, 2009, p. 15). The origins of sociocultural animation can be traced back to the work of Marquis de Condorcet (1743–1794), a significant philosopher and mathematician of the Enlightenment era. Condorcet was a staunch advocate of universal education accessible to all, regardless of social class or gender. He considered education essential for personal and societal progress, emphasizing that it should be grounded in reason and scientific knowledge.

Condorcet believed that education must promote critical thinking and free expression, viewing reason as central to the educational process. He argued that education should equip individuals to pass knowledge and culture onto the next generation, fostering continuous human progress. For Condorcet, education was a fundamental human right that should be accessible without restrictions, a revolutionary stance in his time. This perspective laid the



foundation for sociocultural programs, particularly during the post-revolutionary period in France.

Condorcet's ideas resonate within sociocultural animation, which retains a humanistic, idealistic, and socially transformative discourse. The knowledge and culture transmitted through sociocultural animation have both societal and individual roles, serving as transformative forces that foster social cohesion, convey universal values, and combat social inequality (Findeisen, 2009). Sociocultural animation is a process that integrates elite, high, and official culture while simultaneously promoting grassroots culture, aspirations, and capabilities across different social strata.

This concept is understood as a means of socializing culture, where individuals adapt to society, participate actively, and engage with its cultural dimensions. Culture in sociocultural animation refers to the shared heritage, values, norms, customs, arts, history, and other attributes that define a community's identity and sense of belonging. It acts as a medium for enhancing social cohesion, improving quality of life, and driving societal and cultural development.

Knowledge is another key element in sociocultural animation, encompassing information, skills, understanding, and wisdom gained through experience, education, and training. In sociocultural animation, knowledge fosters personal and professional growth, enhances individuals' understanding of the world, and empowers them to engage actively in their communities (Podobnik & Biloslavo, 2010). By combining culture and knowledge, sociocultural animation creates opportunities for personal and collective development, addressing specific local needs and fostering sustainable societal advancement. The role of sociocultural animation in modern society is highly significant. It enables people to connect in ways that go beyond formal education, encourages active participation, and integrates art, culture, and education to promote active engagement of individuals and communities in cultural activities. In the context of sociocultural animation, culture is understood as a dynamic and interactive process that involves creating, sharing, and interpreting symbolic forms such as language, art, customs, and traditions. This process is closely tied to social structures and power relations, which shape the perceptions of individuals and communities and influence their responses to cultural phenomena. Sociocultural animation focuses on encouraging active participation of individuals and communities in this process, aiming to foster social cohesion, improve quality of life, and promote social and cultural development. Various cultural and educational activities, such as workshops, lectures, discussions, artistic performances, and other forms of group work, stimulate creativity, critical thinking, and intercultural understanding, while contributing to the formation of a more inclusive and diverse society. In the process of sociocultural animation, culture and knowledge are used together to encourage active engagement of individuals and communities in education, incorporating elements of community education. The two concepts intertwine and share similarities, such as the active involvement of individuals and groups within a community, contributing to the development of both individuals and society with the goal of improving the well-being of individuals and communities by addressing the specific needs of local contexts. This approach creates a social space where mutual interaction thrives. Individuals not only educate themselves but also develop their identities, autonomy, and capacity to

contribute to change. This surpasses the passive reception of information, transforming individuals into active agents who expand their impact within the community. Such an approach enriches individuals, contributes to the better well-being of the community, improves quality of life, and supports the sustainable development of society as a whole.

### Paulo Freire's Cultural Circles

The roots of community education can also be found in the philosophy of Brazilian educator and andragogue Paulo Freire (1921–1997). Freire developed his educational approach while serving as the state coordinator for literacy in Brazil during the early 1960s, where he identified illiteracy as a consequence of the broader sociocultural context. This context perpetuated a slaveholding mentality, despite the formal abolition of slavery long before (Grušovnik, 2019). Freire argued that the "culture of silence" was connected to the so-called "banking concept of education," where teachers act as the sole transmitters of knowledge, and students are passive recipients of information.

In contrast, problem-posing education, as Freire proposed, focuses on questioning and creative problem-solving, leading to awareness and liberation. This approach "rejects the mere acceptance of messages and embodies communication" (Freire, 2019, p. 56). A key element of such education is dialogue, which Freire defines as an exchange of words between participants in equal positions. For Freire, the word encompasses not only verbal expression but also practical action.

Freire focused on the oppressed—those occupying the lowest societal positions due to factors such as race, social class, and gender. The oppressors, who dominate them, perceive the oppressed as "things" and exercise control to uphold their own rights, particularly the right to monopolize power. Freire (2019, p. 41) highlighted the complex emotional dependence between the oppressed and the oppressors, stating, "The relationship between the oppressed and the oppressors can only be overcome through dialogue, reflection, and communication." These three components are crucial for breaking this cycle. Dialogue, as an open and equal exchange of opinions and experiences, enables the oppressed to become aware of their situation and develop critical thinking.

This process of awareness and consciousness (*conscientização*), central to Freire's pedagogy, allows individuals to identify structures of oppression and take active steps to dismantle them. Shaull (2000, p. 29) summarizes Freire's idea that education is never a politically neutral process. It can either serve as a tool for integrating young people into the existing system or as a means of transforming the world.

Freire implemented this process of awareness through literacy programs in his cultural circles. These programs, aimed primarily at adults such as farmers and workers, encouraged participants to ask questions and actively engage in the learning process through dialogue. Freire's cultural circles emphasized that writing and reading are not merely mechanical memorization of letters but a way to become a subject in history. Through literacy, individuals transition from a "culture of silence" to a culture of critical perception of the world and their place in it.

Dialogue was a central feature of the cultural circles, as Freire (2019, p. 68) explained: "People do not become human in silence but through words, work, action, and reflection." He

posed the question: How can oppressed people, who lack a voice, find it? How can they participate in naming and understanding the world they live in rather than being mere objects of the dominant discourse? Freire's concept of adult education "No one educates anyone else, no one educates themselves alone; people educate each other through their interaction with the world" focused on freeing people from social and political oppression.

Education, according to Freire, must be critical and emancipatory. It cannot be monopolized by anyone claiming to possess ultimate truth. Nor can it be an isolated process of individual reflection. Instead, education is a dialogical process, where people learn collectively by questioning, exploring, and overcoming perspectives that divide them.

Freire's pedagogy aligns closely with community education, as both paradigms emphasize participatory, critical, and emancipatory approaches to learning. Community education is rooted in the needs and interests of local communities, involving people in decision-making and co-creating educational content. Dialogue, a cornerstone of Freire's pedagogy, is also essential in community education, fostering trust, respect, and equality among participants.

Through dialogue, communities can identify their specific challenges and understand their connections to broader societal structures. Freire's emphasis on the importance of engaging with the world resonates strongly in community education, which draws upon real-life situations and local needs to make learning relevant and impactful. This approach empowers people to move beyond helplessness and dependency by collectively acquiring knowledge that enables action. Community education, inspired by Freire, is not merely about gaining knowledge and skills but about building just, solidaristic, and autonomous communities.

### **The Social Transformation of Sicily and Danilo Dolci's Activism**

"Everyone grows only if they dream" (it. *Ciascuno cresce solo se sognato*) is a well-known and often-cited phrase by Danilo Dolci, one of the most influential thinkers of nonviolence and social activism for the emancipation of southern Italy, particularly Sicily. Often referred to as the "Gandhi of Sicily," Dolci was a prominent activist and educator who focused on social and educational reforms on the island. His innovative pedagogical approaches emphasized direct participation and active engagement with local communities.

Sociologist, poet, educator, and activist Danilo Dolci (1924–1997) dedicated his life to advocating for fundamental human rights in Sicily. He championed the rights to food, work, and democracy while fighting against all forms of mafia influence. His work aimed to improve the living conditions of Sicily's impoverished population and promote social justice through dialogue and participatory methods. His efforts turned Sicily into the epicenter of his vision for a more just society, demonstrating that true change could only occur by involving those directly affected (Sciortino, 2024).

Dolci employed peaceful protest methods to bring about social change. On October 14, 1952, in Trappeto, he conducted an eight-day hunger strike on the bed of Benedetto Barrette, a child who had died of malnutrition. Through this strike, he sought to draw attention to the dire living conditions in Trappeto, emphasizing the need for jobs and basic services. He ended the strike only after public authorities committed to implementing urgent interventions, such as

constructing a sewage system. Hunger strikes became a hallmark of Dolci's activism, which he used on numerous occasions (Langer & Biondo, 2019).

One of Dolci's most renowned protests occurred in November 1955 in Partinico. Through another hunger strike, he sought to highlight the region's poverty and violence while advocating for the construction of a dam on the Jato River. This river flooded during winter and dried up during the nine-month summer drought, severely affecting local residents. Building the dam would have enabled irrigation throughout the valley, improving agricultural productivity and the living conditions of local farmers. The dam project, once completed, transformed the land from arid to fertile, enabling the development of farms, cooperatives, and small businesses. This success became a symbol of sustainable economic, social, and civil progress (Barone, 2010).

In his fight against poverty, Dolci also pioneered a unique form of protest known as the "reverse strike" (*sciopero alla rovescia*), which involved unpaid labor. In 1956, Dolci organized 150 unemployed men to repair a neglected road between Partinico and Trappeto. Although local authorities had abandoned the project, the community took initiative, using their collective effort as a form of peaceful resistance and self-empowerment.

Dolci's method of engagement, known as reciprocal maieutics (it. *maieutica reciproca*), involved collective dialogue. Participants shared their experiences, needs, and aspirations, collaboratively developing solutions through discussion. This approach emphasized mutual learning and empowerment, fostering a sense of agency among community members. Dolci's aim was to transform interpersonal relationships so that each individual could act as a "midwife" of knowledge for others, promoting a culture of shared learning and problem-solving (Spagnoletti, 1980).

By 1958, Dolci had gained international recognition, receiving the Lenin Peace Prize. He used the financial award to establish development and education centers (*Centro Studi e Iniziative per la Piena Occupazione*) in towns such as Partinico, Corleone, Roccamena, and Manfì. These centers became hubs for research, advocacy, and education, targeting the interconnected issues of poverty, mafia influence, and social inequality. Dolci emphasized that communities needed tools and strategies to advocate for their development effectively. Without initiative and clear goals, protests would likely fail (Ličen, 2005). In 1970, Dolci co-founded the Mirto Educational Center (*Centro Educativo di Mirto*) in Partinico with local residents. Designed in harmony with nature, the center featured classrooms with multiple entrances facing the countryside, allowing students to connect visually with the external environment. The circular arrangement of desks encouraged dialogue and collaborative learning, consistent with Dolci's maieutic approach (Langer & Biondo, 2019). The Mirto Center addressed the shortcomings of Italy's compulsory education system, which Dolci criticized as a tool of dominant ideology. Inspired by A.S. Neill's Summerhill School in England, the Mirto Center allowed children to design their learning experiences collaboratively with mentors, peers, and parents. It also served as a space for strengthening family ties, fostering intergenerational dialogue, and promoting community cohesion. The Mirto Center emerged from the community's desire for an educational institution that supported individual growth in harmony with the environment. Officially recognized as an experimental school in 1970, it became a cornerstone of Dolci's vision for social and

educational reform. His innovative approaches continue to inspire community education efforts worldwide, blending empowerment, participatory methods, and a deep commitment to justice and equality. Dolci (Spagnoletti, 1980, p. 82) often emphasized the importance of community work and education in his writings, using the parable of a book to illustrate his ideas. A book, though merely a collection of sewn-together sheets of paper, becomes meaningful when its pages are thoughtfully written and printed as a cohesive whole. This concept symbolizes the idea that individual pages, when combined, form a greater and more flexible entity, akin to the pages of a book creating a complete whole. Similarly, individuals within a community can achieve far more together through collaboration than any single person could alone. Dolci stresses that community synergy is crucial for achieving change and progress. Education, according to Dolci, contributes to the creation of new citizens who are aware, thoughtful, independent, and inclined toward reciprocity with other living beings. It becomes, above all, a revolutionary act (Dolci, 1974, p. 84): Education becomes revolutionary when it shifts from training personnel who meet the needs of industrial civilization to a process of raising awareness and building citizens of a new society, one that adapts only to what is deemed acceptable by its members. Dolci envisions a different, revolutionary approach to education, one that focuses not merely on training for specific tasks but on a broader process of awareness-building. Thus, the aim of education is to cultivate individuals as active and critical citizens capable of creating and participating in society. Education emphasizes the adaptation of personal values and beliefs rather than simply accepting existing social and economic structures. The core of Dolci's efforts lies in motivating the community to nurture awareness and mobilize active participation—an endeavor that shares many parallels with Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed. Both Dolci and Freire emphasize the importance of awareness-raising and liberation from various systems of control, focusing on fostering unity and mutual support. Both authors highlight that justice—both social and environmental—is fundamental to sustainable development. This includes the care for sustainable resources as well as the rights and dignity of individuals living within the community. Sustainability, in their view, encompasses not only ecological sustainability but also social dimensions such as equality, access to education, and the empowerment of individuals to create better living conditions. For Dolci and Freire, sustainable development is directly linked to liberation from oppressive structures and control systems that prevent people from having equal opportunities for a full, dignified life. In this light, community education offers a pathway to sustainable development by focusing on collective action tailored to the specific needs and potential of local communities. By promoting unity, dialogue, and collaboration, and by addressing real-life issues and challenges in the educational process, community education becomes a space where solutions to complex problems—transcending individual capacities—can emerge. Through this approach, people not only gain knowledge but also apply it to create sustainable changes that contribute to the well-being of their communities and society at large. Both Dolci and Freire understand education as a lifelong process that is most fruitful when conducted in a mutually supportive environment. They combine political awareness with intellectual rigor, recognizing the value and potential of every individual regardless of their social or economic standing. Lifelong education transcends the boundaries of formal education and becomes a part of personal and

collective growth. This approach encourages changes that are not only immediate and superficial but also deeply rooted in communities and their values, ensuring that these changes endure into the future and allow for the continuous growth and development of communities toward a more just, equitable, and sustainable society.

### **Community Education in Slovenia**

In Slovenia, community education does not have a strong tradition. However, as Ličen (2001) notes, it is associated with the practice of community learning/education, which is primarily linked to various types of organizations such as associations, folk universities, and cultural institutions, as well as the period of reading rooms and cultural societies active in the 19th century. These played a significant role in awakening national consciousness. Some individuals were particularly active in this area, calling on Slovenians to unite.

There were various reading rooms, savings banks, and insurance cooperatives (e.g., for developing agriculture in rural areas), where people learned together. Different spaces became centers of education. These initiatives were primarily driven by individuals who sensed the need to listen to people's interests in their communities and provide opportunities for acquiring new knowledge and developing skills for life in the community (Ličen, 2001). It can thus be said that community building efforts were motivated by a desire to awaken national consciousness. Associations played an important role in community learning. People gathered to solve problems collectively, meet, and socialize. In the past, associations had clearly defined educational goals, as Ličen (1996) found in her research on education and associations. However, we cannot speak of forms of community education comparable to those developed in the U.S. or the U.K.

In the early 20th century, the first folk universities were established, exhibiting only some characteristics of Danish folk high schools. Even today, Slovenia lacks developed forms of community education comparable to those known internationally. One example of good practice, where "andragogues began to implement community education for local development," as Findeisen described it (Kump & Majerhold, 2009), is the Andragogical Summer School, which was held annually in Ajdovščina from 1995 to 2003. The main aim of the school was for participants (andragogues) to collaborate with the local population and institutions to generate new ideas collectively. The participants then transferred their experiences to their own communities throughout Slovenia.

Ličen (1996, p. 52) observes that contemporary associations, compared to those of the 19th century, place greater emphasis on individual development within a collective framework. The individualization of learning highlights it as a process of efficiently processing information, often limited to the individual's internal cognition rather than an interactive process involving relationships among people and their connection to the world (Kump, 2009, p. 6). Under the influence of liberal capitalism and today's neoliberal tendencies, there is an increasing expectation for individuals to take responsibility for their education independently, without community engagement. In extreme phases of individualization, people often rediscover the need to come together. Kump and Majerhold (2009, p. 15) add that today's growing interest in community is a reflection of nostalgia for lost senses of fellowship and connectedness.

Community education emerged as a response to the need to improve education at international, national, and local societal levels, particularly during times of crisis. These circumstances spurred the development of various forms of self-organized education, where individuals collaborated for survival, improving living conditions, and enhancing quality of life. In combating poverty, spontaneous groups formed to learn from one another and solve practical problems collectively (e.g., study circles in Sweden (Mijoč et al., 1993)) and included the poor and oppressed in the educational process. Through awareness-raising, they developed critical reflection, took action, and transformed their social circumstances, reclaiming their humanity (Freire, 2019).

Education and development are closely interconnected, bringing direct benefits. Common to all concepts is that community education began as a response to community needs to improve living conditions. Some shared characteristics across the described concepts include:

A focus on lifelong learning, enabling individuals to acquire new skills and knowledge throughout their lives. Promotion of active community participation in the educational process.

Accessibility to all, regardless of age, gender, race, religion, or economic status. Adaptability to the needs and interests of the community, often emphasizing practical skills directly applicable to daily life.

Community education is a vital tool for community development, fostering a sense of collective identity and purpose. It helps build the skills and knowledge necessary for people to collaborate in addressing shared problems, stemming from community needs and interests. Community education remains one of the most accessible and impactful forms of social intervention. It not only addresses immediate needs but also creates a sustainable platform for social engagement, extending beyond crisis situations to build long-term change at local, national, and international levels.

## CONCLUSION

Community education represents an integrative approach to education, focusing on the needs and development of local communities. In this context, education does not occur exclusively within traditional educational institutions but also through diverse local platforms such as libraries, fire stations, churches, and healthcare facilities. This form of education is based on principles of egalitarianism, democracy, and the practical applicability of learning to real community challenges.

The historical development of community education has varied across geographical and cultural contexts. In Scandinavia, particularly Denmark, adult education through folk high schools emphasized social equality and the democratization of knowledge. In the United States, community education emerged as a response to economic crises, where community schools became hubs for combating unemployment and social exclusion. In the United Kingdom, village colleges served as centers for holistic community engagement, intertwining education, culture, and social activities to preserve rural life. The French tradition of sociocultural animation linked education with culture and social empowerment, with culture and education playing key roles in promoting social equality and solidarity.

Community education has a long tradition in the United States and the United Kingdom and serves as a counterbalance to globalized education driven by neoliberal principles (Evans et al., 2016; Lucio-Villegas, 2015) and extreme individualism. Historically, various models of community education developed in disadvantaged environments marked by deprivation and poverty, addressing and encouraging individuals who often lacked access to knowledge—many of them even basic literacy—to engage in educational opportunities. Their participation in community education signified assuming (self-)responsibility and actively resisting existing social inequalities and systematic marginalization. Inclusion is not merely a method for educating or training adults but a political and social act that fosters shifts in power dynamics and provides resources for greater independence and autonomy. Above all, it represents an act of resistance against structural injustice that perpetuates and deepens poverty.

Education grants individuals access to power through knowledge, enabling them to better understand their rights and more effectively demand their place in society. It allows them to find their voice and participate in discussions and decisions that affect their lives while reducing social isolation. Razpotnik (2024, p. 180) highlights the growing material inequality within communities, which has significant implications for adult education, particularly in terms of access to and quality of educational opportunities. As inequalities grow, so do the educational challenges faced by individuals from less privileged groups. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for shaping effective educational policies and programs that address access to educational resources, the quality of educational offerings in less affluent areas, social capital—including networks, relationships, and access to information—and structural and political barriers, such as limited influence on policymaking, underfunding of adult education, and inadequate representation of the needs of less privileged groups.

Today, community education aims to promote lifelong learning and active citizenship within communities while continuing to address poverty and inequality in access to knowledge. This education is adaptable, responsive to local needs and changes, and provides tools for personal and community development. By doing so, it not only addresses educational gaps but also strengthens social cohesion and contributes to the sustainable development of communities. Community education is informal and occurs in various environments. It is participant-centered, less structured, and avoids hierarchical teacher-student relationships. It strives to enhance community well-being (Taylor, 2006, p. 292) and arises from the needs and interests of the community (Martin, 1996, in Tett, 2010, p. 1).

Community education is therefore a vital component of modern educational systems, blending educational practices with immediate community needs and contributing to broader social progress. The goal of community education is empowerment—engaging individuals in education throughout their lives (Tett, 2010, p. 1). A key element of the community education process is dialogue, which is rooted in the belief that knowledge is not merely transferred unidirectionally from teacher to student but emerges and develops through interaction and dialogue among all participants in the educational process. Understanding historical models and contemporary needs enables the creation of effective strategies for the future.



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